

5-17-95

Lost

Last Sunday we arrived at church early, as usual, for Paul's choir practice. The parish hall was awash with pre-church activity, mainly families who come for breakfast, our most popular social hour. We are enjoying a surge of young families coming to church with their young children. The toddlers have a few moments to run around among the crowd before going upstairs for nursery care or church school classes. I was standing talking to Norma and Fred Morris when my leg suddenly acquired a barnacle. I looked down into a pair of wide eyes and a trembling mouth. A child I'd never seen before was clinging to my skirt and leg as to a last support. My pink skirt must have resembled the pink skirt she had come with; I was *not* the mother whom she obviously needed. Before the moment became tragic and loud, the right pink skirt arrived to rescue her, and I was taken back to other occasions when being lost was the main happening, including two that were very similar.

One occurred thirty or so years ago when I was shopping with five-year-old George and two-year-old Roland. We were on the first floor of a large suburban Dallas Sangers' department store. Roland had obviously strayed momentarily. Suddenly realizing his absence from me, he grasped a dark blue skirt, like mine but not mine. Fortunately, I located him before his and my own panic became acute. For some time afterward he did not stray so far from me when we were in public.

Years before that, when I was about four, I was with my mother on an elevator in Sangers' downtown store. That was the occasion I relived last Sunday. I had been sure that I saw her flowered dress leaving the elevator and I quickly followed. Just as the elevator doors closed, I realized that the flowered dress was not the right one. The elevator went up and I envisioned Mother being carried away from me, and there I was, at the mercy of strangers. My heart stopped beating; I knew that I would never again see Mother. The woman in the flowered dress caught me before my panic propelled me into rapid flight. She must have tried to assure me that Mother would come get me, but I didn't feel a bit secure. The two or three minutes Mother took to leave the elevator at the next floor and return to me were an eternity. My anguished wails must have had the entire floor alerted to the tragedy I was living. Mother, of course, did reclaim me as quickly as she could, but my universe was shattered. I don't recall any of the rest of the morning except that Mother evoked the magic of the Sanger Tearoom, which I was sure, forever after, was the most wonderful, safest haven in the whole world. The next best place after the Tearoom had to be the multi-storied garage across the street from Sangers where I soon watched our blue Buick descend the ramp from the second floor so that it could take me safely home.

Years later I recalled that sick panic when Roland had his fright and, again, last Sunday when I turned out to be the wrong mother. I chatted briefly with the mother after she comforted her little Amy and was even able to make a kind of headway in convincing her that I was no ogre.

The sensation of being lost may vary in kind and intensity over the years, but it is always an unpleasant emotion. Often it may be overshadowed by a feeling of being pretty stupid instead of the sick, panicked feeling of a lost child. Just recently Paul and I were exploring a part of Richmond we'd never seen before. It was a pleasant part of town with a great deal to offer a spring-time sightseer with its lovely dogwoods and azaleas. We enjoyed the neighborhood thoroughly until we decided to go on about our business. We knew that we were near Broad Street, but, no matter where we turned, we found ourselves retracing our route on Dickens Street, with Broad Street remaining elusive. I generally have a good sense of direction, but on that occasion I couldn't decide which direction was east and which west. A cloudy sky contributed to my confusion. We were not really lost, but we still didn't know where we were. Finally, we stayed on one street until it was clear that we were going in the wrong direction. We reversed our direction on the same street and did finally reach Broad Street, with its familiar landmarks that told us we were safely on our way home.

The feeling of being lost this time, of course, was different from that of a child separated from her mother, but lurking in the background was the possibility that it was no fun. I can't be certain where we went wrong, except that I'm sure that the terrain of Richmond and streets that start and stop or change names were part of it.

About a year after we moved to Richmond, I was on my way to teach a class at J. Sargeant Reynolds' Parham Road campus. I was following my favorite route down Three Chopt to Horsepen, intending to continue on Horsepen after it changed to Glenside Drive. At Monument Avenue, a policeman directed me to turn onto Monument Avenue because of a fire in the next block on Glenside. Not wanting to wander about a neighborhood I didn't know, I asked the officer how I could return to Glenside Drive.

Very patiently, he said, "Lady, turn right, go to the next corner, turn left. Go to the next corner, turn left. Go to the next corner. You're at Glenside. Turn right!" How was I to know that the streets there were laid out in a true grid pattern? I thanked the nice man and went on my way, not lost. But moments before the policeman directed me, I had recaptured a bit of that "lost" feeling from long ago.

More and more at my age, I find that occasions like the confusion of the little girl last Sunday bring a flood of memories of things that have happened to me, some long ago, some recently.