

## Chapter 3

### *The Padded Girdle... Better, not bitter*

Now that high school was finally over with, I really began to wonder about my future. What could I do? How could I support myself or become independent? Was I even going to live long enough to worry about all that? After all, I'd been told I might not live past twenty five. It was a very confusing time of life for me.

I decided that regardless of my future, or how long I may or may not live, I couldn't just sit around the house. That was no life at all. So, I went out and tried to find a job, any job. But, I was met once again with strange looks and preconceived notions about what I could or couldn't do based upon my physical appearance. No one wanted to give me a chance because they assumed just by looking at me that I was probably undependable.

After considerable searching, I finally landed a job at a place called the Blue Dot Drive Inn, working for a wonderful gentleman named Rowbie. Rowbie showed me great kindness and was probably the first adult to really give me a chance. I was *thrilled* with my new job... even if it was working behind a grill with kids that were all several years younger than me. At least it was a start.

Sometimes I'd make a little extra money babysitting for a wonderful young couple who moved into our neighborhood, Denise and Mark. When Denise and Mark were first married, they were told that they would never be able to have children of their own. This was devastating to both of them, but they still wanted children very much, so they decided to adopt. As sometimes happens, six months after they'd adopted a beautiful little baby boy, Denise got pregnant. Nine months later, she gave birth to another little boy, but something had gone wrong. When her baby was born, they discovered that he hadn't developed normally. One arm terminated at the elbow, and it had two small fingers growing out the end of it. These two fingers were webbed, and the doctors weren't sure whether or not the fingers would even be functional as he got older.

Denise struggled with her little baby and his disability. It was hard for her to accept the fact that she had adopted a perfect little baby from someone who would give it up, while her own biological baby was born deformed. She didn't quite know

how to handle that. As time went by, Mark noticed that she seemed to be withdrawing a little from her new baby, and he asked me to come over and help out with the house and children. Denise was a wonderful person. She took great pride in cleanliness, and in keeping her home neat and tidy. She taught me how to "deep clean," and how to keep a house proper and presentable.

At this time, Mark was a college professor and had to go back to Syracuse, New York, to take some summer classes which were required in order to keep him current in his particular field of expertise. He'd been in contact with a physician in New York, who believed that their little baby's arm could be lengthened and his fingers separated, giving him a shot at a more normal life. Mark believed that taking Denise to a new area, with two small babies, would just be too much for her to handle. He asked me if I'd consider going back to New York and be a nanny for the kids and a companion for his wife. I was really excited to go!

When I went home and spoke to Dad about it, he was not very enthusiastic. After all, I was his little girl, and I had enough problems of my own. He didn't relish the prospect of me going back to the big city where he wouldn't be around to help out if I got into trouble. After a lot of persuasion, Dad finally agreed to let me go. I helped Mark and Denise pack up their van, and we drove across country to New York City. It took us about four days. On the way we stopped at many beautiful places. Some of the most exciting places to see were the Statue of Liberty, Niagara Falls, and, of course, New York City itself. I never dreamed I would ever see these places in my lifetime.

When we arrived in New York, we stayed at this huge round high-rise hotel. It was unlike anything I'd ever seen. We checked in late at night and went to our rooms. When I got to the room, I realized that I'd left my overnight bag in the back of the van. I went downstairs and out into the parking garage. As I was taking my bag out of the van, I heard this booming voice behind me ask... **"What do you think you're doing?"** I turned around, and there was this huge policeman. He looked me in the eye and asked me again, "What do you think you're doing out here little girl? Are you crazy? Do you want to get killed or raped?" I told him I *wasn't* a little girl, I was eighteen years old. He informed me that ***I was a little girl***, and that New York was no place to be wandering around alone at night.

Then he escorted me back to my room. He told Mark to never let me or Denise out alone like that again. I had no idea it was such a big deal or was even dangerous. I was this little naive girl from a small town, where *we never even locked*

*our doors at night. We never* worried about walking outside alone at night. As the officer left, he turned and said... "**Remember, you're not in Kansas anymore.**" We decided we'd better take his advice.

Mark rented an apartment close to where he would be attending school, and he told Denise and me that we had to stay indoors with the doors locked at all times unless he was around. We agreed. During our long hours together, Denise and I became very close. Denise taught me how to do my make-up so I would look my best and how to improve my hair style. When we were allowed to go shopping together, we always had a wonderful time.

We would have conversations about life and how cruel kids can be to those they view as *abnormal*. I believe I helped her understand what it was like to be disabled and be treated differently. I told her how mean children had been to me growing up. I didn't want her little boy to feel like he was worth less than other children just because he was "different." I also told Denise of the complex I'd developed because of the way I looked, especially from my waist down.

I'd received a sewing machine for graduation, and I took it with me to New York. I was *never* able to buy clothes from stores that fit me right. Instead, I'd buy patterns and material, and modify the patterns to fit me. All of my clothes were custom made *just* for me.

One day, Mark came home early and told us he would tend the kids so we could go out shopping together to get some things we'd been wanting. We'd decided to make a quilt for the boys, so we went to a fabric store to look for some cute material and some quilt batting. Suddenly, Denise's eyes lit up. She looked at me and said, "I have a great idea. I'm going to make you a padded girdle!" I started to laugh. I told her I thought she was crazy. I wasn't about to wear a padded girdle! I was already the brunt of enough jokes and teasing. Can you imagine how silly it would seem to others if they found out that I was wearing a girdle - especially a girdle to make me look *fatter* instead of *skinnier*? But, she was determined to give it a try.

We went home, and Denise made me my padded girdle using nylon material and quilt batting. The object was to give me some hips and thighs. It started at my waist and stopped just below my knees with some elastic banding to keep it tight and in place. When she was finished making it, she took me to a department store to buy some Levi's... something I'd *never* been able to do before in my entire life.

I was really skeptical about this whole thing. She picked out the smallest pair of jeans she could find, took me over to a dressing room, handed me my padded girdle and the jeans, and shoved me inside. I put on my girdle, pulled up the jeans, and zipped them up. Then I turned around to look in the mirror. ***I couldn't believe my eyes.*** It was a ***miracle***. The girdle added thirty pounds to me... well, that's what it looked like anyway. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I looked... normal!

I opened the dressing room door and walked out. Denise took one look at me, and this wonderful smile came across her face. Then she put her hands to her mouth and began to cry. "What's the matter?" I asked. She told me I looked great. The reason she'd gotten a bit emotional was not because of the way I looked, but because of the look she saw in ***my*** eyes. I knew what she was talking about.

For the first time in my life, I didn't see this skinny awkward girl without a future. I saw a girl with possibilities, a girl who looked ***normal***. For the first time ever, the future seemed exciting, and I wanted to live. For the first time I caught a glimpse of a future that I believed just might include happiness, even love. I was so happy I began to cry. Denise gave me a hug and cried along with me.

We'd been in New York for two and a half months, and I was getting really homesick. I was also getting very excited to return home and show my family and friends "the new me." Mark was finished with his schooling by now, and he and Denise were going to spend the remaining two weeks in the city with doctors who were going to help their little boy. I asked Mark and Denise if I could fly home rather than spend the next two weeks with them in the city. They thought it was a good idea. I returned home with great anticipation for the future.

Denise taught me so many things that would be helpful to me throughout my entire life. I will ***always*** be grateful to her for that. And I believe I gave her something too... insight that would help her with her own baby as she and Mark learned how to cope with the trials and struggles that surely lay ahead.

I arrived home, and felt that I'd gained a lot of self-esteem, (thanks to some good friends and my new "secret weapon"). These would help me out in the future as I finally now ***dared*** to dream of finding my own prince charming.

It felt good to be home, but something was different. I viewed my time in New York much like the time a caterpillar spends in a cocoon. It begins that stage of existence as one thing but emerges as something quite different. That was the way I felt about myself. In many ways it was still the same old me, but I had

changed, in mind as well as appearance, and I liked what I saw. I'd had a brush with independence, and I liked it. I felt that being on my own, away from the security of family was the next logical step in my progression from young and helpless to mature and independent. I just wasn't sure how I was going to make that transition.

I was sitting at home one day, when the phone rang. It was a girl from my neighborhood who'd been one of my friends in high school. Her name was Kathy. When she asked me if I would be interested in renting an apartment with her, I was very excited. Kathy had been one of the *popular* girls in high school and one of those gorgeous girls that all the boys wanted to date. I couldn't believe that she wanted to have *me* as her roommate. Of course, I told her I would love to, and soon we moved in together to share not only expenses but some great times. I felt like this was really a new beginning for me. I'd seen "the big city", but I was really happy to be home in a "small" city, where the pace was a bit slower.

I had learned by then that people were drawn to happiness and positive things. I believed *that* would be the key to my success if I was ever going to achieve it. I tried to be a friend to everyone. I decided that the first rule I would live by was to never put anyone down or treat them the way I'd been treated. Because of this perspective on life, it was pretty easy for me to make friends.

Our apartment had a nice swimming pool, and each night after work, I'd spend time around the pool, (in my swim suit robe) getting acquainted with the other tenants and trying to be friendly to everyone. Before long, I was surrounded by friends nearly every night. I really gained a lot of confidence at this time in my life.

I remember one night the tenants all got together to have a barbecue, and we had a lot of fun. When Kathy came walking by, somebody asked her to join us, but she graciously declined and went up to her room. Several of the people attending the "barbie" commented that Kathy seemed "snooty," and "stuck up," and generally voiced negative feelings about her. "She's not snooty," I said. "She's just very busy and doesn't have time to sit around the pool with us. It's not that she's stuck up at all. She's just got a lot of dates and other things, so don't judge her. She can't help it that she's so pretty that all the boys want to take her out." I knew what it was like to be gossiped about and have people say unkind things about me, so whether it was unkindness or ignorance, I didn't want to see that happen to my friend.

I remember one night going up to the apartment after a nice evening by the pool, and when I walked through the door, I could hear Kathy in her room... crying. I went to her room and asked her what was wrong and if there was anything I could do to help. Her reply was **totally** unexpected. At first, she told me she didn't want to talk to me. I was shocked! "What's the matter?" I asked. "Did I say or do something wrong? If I did, I didn't mean it. Please accept my apology." She turned to me and said she was just upset and that she was envious of me because I made friends so easily.

I couldn't believe what I'd just heard! I couldn't help it. I sat down, right there on the floor, and started to laugh! I was floored! Here was this gorgeous girl, arguably the prettiest girl in town, and she was envious of me? I would have given **anything** to have her looks, her perfect body. Yet here **she** was, crying because she so badly wanted to be able to make friends like I could. I learned a great lesson from that.

We lived together for two years, then Kathy got married. I was sorry to see her go, but I knew she'd found happiness. That's what I was searching for myself.

I'll be forever grateful for the phone call that Kathy made asking me to be her roommate. I was really blessed to be able to be a part of her life. I learned that the most important part of a friendship is not "what can I get out of this relationship", but, "what can I give to this person to help them be happier and have a more fulfilling life". I'd learned how to be a good friend and how to make my personality compensate for the physical attributes I felt I lacked. I just tried to be the best friend I could possibly be.

That's all I had to offer.