



# Family Tree

## Better to Wish

The First Generation

ANN M. MARTIN



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the Depression deepens, and her mother dies, the responsibility of taking care of her  
family falls to her, and she has to put her dreams of going to college and becoming a  
writer on hold.

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# Prologue

*Monday, September 19th, 2022*

When I was eight years old, an hour could seem like a week and a summer could seem like an eternity. But Mama would say to Rose and me, “Time is flying.”

When I was eight, what I wanted to be was ten. A two-number age. When I was ten, I wanted to be twelve. When I was twelve, I wanted to be sixteen. I wanted to be an adult, I wanted to drive a car, I wanted to have a job, I wanted to be independent, I wanted to be a mother.

The years rolled by and eventually I realized that they were rolling faster and faster, and that Mama had been right after all. Time was flying.

I’ve gotten a lot of things I wished for — children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren. And I’ve experienced a few things I wouldn’t wish on anybody. Pop once said it’s a good thing we don’t know what’s around the corner. I didn’t understand what he meant then, but I do now. It’s better to wish than to know.

When you have the pleasure of being one hundred years old, when your mind is clear and sharp and you can revisit an afternoon that's ninety-five years past as easily as you can visit yesterday afternoon, then you can piece together the kaleidoscope bits of your life. But like a kaleidoscope, the picture is different every time. Fred is there and then he's gone and then he appears again. Zander swirls into focus slowly and disappears with a great swoop that is unexpected, even now. And Mama and Sarah and Adele, they come and go. Love, too. And money. It's crass, but you can't forget about the money, although it means more to some than to others.

Generation following generation, the little ones who didn't make it, the grown ones who stuck around longer than maybe they should have been allowed. And the secrets. The things hidden and the things unsaid that sometimes cause more trouble and more grief as the years pile up, more than the things brought out into the sunshine for all to see.

But even secrets have their place.

Sitting by the window now, in the shadow of a chestnut tree, longing for a view from a different window in a different time, I dig through my memories and choose one from Lewisport, my first home.

# Chapter 1

*Wednesday, August 13th, 1930*

The night of August 13th was going to be one of the best of the whole summer. Abby Nichols knew it, her sister Rose knew it, every kid up and down their sandy lane knew it. It was just an ordinary weekday in tiny Lewisport, Maine, not a holiday, but by the time darkness fell and the fireflies were blinking, the field across from the Methodist church would be ablaze with lanterns. Nearly everyone in town would be turning out to eat candy apples, win Kewpie dolls at the arcade, and gawk at the posters by the entrance to the sideshow. The signs announcing the traveling fair — ONE NIGHT ONLY! — had promised a two-headed snake, and Abby did not intend to miss out on that.

Abby thought about the snake, which she felt sorry for but wanted to see anyway, and about the bearded lady and the fat lady and crab man, who supposedly had crab claws instead of hands. She had only a dime to spend at the fair, and a nickel of that would go toward the sideshow. Maybe

her father would relent and give her and Rose an extra dime each, but money had always been tight in the Nichols household, and was even tighter now that the Great Depression had fallen over the country, so extra dimes seemed unlikely.

Abby turned on her side, propped her chin in her hand, and looked out the open bedroom window. In the gray dawn she could see the sand on the other side of Blue Harbor Lane and, beyond that, the dark expanse of the ocean. She heard waves rolling in and saw the shapes of gulls wheeling low over the water. The damp salt air was inside, outside, everywhere, making the bedsheets nearly as wet and heavy as sails.

“Abby?” Rose whispered from her side of the bed. “What’s the first thing you’re going to do tonight?”

Abby rolled over again and faced her little sister. “Go to the sideshow.”

“Really? You’re going to spend a whole nickel right away?”

“Don’t you want to see the sideshow?”

“Yes, but . . . Abby, now don’t tell.”

Abby sighed. “Don’t make me promise not to tell something.” She looked sternly at her little sister. “Please, Rose.”

“But I have a plan. And if we tell it, it won’t come true.”

“Then don’t tell me. Keep it a secret.”

Rose made a face at Abby and said, “Okay-ay. If you don’t want to know my plan.”

The room lightened, and the white curtains that Abby’s mother had made shifted in the breeze. Abby sat up, swung her legs over the edge of the bed, and, resting her arms on the windowsill, peered down at the road below.

“There’s Orrin,” she said.

“Got his bucket?” asked Rose.

“He’s always got his bucket.” Abby leaned out the window. “Orrin!” she called softly. “Orrin!”

Orrin Umhay, an old cap of his father’s on his head and a hankie trailing out of one back pocket, grinned up at Abby from the quiet lane. Setting down his empty bucket, he asked, “Want to come with me?”

“Blueberries or clams?” asked Abby.

“Blueberries.”

Abby looked over her shoulder at Rose. “Want to go pick blueberries with Orrin?”

Rose stretched her skinny six-year-old legs. “Yes.”

“We’ll be right down,” Abby whispered as loudly as she dared, and she pulled her head back inside.

Rose was already wriggling into her gingham dress, the blue one that Mama had made Abby two years earlier for her sixth birthday.

“Dungarees,” said Abby, and pulled the dress off Rose’s head. “You’ll get all scratched up if you wear a dress for blueberry picking. Hang that up. You can wear it later.”

“You don’t know everything,” muttered Rose, but she put on her dungarees.

“Pop’s up,” Abby said a few minutes later. She was listening cautiously at the door. “We can stop whispering. I hear him downstairs.”

“Maybe he won’t let us go.”

Abby considered this. “Don’t say we’re going with Orrin. Just tell him we’re going blueberry picking.” She brightened. “If he asks, tell him we’re picking them as a surprise for Mama.”

“All right. But where’s Orrin?”

“Gone ahead. Pop won’t see him.”

Abby and Rose slipped out of their room, the only one on the second floor, and crept to the bottom of the stairs. Luther, their pop, had built the house with his own hands while he was courting Nell, their mama. Pop was the best carpenter in Lewisport, maybe in Barnegat Point, too. Abby had heard people say that many times, and she was proud of her father.

“Where are you girls off to so early?” asked Pop from his place at the kitchen table.

“Blueberry picking,” said Rose.



And Abby said, glaring at her sister, “*May* we go blueberry picking?”

Pop glanced through the window. “Isn’t even light out yet.”

“It’s almost,” said Rose. “Please?”

“Let them go,” spoke up Mama. She turned from the stove and set a plate of eggs in front of Pop.

Pop was always up early. “Early bird catches the worm,” he liked to say. “Times may be hard, but there’s no excuse for a healthy man not to be holding down a job.”

And Mama was usually up early, too, to make sure Pop got a good breakfast in him before he went off to whatever carpentry job he had found. If Mama wasn’t up early, it was because she was having one of her bad days, her mind stuck thinking of the two rosebushes and what they meant.

Abby and Rose scuttled out the door before Pop could disagree with Mama, and they caught up with Orrin, who was waiting at the edge of the woods near the spot where Blue Harbor Lane abruptly ended at a rocky beach.

“Hey,” said Abby.

“Hey,” said Orrin.

Abby had known Orrin since they were five, but she had fallen in love with him three months earlier, toward the end of second grade. She couldn’t tell him, though. Some thoughts were better left secret.

“How much money have you got for the fair?” asked Rose as they tramped along the path toward the best blueberry bushes. Abby kicked her ankle, but it was too late.

“Not saying,” Orrin replied, and then Abby knew for sure that Orrin didn’t have any money at all.

Abby felt like hurting Rose, or at least making her feel as awkward as Orrin looked. “Why don’t you tell us your plan for tonight at the fair?” she asked her sister.

“What plan?” said Orrin with interest.

“I said it was a secret!” cried Rose.

“But I thought you wanted me to guess.”

“Oh, I’ll just tell you anyway.” Rose stopped and plucked a blueberry from a scrubby bush and dropped it into the bucket she and Abby were sharing. “I’m going to win a tea set at the ring toss game. I know there’ll be a tea set there. If I toss very, very carefully, I bet I can win one with five turns. And if I can’t, then I’m going to use my other five cents for five more turns instead of going to the sideshow. But I’m going to get a tea set tonight.”

“Good luck,” said Orrin, and Abby could tell that he meant it.

The sun grew stronger and the day grew hot. When Abby and Rose got home and gave Mama the bucket of berries,

she fed them breakfast and then scatted them up the wooden staircase to change out of their dungarees and into dresses. Mama was good with a sewing machine, and Abby's dresses were handmade, which was nice, but her friend Sarah Moreside sometimes got to go to the dress shop in Barnegat Point and pick out a store-bought dress.

Downstairs, the front door banged and Abby heard Sarah say, "Can Abby come out?"

"Abby!" called Mama. "Sarah's here."

Abby buttoned the last button on her dress, grabbed her red socks, and hurried downstairs with Rose at her heels.

"You go play with Emily," Abby said over her shoulder.

"Oh, let her play with us," said Sarah. "It's okay. Look — new paper dolls. Gran sent them for my birthday. We can all cut out her dresses."

Abby gaped at the flawless pages of outfits for a chubby girl named Little Judy, who at the moment was wearing only frilly underwear. Sarah's offer was very generous, considering that Rose was still hopeless with scissors.

Abby and Sarah and Rose sat on Sarah's front stoop in the warm sun and painstakingly clipped out Little Judy's traveling suit and seaside outfit and lavish lavender Christmas dress and her many, many "School Daze" dresses.

“Imagine having this many clothes,” said Rose, concentrating furiously on her scissors, wisps of hair escaping from her braids. “Little Judy must be rich.”

“No one’s rich these days,” said Sarah.

Abby glanced up from the page of Little Judy’s complicated traveling suit. “President Hoover must be rich.”

“Girls! Come inside, please,” called Mama from three doors away.

“We’ll meet you back here later,” Abby said to Sarah, jumping to her feet.

At home, Mama insisted that Rose and Abby change into fresh dresses and fresh socks and eat soup even though the soup was hotter than the day. “And you need a rest,” she said to Rose, who protested until Mama reminded her that she would be up late that night at the fair.

Abby trailed back out of her house. Farther down Blue Harbor Lane, she could see three girls jumping rope, and Orrin and his brother trying to ride a little cart they had built themselves using boards and old wheels from a wagon. Sarah wasn’t on her stoop yet, so Abby wandered around behind her own house and stood on the sandy ground and looked at the two rosebushes that Pop had planted, one in 1927 and one in 1928, each time one of Mama’s babies hadn’t

lasted long enough to be born proper. On the babies' headstones in the graveyard at the church were their names: Millicent Pryor Nichols and Luther Randolph Nichols Jr. But the bushes were just plain bushes without any kind of markers. And they made Mama sad. Sometimes Abby wished they hadn't been planted in the yard where Mama could see them every day.

Sarah called to Abby then, and they worked on Little Judy's outfits for a while longer. Then Rose came outside after her nap and a gang of Blue Harbor Lane children played a noisy game of kick-the-can. Finally the girls split off from the boys to take turns jumping rope, and before Abby knew it, Mama was calling her and Rose inside again. It was time to get ready for the fair.

The people of Lewisport walked to the Methodist church after supper, the children scrubbed and shining, the adults tired but hopeful, pockets jingling with pennies and nickels and dimes. Abby and Rose were wearing their third dresses of the day, and their dimes were tucked into the change purses that they wore on chains around their necks.

"Remember not to say about my plan," Rose whispered to Abby. "It's a secret. If you say anything, you'll jinx it."

The lights of the fair blinked in front of them.

“Lanterns!” said Abby under her breath. “It’s beautiful! Remember last year?” She turned to Mama and Pop. Last year there had been a small Ferris wheel and Abby had ridden it so many times she had run out of money. That was why she planned to go to the sideshow first this year, before anything else. “Look, there are Sarah and Emily and Francis and Douglas. Can we walk around with them?”

“Stay together,” said Pop.

“Abby, keep an eye on your sister,” added Mama.

Abby took Rose by the hand and they ran to their friends. Everyone wanted to see the two-headed snake, except for Rose, who wanted to start winning her tea set.

“Five against one. We win,” said Douglas, glaring at Rose and jamming his hands in his pockets.

“We’ll go to the arcade right after the sideshow,” Abby promised her sister.

“Well, I’m not going in. I’m not spending half my money.”

Abby was getting very tired of Rose’s stubbornness, but once Rose made up her mind, she was hard to budge. In the end, Abby and Sarah waited with Rose while the others went inside, and then they switched off. Rose resolutely refused to use up half her dime, even when Abby ran out of the wooden trailer, crying, “Rose! It really is a two-headed snake! Two

heads, four eyes. And there's a man with claws for hands, just like the signs say!"

But Rose would not give up on her tea set plan. She ignored Abby. "The *arcade*, the *arcade*!" she said, pulling her sister's hand. She led the way along the rows of games, past the flashing lights and ringing bells and the *pop-pop* of air guns to the tamer ring toss booth, with its board of prizes at the back.

Rose studied the board. At last she pointed and said, "Look. A china tea set. That's what I want."

Abby looked at the tiny china cups and plates and saucers, packed into a fancy wooden box. "But, Rose," she whispered, "you have to get the ring over the exact middle pop bottle to win that. It's almost impossible."

Rose set her jaw. "I can do it." She handed her dime to the skinny man in a striped shirt who was holding a handful of small wooden rings. "Five, please, mister," she said.

Abby and Sarah watched as Rose, frowning, carefully tossed her rings, one after the other, onto the grid of pop bottles. Most of them fell between the cracks. One landed to the side, missing the bottles altogether. Rose used her remaining five cents to buy five more tries. When she reached for the tenth ring, Abby said to her, "Here," and held out her nickel, but Rose shook her head. "I have to do it with my own money."

She squinted one eye shut and carefully tossed out the last ring. It bounced off the edge of a bottle and landed on the ground.

“*Oh!* So sorry, little lady,” said the man in the striped shirt. “Here. A consolation prize.” He reached for a balloon, which he fastened to a stick before giving it to Rose.

Rose would not cry. She walked ahead of Abby and Sarah down the midway, the balloon bouncing at her side, until Abby saw a man selling ice cream, and bought one for herself and one for her sister.

Their money was gone. But the carnival blinked and pinged and flashed around them, and the lanterns glowed. Rose held tight to her balloon and Abby thought of the wonders of the sideshow and decided she would write about the two-headed snake on the first day of third grade in Barnegat Point, when her teacher was bound to ask the students about their summer vacations.

Long years later, when Abby was old, very old, she liked to recall this evening. Not because Rose had lost her dime, of course, but because it was pleasant to dwell in this time when losing a dime was the biggest worry she and Rose faced. They hadn’t yet learned that it was better not to know what was waiting for them around the corner.