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*Hello, Stranger*

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# Hello, Stranger

MY LIFE ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

Barbara Moran  
••• as told to Karl Williams

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It should not be quoted without comparison with the finished book.

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## PROLOGUE

Mom and Dad brought me to Menninger's in September 1961. I was ten years old.

When it was time for them to leave, instead of saying, "Please don't go," I stuck my tongue out at my parents.

It didn't make me sad. If somebody criticizes you and you're mad at them a lot, when they go away, that might be the best thing they do for you.

Anyway, I had the idea it was a boarding school, and I had met several staff people at Menninger's, and I could have said to my parents, "Well, I'm going to like these people better than you."



There were mostly boys, some teenage girls, and then there were three of us younger girls. One of the teenage girls was very fat.

I'd never seen anybody as big as this and I walked up to her and said, "Hi, Fatso."

I wasn't trying to put her down; I just thought it was interesting and cute that somebody was that big.

But I only did that a couple times, 'cause she said she'd clobber me.



The younger girls were me and Carole and Alyson, who was Native American.

Carole McAlister was nine and rather slender. Her hair was brown and she wore it in curls; they'd roll it up for her every night.

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I enjoyed Carole from the very first. I liked the way she laughed. Carole wanted Alyson to be her friend, but Alyson would sometimes give Carole the cold shoulder.

And Carole would plead for her attention: “Alyson, Alyson, Alyson...”

So when Carole was trying to get attention from Alyson, I always offered her mine.



The first Sunday I was there, when we were getting up, I said to one of the staff people, “It’s going to be weird going to a strange church.”

That person told me that, at Menninger’s, they didn’t go to church.

I was surprised. My Dad had said that it would be okay for me to eat meat on Friday at Menninger’s, but my parents had not said anything about going to church. I thought it was a sin to miss Mass and I felt guilty. I thought God might be mad at me if I wasn’t in church. I apologized to God; I said the words in my head and some tears came into my eyes.

But I got over that in a hurry. Any regrets were gone within hours, and I never worried about it after that.



There were a lot of surprises. They didn’t want me to talk about the objects I pretended were alive. But when I talked about my pretend people, Carole listened and laughed and acted interested. I was punished for laughing. They didn’t think that was good for me, so they kept an eye on me and Carole, and they would separate us.

Sometimes we would just say words we thought were funny, and we would laugh. One afternoon the group went to a drive-in

to get a snack. Earlier that day, I'd had a weird thought that bothered me: What if somebody offered a booger to a captive traffic light? But when I heard everybody saying "ice cream cone," I thought, *What if they had a "mucus cone"?* At first this thought bothered me too, but I kept repeating those words and eventually it made me laugh. And then all Carole would have to do is say "mucus cone" and I'd double over with laughter.

But they didn't approve of that.

They were on my case from day one. I'd get into trouble and they would make me sit idle for indefinite lengths of time, until they felt like letting me get up.

I also had some frustrating moments when I tried to tell things to the people at Menninger's and they wouldn't believe me. I remember I cried about that.



I was allowed to draw what I wanted. Sometimes they'd take my pencils and crayons away, though—usually because I was drawing on the wall or on a pillowcase. Often, they just let me be unless I drew something that really bothered them. The one picture that made them mad was a cone with green ice cream. Someone who didn't know could have taken it for lemon-lime sherbet with lime-peel bits in it—but they knew it was a "mucus cone," full of frozen nasal secretions. That's when the package of seventy-two crayons got lost.



But there were payoffs, too. I had a \$1.50-a-week allowance, which was about six times what I got at home. And there were activities and adults to give me a lot of attention. Some of the childcare workers were just the kind of people I wanted to have for parents, and they had patience and energy.



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Monday through Friday, there were three workers on duty in the morning. The school was in a different building. You got up in the morning and made your bed and put on your clothes and then you had breakfast. Each group had its own area in the dining room. And then we had a little time to kill before school started at nine. People watched cartoons if they wanted to. I remember the host for a cartoon show. He was a real person and he would do a dance and some tricks...the things clowns do. And he lip-synched this recorded song, the theme song for the show, that had a full orchestra in it—the horns blowing and all that, kind of like a circus song—about himself: his red, shiny nose and his crazy, mixed-up clothes. Whizzo the Clown: your best friend. If you were sad, he'd make you glad.

PART ONE  
*The Years with My Family*



Me with my “skunk family” of roller skates in 1957.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *When I Was Little*

I didn't want to please anybody but myself. I knew who Mom was; it was just that I did a lot of pretending and I wanted to be someone else's kid. I thought people were wet blankets. Other people's feelings, other people's happiness—they weren't important or even real to me. All I cared about was whether I was getting what I wanted. Most of the time if somebody talked to me about something that didn't interest me, I just didn't bother to listen. I don't remember this, but when I was a young child, I didn't talk much and my parents wondered then whether I was aware of anything at all, because I didn't respond to people the way they thought I should—I never looked at people. That's what Mom said.

We moved to Omaha, Nebraska, when I was three, to a fairly large house with a big yard on a corner lot. This house had front and back stairs. I counted the steps and then said, "The front stairs have twenty-one steps. The back stairs have seventeen steps. I like the twenty-one better: They have carpet and they're not slippery."

When I was little, I could have pointed to colors on a color chart that to me matched songs. I didn't see the colors when I heard the song; it was just that the song sounded like the color green, or blue, or red. But I soon realized that, when I tried to explain this, no one understood what I was talking about.

Once, I learned a new word and I forgot it. I couldn't understand how you could learn something and then not know it later. I thought when you learned something, you'd always know it. I was only around four years old and I had no comprehension of forgetting before that day.

I spent time with my brothers and sisters, but mostly I was doing my own thing. It seemed to me that other people were getting what they wanted, but because my wants were different, somehow they were inferior. When I was by myself, though, I was in a good mood. I could at least entertain myself, and I didn't realize there was anything wrong.



**Mrs. Moran, for a psychologist**

*Born 5/29/51 Mitchell, S. Dakota*

*Breech; short labor; no complications*

*Mother 44 at birth*

*Bottle-fed*

*Sat up 8-9 mos.*

*Walked 17 mos.*

*Speech delayed compared to others in family*

*...the youngest of seven children...In infancy not responsive to attention. Seemed not as alert as siblings were...As a baby in play pen and creeping stage played with what was within reach. If dropped or lost never fussed or tried to regain it but turned to something else ...*

*As soon as walking fond of books.*

*...Between two and three did much drawing with whatever was at hand, during summer used a stick and drew in dirt, rubbing it out and drawing the same thing again and again.*

*...at three she distinguished between hexagons and octagons... When taken to see a new baby, she casually looked at the baby then examined the crib and said, "Terry's crib has 12 bars; mine only has 11." As soon as we reached home she went upstairs to check and told me she was right.*

*...Good vocabulary...no baby talk, but didn't converse—repeated what was said to her ...*

*...Discipline has never been a problem with the others. With Barbara nothing*

*worked...Until recently didn't seem to realize that her behavior was different than other children her age. Quite troubled by it now...Loneliness seems to be a part of the picture. Has been quite upset if one animal was alone: always wanted two turtles, two pigeons, two cats, two dogs, saying they'd be unhappy alone ...*

*No enthusiasm for any special person, as though family and strangers were alike. If we were out in front of the house she might take the hand of anyone who passed and walk down the street with them. Would join any other family group when at the beach or on a picnic—even pick up their food. She would walk right across people lying on the beach just as though they were logs. In contrast to this vague attention to people she paid minute attention to detail of things in which she was interested. When taken to a restaurant, constantly on the move to see this and that—to such an extreme that we about gave up trying to take her places except where she could be active ...*



I thought animals were prettier than people because they had fur. They were better to touch too. I didn't like to touch other people's skin; it felt like rubber to me. Different types of clothing just did not feel right. I didn't like that wet, sticky feeling you get when you wear certain kinds of clothes; I didn't like tight clothes that had no "give," such as tapered slacks or a dress with a narrow waist. I liked to have a loose top on and nothing underneath, because then I didn't feel that stickiness as much. In the summertime, we went barefoot a lot, and if I wasn't wearing shoes very much and then I put them on, I felt like my toes were squished together.

At times, some household objects would look to me like they had private parts, like they had vaginas. And I would have dreams

about somebody molesting the objects. These bad thoughts were intense and I was preoccupied with them. Usually I didn't have them, but when I did, they could last for days. Not knowing any other word for what I was feeling, I would say I was "sad." But I felt I couldn't tell anybody about these thoughts and dreams. I just couldn't.

My folks took me to church every week at the cathedral. With the Latin Mass, I couldn't understand a thing they said. I simply couldn't sit still and be quiet for an hour. One time I had a fantasy while we were at church: What if the church would get up and walk someplace and put itself down somewhere else? And people would come out and not know where they were. It was just sort of a passing thought, but that was about the time I started to see how certain buildings, like capitol buildings, looked like people.

As I got older, I knew I was not like my sisters, and it grieved me. Most of my family always wanted me to do something that would please them. The only one who would ask me questions about what I was doing when I played was Ruth. When Ruth and I slept in the same room, one morning Ruth said the cathedral's birthday was coming and we should buy a present. Then we discussed what we'd get her for her birthday.



## Ruth

*My mother used to spend a lot of time with Barbie and read to Barbie a lot. I have many, many pleasant memories of my mother coming in before bed and reading us a chapter out of a book—she did that with all of us.*

*Barbie liked to dictate stories. Before she knew how to write, she would just tell stories to my mother and my mother would write the words. Barbie would tell her where to leave spaces and she would go back and draw pictures. My mother would cut up*

*grocery bags, do the stories on them, and then they would be stitched together with thread or stapled to become little books. The characters in Barb's books were personified objects. She wrote books about little submarines, kitties, or her skates.*

*My father was a quiet, contemplative type. A nice person, he was always there, and supportive in a reserved kind of way. We all had our educations paid for. But he did not support any questioning of religion or doing anything "unchristian." For instance, gossiping—we never had open discussions at our dinner table about other people or families. We didn't complain about our teachers. Teachers, sisters, and priests were, in my father's opinion, always on the right side. If there was a conflict with one of them, you could bet you were on the wrong side. But other than that, he was a good, orderly, and gentle man.*

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Gas Pumps, Geysers, and Traffic Lights*

To me, ordinary people were boring. I did like my brothers and sisters and friends of the family, but I couldn't understand any of them and they didn't understand me. I was driven into a world of daydreams because I had no way to communicate the only thoughts I could have. I never really liked the way people looked, and that had a lot to do with it. Objects just looked and felt better to me. It seemed there was nothing I could think—let alone say—that anyone wanted to hear. I pretty much had to be by myself to do things I wanted to do.

I knew people just didn't understand me. I was often lonely, and people were a disappointment. I wanted to be around someone who understood. I wanted to think someone felt like I did. I could imagine certain kinds of people I wished were in my life: people who were pleasant to look at and touch; people who made me feel safe and welcome; people I could trust not to hurt me; people who'd be there for me. And so I pretended objects were human. I enjoyed my pretend friends; they made me feel less empty.

In the early '50s, when gas pumps had the lamps on top, I thought they looked like they could be alive and that they were cute. I was also attracted to capitol buildings; they looked like someone sitting down with the dome as the head. The Field Club where we went swimming then had a fountain in the full-sized pool, and it looked like it was alive because it just stood there in the water like a person would. I drew a picture of it with chalk on the wall in our garage. Watching *The Ruff and Reddy Show*, I became fascinated with a cartoon submarine. I thought of this



type of thing as half-ship, half-animal. I also liked the TV towers in Omaha. The ones for Channel 3 and Channel 6 were the parents. The other one, the “weather tower” for Channel 7, had lights on it: red for warmer, white for cooler, green for the same. If rain were forecast, they would flash the lights. I thought of this tower as the child who wore a jacket that lit up. When I was in kindergarten, I liked the huge vent pipes on the roof of the school. They were curved at the top and I named them Larry and Flora.

I talked to Christmas trees. I liked to touch the branches and I would pull on them sometimes, so I accidentally tipped our tree over nearly every year when I was little. I would get too attached, and it was hard to see the tree go after Christmas.

We had a set of wooden building blocks. I took a certain number of blocks and named them after people in the family. Five big ones represented the older people: my brother John, sister Marty, and brother David, who were almost like adults to me, and then Mom and Dad. And four small ones represented the smaller people: Catherine, Dorothy, Ruth, and me. I could tell which one was which by the grain of the wood.

After building blocks, I played with roller skates the way Dorothy and Ruth played with dolls. Mom told me I couldn’t have the regular skates, because my brothers and sisters were still using them, but I could do whatever I wanted with the keyless skates. I found some of those down in the basement behind the furnace room. I named them Tidish, Two-eared, Berings, Matilda (after the Harry Belafonte song), Alice, Zippy, and Pindin. Zippy, Pindin, and Berings were boys and the others were girls. I called them my skunk family. Skunks were furry and like cats. I didn’t know until later that skunks are also big stinkers. I’d line them all up in front of the TV in the afternoon and we’d watch cartoons. I was their mom. I put out food and water for them. I’d wrap old

rags and cloth strips around them like clothes and put them to bed in the doll crib next to my bed. I guarded them the way a mama bear would guard her cubs—if anyone mistreated them, I'd get mad. I played with my skates for years, until the one I considered my favorite fell apart. I lost interest right away then.



I liked the idea that I could make a mark and have it look like something. As a young child, I only drew the basic shape of a swing, because that was all I could draw that looked like something. As soon as I was able to draw other things, I did.

I remember for a while when I drew people, I drew them like my blocks: I liked the way the blocks looked. The blocks were simpler. People were just too complicated.

I drew the things I wanted to see, the kinds of things I liked looking at—objects as persons—because otherwise I couldn't see them. I wanted to be able to have an image in front of me of a better world, because I didn't think the one I was in was good enough. I drew even when nobody else looked at the pictures.

I'm glad I could draw what I wanted to when I lived at home. I always wished I could share those things with other people. But when I drew, people still didn't get it.

I liked to draw because it gave me a sense of control. On paper, I could see what I wanted to see. I drew the world as I wanted it to be. Drawing is like talking. I could speak my own language; I could show what words couldn't say.



When we went to Denver, Mom and Dad just happened to drive into a motel called The Branding Iron; it even had a logo. I had seen someone use a branding iron on *The Ruff & Reddy Show* and I'd decided I liked branding irons, so I cut pieces of cardboard

and taped them together to make a branding iron. I named him Brandy and took him with me when we went to dinner.

Later on, we got a radio-phonograph, and when you adjusted it just right, part of it looked like a human eye. When you tuned it, the eye would be closed. I drew pictures of it. I liked the record album covers and I'd put them up on the window sill so they could watch people outside. This certainly bothered everyone, because records have to be handled carefully. But I never broke any LP records.

On a day trip to Colorado Springs when the geysers in Yellowstone went off, they looked almost solid to me, the way clouds look, and I thought I could see faces in them too.

Also in Colorado Springs they had some really cute traffic lights—four-way lights hanging from wires: box-shaped, like three cubes stacked and all fused into one, big enough to have red, yellow, and green lights in each direction, and then of course the little visors. That's when I started liking traffic lights. Back in Omaha they had some odd modern signals I didn't like. I called them "automated." But there were also traffic lights I thought of as "live"—the two-ways. They were standard almost everywhere. They had two sections that were at right angles and that were attached to each other at the top and on the bottom. If you were in a convertible and you stopped for the red light, you'd be right where the hanging traffic light could look down at you, because a traffic light on a pole will look directly down in front. Or they'll watch you walking down the street, and the other ones watch you in cars. I don't know the names of any traffic lights; they're all generic to me. But I thought about them on a regular basis.



When I was five and started school, I went half-days to preschool at Duchesne. Duchesne is really a French name and it's pronounced "Du-SHEN." But Dad would sometimes pronounce

it “Du-CHES-nee.” I thought that was a made-up nickname, until I was able to read and see how it could be pronounced that way, and that it was Dad’s sense of humor.

While my parents talked with the teacher at Duchesne for the first time, I looked at the books. I wasn’t reading yet, but I could look at the pictures. I liked this one book with a scene that showed a steam engine with a face; the steam engine was being worked on (I think they were taking the smokestack off), and it was crying. My father was a doctor and I liked medical stuff, but the story also seemed to show what people in my family always denied: The fact that the engine was shown crying was a message that it was okay and natural to cry when you were being worked on.

There were plenty of books around at home, and I even had a couple of train books: *The Little Train That Won a Medal*, *The Little Engine That Laughed*, and *The Little Engine That Could*. I thought locomotives looked like people, and I remember sneaking downstairs after I’d gone to bed and looking at them out in the hallway in an atlas that was in the bookcase with the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

But that book at Duchesne with the steam engine was the best. And I kept running into the kindergarten room to get my hands on it.

I couldn’t sit still at school; some things just didn’t interest me. I would wander off and look at things I wanted to see, like the small jungle gym in the preschool room I wanted to play on sometimes. Also in preschool I remember on Valentine’s Day they had paper hats with candy hearts pasted on. I ate all my hearts, then I grabbed the hearts off other kids’ hats and ate them too.

Once, when I was five, Mom said, “Barbara, I could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times you’ve hung your coat up in your whole life.”

If I got really upset, sometimes I'd cry and whine, and not even know what was wrong. I was accused of doing it to myself, of choosing to be different. Mom yelled at me and criticized me. That made me feel guilty. I knew it wasn't my fault, but I was sure no one would have agreed.

I caused her heartache, that's what Mom said.



### **Mrs. Moran**

*About this time, she started to ask questions, especially: "What's inside of \_\_?" Spent much time examining things with a hand lens. Often responded to a question with a question of her own regarding something she had on her mind. It was as though the question you asked her didn't penetrate and would only get answered if one made a special effort to get her attention. Now she started asking the meaning of any word used in family conversation—even quite technical terms.*

*One of her first intense interests was in blood and anatomy. Was always at hand when a chicken was cut up to probe and question. Once her interest was aroused she kept at one, asking questions and more questions and getting quite furious if one said, "I don't know"—until we had to buy a set of encyclopedias.*

*Age five: Following visits from some out-of-state friends (the people meant nothing to her), she became interested in maps. From then on, maps and the globe were her constant "toys." She carried them about with her and learned to locate all the places where the before-mentioned people lived, then other places she had heard of. Soon from the globe, she identified the continents and oceans, and then moved her interest on to the universe.*

*She didn't seem emotionally prepared for kindergarten. We thought it advisable to have some testing done before making any further decision as to school. We took her to Dr. Philip Boyer*

## HELLO, STRANGER

*for psychological testing. He thought she should have psychiatric attention. Then we went to Dr. Moore, a child psychiatrist. He thought we should get her with children as soon as possible. We entered her in the Duchesne Academy in the kindergarten class, but after a brief trial, they thought it better to move her to the pre-school section where she remained for the rest of the year. She didn't participate in pre-school activities, playing off at the side by herself, and was difficult to discipline. She was very age-conscious, was greatly bothered that she was not with five-year-olds, and would slip over to the kindergarten at every opportunity...*