

*Out of the  
Pumpkin Shell*



NANCY WERKING POLING

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*In memory of my mother,  
Ethel Mae Spitler (1919-2003)*

*Hoosier born, she and her life-long friend, Geneva Fralich  
Whitman,  
provide a poignant model for female friendship.*

## Acknowledgments

Stories, like wildflowers, start from scattered seeds: a riotous anecdote a friend tells over lunch about her cousin being terrified of menopause; my mother describing a leaded-glass lampshade she and my father once hid behind the bathroom wall of a now-abandoned farmhouse. To friends whose stories planted seeds in my imagination, thank you.

In a way, it is with regret that I thank the women who have personally shared with me their experiences of being sexually abused by clergy. I say regret because I wish the abuse had never happened. It is their courage, though, that has inspired many of us to create stories and become activists on behalf of all women who endure physical and emotional violence.

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And finally, wagonloads of gratitude to my husband and best friend, Jim. Not only did he contribute psychological insight, but he gave me what I most needed in this venture of storytelling: assurance that I was up to the task.

## **About the Author**

Nancy Werking Poling was born in small-town Indiana, reared in sleepy Florida, unsuccessfully educated in Virginia to become a southern belle, and toughened by more than twenty years in the Chicago area. She has worked as an educator, consultant and writer. Her most recent book, which she edited, is *Victim to Survivor: Women Recovering from Clergy Sexual Abuse*. She resides in North Carolina.



## Chapter 1

Elise claimed a woman can keep her breasts firm by standing under a cold shower two minutes a day. Not wanting to be like my Grandma Atkinson, whose ample bosom sagged so much people probably assumed the thickness above her waist was a roll of fat, I conscientiously followed Elise's prescription.

My daily breast-firming routine went something like this: Standing beneath the warm spray of water, I enthusiastically generated a lather with my pink gauzy puff, luxuriating in the warmth of the pulsating spray and the gentle suds that slithered down my body. Next, bracing myself, I reached for the temperature controls and abruptly cut off the flow of hot water. As frigid torrents poured from the showerhead, sending shock waves across my body, I shouted to God for mercy. Yet, stepping from the tub three minutes later, I would look down and see that my nipples were indeed constricted and erect.

However, a year and a half into this practice, I flunked the firmness test. That is, when I placed a pencil beneath each breast, the pencils didn't drop to the floor as they would if the muscle tone were sound. No, as I walked through the house nude, they remained snugly tucked within the folds of flesh. I quit taking icy showers.

We've known each other for years, Elise and I, having both taught first grade at Rutherford B. Hayes Elementary School. She's long been my main advisor when it comes to health and beauty. For a while she guided me through a strict dietary regimen, where I daily combined a portion of every vegetable in my refrigerator with pineapple juice and mixed it all in the blender. Each swallow of the Green Drink made me gag, but Elise assured me I'd live longer. She also insisted on my taking seven pills a day, one of them with vitamin E, which was supposed to keep me lustful.

The Bobbsey Twins, they called us at school, in reference more to our shared proclivity toward adventurous escapades than to our appearance. In fact, we don't look at all alike. I'm tall and big boned; Elise is short and petite. When we were young, I wore my mouse-brown hair shoulder length in a blunt cut. Elise had this fabulous hair: naturally curly and naturally red. Now it's naturally curly and *unn*naturally red. As for my own hair, the gray has been moving in on the brown. I keep it quite short, brushed away from my face.

Our personalities aren't alike either, though after all these years it's sometimes hard to know where the thoughts of one of us end and those of the other begin. While I tend to be a daydreamer, Elise is like a small emergency vehicle racing around town at top speed. She accomplishes more in a day than I get done in a week.

And the way she can describe an event. The more appalling the incident the funnier she is. The most tragic experience of her adult life was her husband getting killed in a car accident. She was twenty-six and pregnant with Robbie. Everyone at school expected her to return to work a changed woman, less flighty, a little serene maybe.

"So there I am, the mourning widow—" I heard her say as I

entered the faculty lounge on her first day back. Seated around Formica-topped tables, the contents of their brown lunch bags spread in front of them, the teachers were laughing like crazy. “I’ve raced like hell to get to the hospital, for chrissake, and no one has any idea where the body is.”

She spoke in falsetto: “I’m terrible sorry, Mrs. Collier, it can’t have gone far.’ *It*, they keep saying, as if *it’s* a fucking self-propelled gurney wandering the hallways, not a man who just an hour before I got the call had been hopping around our bedroom reliving a sack race he won in junior high. With one of my new pillowcases. I’m still pissed that he tore it.” Again the falsetto: “Right now our people are checking every room in the Intensive Care wing.’

“A couple hours later—I’ve been sitting in the emergency waiting area, across from some ugly guy wearing a blood-stained T-shirt that says ‘I’m what you’ve been looking for.’ A man in a suit and tie, some vice president—of lost bodies, I guess—he comes up to me. Sounds so fucking proud, like they’ve just brought Ken back to life. But no, they found the body—would you believe—they found it on the gynecology floor. Turned out the name Barbara Somebody was on his ID.”

Not that Elise wasn’t distressed—she loved Ken dearly—she’s just got this uncanny way of turning her pain into a comedy routine, which until ten years ago is how she handled most threats to her happiness. Along with a string of expletives.

“Why do you curse so much?” I asked early in our friendship. “Not that it bothers me. I just—”

She took no time to ponder an answer. “I’ve always wanted to be normal.”

“What’s normal got to do with it?” I considered myself fairly normal but didn’t say more than an occasional *damn* or *shit*.

“You got any idea what it’s like to be a Preacher’s Kid? I had to prove I wasn’t pious. A *shit* here, a *fuck* there, and you sound normal.”

In fact anger was about the only emotion she was skilled at expressing—unless you want to count humor, but for her the two were connected. If she’d been a kid in her own first grade class, she would have flunked the lessons on Acceptable Ways

to Show our Feelings. All the times she went over the big chart on the wall that showed kids smiling and frowning and crying and looking surprised—it was all wasted on her. One thing for sure: She was pissed. About never establishing roots as a kid, but mostly about her mother. Well, her mother’s state of mind and all that that entailed.

So when did we begin to worry about getting older? Nineteen eighty-five, the year we both turned forty. For weeks before my birthday I cried into my pillow at night, mainly because I remembered what my mother looked like in her forties—frizzy perms, muumuus she wore to conceal the fifty extra pounds she carried. I feared the same drab destiny awaited me. Three months later, when Elise made her own giant leap across the decade marker, she tried to camouflage her true feelings with humor, which was her style, but couldn’t quite pull it off. She didn’t go out of her house for nearly a week. I figured that, like me, she was thinking about her mother—all her mother had gone through. But Elise wouldn’t talk about it.

Ten years later, as we approached fifty, real panic set in.

“Hat, we’ve got to take action,” Elise said over our usual TGIF confab at Bailey’s Pub.

“Yeah,” I said, “but what are our choices?”

“You know that adage, you’re only as young as you feel. Our problem is we don’t do anything to feel young.”

“So what does a woman do to feel young?”

“The things young people do.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. But I think, dear friend, it’s time we spent some time in careful observation.”

The following day, a glistening Saturday in early spring, as we walked along Lake Michigan, our gazes shifted back and forth between the colorful sailboats dotting the intensely blue water and the multitude of people moving along two parallel paths. We watched young people jog. Too painful, we agreed, observing their panting and sweating. Others, we noticed, were on roller blades, weaving with agility in and out of the bicyclists

and pedestrians, extending their arms for balance, sometimes hunkering down—for added speed, we assumed. We were about to head for the nearest SportMart, when we heard a siren and immediately came upon paramedics lifting a middle-aged man swathed in protective padding onto a stretcher. We struck roller blading from our list of possibilities.

“You know,” Elise said as she leaped out of the way of a speeding bicyclist, “Jennifer’s crazy about aerobics.” She was referring to Jennifer, the twenty-eight-year-old receptionist in our school office who looked like she was still in high school. “How dangerous can jumping up and down to music be?”

Leaving the lakeshore, we got in my car and headed for the Y, where we enrolled in evening classes. That same day we purchased the appropriate attire: a darling spring-leaf green outfit for Elise, a purple one for me. I was pleased that the spandex leggings made my thighs, which usually look like overcooked custard pudding, appear deceptively firm.

The following Wednesday, fifteen minutes into our first class at the Y, we were convinced we didn’t belong. Everyone else was under thirty, and while our expensive clothes were saturated with sweat, theirs had but delicate moist patches at the base of their breasts, and in that region where their leotard stretched between their legs.

For more than a month I huffed and puffed, tripping over my own legs as the svelte, ponytailed instructor yelled, “Up, down, T-step, crossover, grapevine,” all to cacophonous music that sounded as foreign to me as the talk among the waiters at China Palace. Meanwhile, I observed the uniformity with which young bodies around me responded to their owners’ demands. Bouncing over and around elevated plastic steps, they were like a dancing troupe. Only Elise and I were out of sync, climbing our platforms while everyone else was stepping down, moving to the left as everyone else moved to the right, bumping into the lovely bodies. The young, firm bodies. The bodies that weren’t sweating profusely.

“You’re doing so well,” the instructor would patronizingly say to the two of us at the end of each session. Our faces were beet red as we leaned forward, hands on our thighs, heads

drooping. Doing well for two old ladies, is what she meant.

At about that time people's ages started to matter. We spoke of the adorable *young* usher at Maggie Winston's funeral, of the sweet *young* clerk at Linden's Health Food Store. "How old a woman was she?" I wanted to know when Elise was describing an argument she'd had with the property tax assessor. "How old a man is he?" she asked when I called her to say I'd just met Dr. Hunt, the man who was to replace Grover, our principal.

Under Grover the faculty had done pretty much as it pleased, ignoring new directives we disagreed with, running our classrooms according to our own likes and dislikes. For years Elise and I mocked the way his hair shot out in every direction, the way he always appeared dazed as he tripped down the hallway. Old Grover, who couldn't remember the name of any teacher who'd been at Rutherford B. Hayes for fewer than ten years, old Grover who free-associated his way through faculty meetings. There are, of course, advantages to having an incompetent boss. The greatest one is that you feel superior.

Barely over thirty, Dr. Hunt was an intimidating man, large and muscular, with a booming voice. Upon his arrival, Elise and I immediately found ourselves in an adversarial position. We didn't take kindly to being micromanaged. Before long, in not so subtle ways, he let us know that he was keeping files on us. "Elise, this will go in your file," he boomed when fourth graders started a food fight while she was on cafeteria duty.

"Harriet,"—everyone else called me Hat—"this will go in your file," he told me after catching one of my students, a boy who had trouble spelling his own name, writing *fuck* on a bathroom wall. It soon became clear that Dr. Hunt considered Elise and me, Rutherford B. Hayes Elementary School's most experienced teachers, too old to be effective. Almost daily he called one of us into his office to explain in a condescending manner that things were not going to be as they used to be. As if we were holding back the progress he intended.

I'm not saying that either of us deserved any Teacher of the Year award, but we'd stuck with phonics when the method went out of fashion, weaving it in with whatever reading program

the school district adopted. A fact our new principal seemed to overlook as he directed teachers to return to phonics. And our classrooms were nurturing environments for children.

One Friday afternoon Dr. Hunt entered the faculty lounge during my prep time, joked around a few minutes with Jerry Kulinsky, our newest and coolest sixth-grade teacher, then told *me* to go outside and cover for the gym teacher, who'd just gone home sick.

"There I was," I complained to Elise as we sat in our favorite booth at Bailey's Pub, "refereeing eleven-year-olds playing soccer. Huffing and puffing so hard I didn't have enough extra breath to blow the whistle."

"Why not send Jerry out? He plays rugby on weekends, for chrissake."

"Hunt's way of reminding me I'm too old to be a team player."

We sat without talking. Over Elise's shoulder I watched Michael Jackson doing his gyrations on the muted big TV screen. Ah, the energy of the young.

By January we were talking about taking early retirement. We spent hours at Bailey's Pub, sipping Irish coffee, measuring the benefits against the deficits.

"We wouldn't be making as much money."

"Who the fuck needs his money?" Of course, that would be Elise. If I were taking that position I'd say, "Neither of us actually needs the money."

"We'd have all that time to do what we really want to do."

"You say that as if we have something better in mind."

"We'd be letting the fucker win." Again, that would be Elise. I'd say something like, "We'd be letting Dr. Hunt win."

"Sooo?"

"Neither of us has ever been all that enthralled by teaching. It was what women of our generation went into."

"But we've been successful at it. It's been a decent career."

"We're only forty-nine, too young to retire."

"We've put in the years, though. People in corporations are all the time retiring early. I say let's get out."

How many times we repeated that dialogue, I don't know, only that on one occasion I'd argue for retiring while Elise argued against it. The next time we'd switch positions.

The conversation always ended with us pondering life's what-ifs. What if we'd been born thirty years later? What if we'd studied law or journalism, gone into advertising or archeology? Then Elise would ask wistfully, "What if I'd gone for it, spent some of the money from Ken's life insurance to study acting? Of course with a kid..."

And I'd say, "What if I'd stayed single? Taught a few years, saved my money, then bought a bookstore?"

We'd both sigh.

Instead of spending Ken's life insurance on acting school, Elise had invested it.

And I'd married Walter.

Walter, who ever since the beginning of our marriage had focused his attention on the shoe factory he inherited from his father. Walter, who while most small manufacturers were selling out to bigger companies, successfully continued to guide Wendellton, Inc. in its production of fine leather shoes for men. Ever loyal to the wealthy men of America, he put in twelve to fourteen hours a day at the factory. Naturally, anyone who works that hard needs a stress-reduction plan. Walter's was to sit in front of the television drinking gin and tonic.

"Bor-ing," Elise said of him one day while we sat opposite each other at a miniature table in my classroom. We were cutting out little gingerbread people for the kids to decorate the next day. "Why the hell did you marry him, anyway?"

"I was nineteen, a sophomore in college. I was impressed by this experienced older man."

"I've forgotten, how old was he?"

"Thirty. Turned out he wasn't all that experienced. Later I learned his parents were pressuring him to produce an heir, a fourth generation to someday take over the shoe factory."

"And we know how that turned out."

She was referring to my first born, Steven, marrying Roxanne, a British woman of Indian descent, a wife a little too brown for Logan family approval. And to Lennie, our second

son, who also disappointed his grandparents and father. When he'd announced he was gay, all three responded with the same combination of malevolence and anguish they'd expressed when he renounced the Republican Party. I must admit, though, that my dear son tends to choose drama over subtlety. He'd renounced the Republican Party at his Uncle Lester's funeral and announced his sexual orientation at his grandparents' fiftieth wedding anniversary celebration, both times with a microphone.

Later he told me that when family and friends toasted Pop and Mom Logan's sound health and extraordinary progeny, all he could think about was that he was living a lie and that he wanted them to love him for who he really is. He was in for a big disappointment. My mother-in-law gasped and brought her hand to her heart. My father-in-law displaced his false teeth while trying to spit and curse at the same time.

"Walter claims it's all my fault, Lennie's being gay *and* a Democrat."

I stood up. For a woman my size, those little chairs can quickly get uncomfortable. I continued to guide my scissors around the poster board pattern, making sure the brown scraps of construction paper fell on the table. I continued, "Accuses me of being overprotective, says I feminized Lennie by never letting him be a true boy, whatever that is. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to have done to turn him into a Democrat."

"Feminized? Must not have looked at him lately. There've got to be women all over Chicago pissed that a guy that gorgeous prefers men."

We cut out gingerbread boys until our hands were cramped, talking all the while. I told Elise—I'm sure it was the hundredth time—how there was a spell when I resolved to divorce Walter every time a New Year rolled around. I kept procrastinating, though, until getting a divorce seemed too much trouble, what with more than a quarter century's accumulation of dishes and books and furniture and artwork and tools to sort through. I dreaded the thought of having to spend hours negotiating who got what. Walter tends to be tedious under normal circumstances.

“Now if I keep the screwdriver,” I told her he’d say, “you’ll want to borrow it, then you won’t return it, so I’ll have to call you then go get it, but you might forget and when I get to your place you won’t be home and I’ll have to go buy a new one.’ It’d be that way with every single possession.”

We’d lived in the same house for nearly all our marriage. Our walk-up attic was filled with boxes of old teaching files, piano music from the days when I played, the boys’ collection of Tonka trucks, a set of dishes (service for twelve) I no longer used but couldn’t bring myself to get rid of.

“Besides,” I said, “if I moved out, I’d have to do what responsible people do: pay bills and balance a checkbook, worry about my pension and meet regularly with whoever it is Walter consults on all those financial issues.”

“You must be getting something out of the relationship, otherwise you wouldn’t stay in it.”

“You’re right. I have all the financial advantages of marriage without the emotional crap that accompanies working through the relationship.”

That conversation pretty much sums up how I felt about Walter.

We wanted to retire early. No, we didn’t. Yes we did. No we didn’t. Then came the recycling fiasco. Together Elise and I had created a teaching unit where the kids were supposed to bring in their families’ empty soda cans for a week. What had been intended as a brief introduction to ecological concepts soon got out of hand. The children began collecting their neighbors’ cans as well as those used by their own family, and mothers were pulling alongside the school portico, their vans overflowing with stuffed garbage bags. Before long the library corner and the play kitchen area were piled high with bags full of cans that had once contained beer or pop.

On a Friday afternoon Dr. Hunt called me into his office. Sitting behind his large oak desk, leaning back in his swivel chair, he said, “I hear you’ve been drinking on the job.”

My mouth hung open.

“D-d-did someone tell you about—? But everyone kept

proposing toasts—”

Then it occurred to me: He said *on the job*. I'd thought he was referring to Grover's retirement party, where, yes, I got pretty soused.

The cans. Just that morning Elise had said our rooms smelled like breweries. I laughed, trying to sound light hearted. “Oh, that. The kids—”

“What toasts?” he interrupted. The smile covering his whole face was diabolical.

“I-I-I mean—” His youth, his arrogance, his disdain, it all scared the daylight out of me. “What I mean is I would never drink at work.”

“I'm sure you don't,” he said sarcastically.

Before I had a chance to say more, he waved his hand as if shooing me out of his sight. Still proclaiming my innocence over my shoulder while exiting his office, I nearly stumbled over Elise, who like the kids when they were sent to the principal's office for being naughty, sat on a folding metal chair outside his door. I raised my eyebrows and grimaced to signal the seriousness of the situation.

Now, Hiram Walker had been custodian at Rutherford B. Hayes about as long as Elise and I had worked there. If there's one thing I've learned over the years, it's that it pays to have a good relationship with the custodian. You never know when you'll need him. A lesson not learned by Dr. Hunt, who seemed to consider Hiram of the servant class. Ordering rather than requesting, criticizing rather than expressing appreciation.

The next morning, Saturday, I called Hiram from Elise's house. “Hiram,” I said, “I need a favor. I want to get into Dr. Hunt's office. I promise I won't take anything, won't look at anything I'm not supposed to look at either. And I'll never tell a soul how I got in.”

“Meet me there in half an hour,” he said without my having to explain any more.

When Dr. Hunt arrived at work on Monday morning, there was hardly enough room to open his office door. Black plastic garbage bags filled with empty beer and soda cans occupied every bit of space, from floor to ceiling. The stench was—the

only word that comes to mind is *intoxicating*.

That same day he found two letters in his mailbox: one from Elise and one from me, both announcing that we planned to retire at the end of the year.

*We hope you enjoyed this  
Bella Appetizer.*

