



Eva Rutland at age 12 in Atlanta, Georgia

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The Trouble Is . . .

The trouble with being a mama is you worry too much. You worry about why Tommy spits up his milk and smells so sour, why Archie sucks his thumb, why Annie can't grasp Spanish, why that "absolute doll" won't ask Doris to the platter-hop, why Patty has so many boyfriends, how on earth to keep eight wriggling Cub Scouts still enough to make eight sparkling pairs of earrings for eight sparkling mamas' sparkling Christmas presents (well, seven—you're willing to forgo yours), how to get children who don't like eggs to eat good solid breakfasts, how to stretch the budget to include those nourishing eggs they leave on their plates, how to calm a husband who doesn't like eggs left on plates that a budget had to be stretched to include, why other kids look so scrubbed and yours look so grimy, what to do about smelly feet (why doesn't somebody invent sneakers that don't make feet sweat?), how to get a bass fiddle and four-foot boy to school together without carrying them yourself, how to discipline Billy without warping his personality, how to keep your husband from warping Billy's person, how to iron blouses with no cat faces, how to get Tommy to wear his pants around

his waist instead of his hips, how to straighten curly hair, how to curl straight hair, and how to make uniforms for Girl Scouts who are going to serve in the children's hospital (you know this is good training but you never could look a needle straight in the eye—and why don't the uniforms come ready-made?). And if you're a Negro mother you have a few extra worries. Will Sarah be accepted at Mr. Diddlywhat's Dancing School and can the kids swim in the public swimming pool? How adequate is Joey's segregated school or how integrated is his integrated school? And what to do when somebody calls him a "nigger"?

My big trouble is I wasn't trained to be a mama—well, not the worrying type anyway. My mama never worried. Oh, about fundamentals, like how to pay the bills and what to cook for dinner. But about children, no. You bathed 'em, you fed 'em, and you made 'em behave—and that was it. My mama was a schoolteacher but I don't believe she ever read a psychology book in her life. She had one method of discipline—a peachtree switch applied vigorously around one's legs. Her approach was to get rid of a bad habit—and who ever heard of personality? I remember my aunt couldn't stop one of my cousins from sucking her thumb so she sent her over to my mama. Mama broke the habit in three days. She simply tied said thumb to the bedpost out of reach of said mouth, with no thought of substitutions and no qualms about said child's emotional stability and security and whether said child's parents quarreled in the presence of said child. Said child now has married, has thumb-sucking children of her own, and from what I can see has a well-rounded personality, suffering no ill effects or frustrations from said thumb incident.

The only time my mother used psychology (and it was strictly the homemade or mother-wit kind—I'm sure she

never got this out of any book) was when one of her own cherubs snatched three pennies out of her purse to purchase an oversized cherry lollipop. This was in the days when allowances were unheard of and any store-bought delicacy had to be strictly accounted for. The source of the lollipop was immediately traced and punishment promptly administered. Not the peachtree switch variety. Stealing was a major infraction and called for major surgery. The punishment (get this, now) was for the culprit to wear a blindfold for three hours and pretend he was blind. I really thought he was and set up such a howl that he had to peek under the blindfold to show me that he could really see. I never did see the connection between the blindfold and stealing, but the punishment had its effect and served as an example to Mama's other children as well as the culprit. It scared the daylights out of me, and I don't remember another incident of stealing in the history of our entire family.

Nowadays the punishment for stealing is not so simple. One must first see that the child is loved, has some valuable possessions of his own, is made a junior partner in the family firm, is presented with an itemized tabulation of how Dad's income is spent, and is provided with some small service that will enable him to earn the money to buy whatever his little heart desires. Then, as I think I read somewhere, "Johnny no longer has to try to satisfy his deepest hunger—his hunger for love—by making forays on his mother's purse."

But, as I said, Mama was not confused by psychology. And for the "nigger" problem, she had one answer—you were not a "nigger," you were a *Negro*, a word uttered with such dignity that you were proud of the fact and sorry for the ignorant so-and-so who didn't know the difference. As a matter of fact, Mama was not only conscious of her own dignity and worth.

She was absolutely and irrevocably conscious of everyone else's dignity and worth, and that took some doing in the neighborhood in which we lived—a strange mixture of races and classes and creeds. The Jews centered around their synagogue on Pryor Street, the middle-class white people on Formwalt, the poorer whites across the street, and the poorer Negroes huddled in the shacks on the alley in back of our lot.

The neighborhood was not new to Mama. She had been born there when there was nothing but trees around and a creek, long since dried up. Her father had built our house long before the Jews built all around them. Mama used to slip out to wash diapers and help in their kitchens and slip back in before Grandpa got home. Grandpa was proud, and his shoe shop on Whitehall Street had thrived. He brought sugar and flour in by the barrelfuls, and he kept his children—all eleven of them—warmly clothed, and he didn't mean to see them in "anybody's kitchen." He saw them all finish college before he died. Mama had been there during the riot between the Negroes and whites. She often told how Mrs. McBride, their white neighbor on the hill, had come down during Atlanta's 1906 race riots and said to her mother, "Well, Emma, if the white folks come, you all come up to our house, and if the black folks come, we'll come down here. That way, we'll all be safe." Good neighbors, that's the way Mama felt, and she kept feeling that way, even as the neighborhood grew more complex.

And Mama's love and compassion for everyone had its effect on me. I'd retire shivering behind a chair when Miss Flora from up in the alley came reeling and rocking in to use "Miz' Eva's" telephone. She could use it if she didn't want to call the police.

And then there was the witch that lived around the corner from us. I know she was a witch because all the children

said so and she looked like one. I can see her now, bent and wizened, wispy white hair straggly under the black shawl, sweeping her walk with a long straw broom and followed by a slinky black cat. Her big yard was encircled with a heavy iron fence wired with electricity, or so went the rumor. To even touch it meant instant death, to say nothing of climbing it to reach the luscious green apples that hung temptingly from a limb above or the purple grapes whose vines entwined it. The gate had a heavy latch, controlled, it was said, by a special switch inside the house—one glance in a special mirror identified you as friend or foe and you were in or out, whichever the old witch preferred. I definitely preferred out and always walked cautiously on the other side of the street. But Mama insisted she was no witch, just poor old Mrs. Brookman who was lonely and unhappy because Mr. Brookman had killed himself when Germany lost the First World War, and “run over and take the poor old soul a pan of these hot rolls.”

As I said, Mama had no use for psychology or witches or black magic or childish fears.

So down the street and around the corner I went, careful not to touch the iron fence, lifting the latch with one finger, wishing it wouldn't budge, down the long walk, past the slinky black cat, into the darkened house, carefully shutting the door behind me—just me and the witch and a pan of hot rolls.

“Ach!” exclaimed the witch. “How mein fraulēin has grown.” And taking the rolls, still gibbering in an unknown tongue, she led me toward the back of the house. Mama will be sorry, I thought.

But she only wanted to give me a bucket of the luscious apples and I escaped happily, careful to touch only the latch and thankful that the witch bore me no ill will.

Of course Mama's idiosyncrasies also had their advantages. Miss Nancy, the black lady who lived next door, warned Mama not to let us play with those "alley brats," the poor blacks from the back alleys. She was careful not to suggest banning the poor white children. Perhaps because Miss Nancy, like my grandfather, was a former slave and still retained a cautious respect for all white people. Mama paid no attention to Miss Nancy. We could play with anybody, white or black, and anybody could borrow anything. This was during the Depression years when everybody was poor.

We were poor too. At least I guess we were poor. My father was a pharmacist and during most of my childhood worked in a prescription shop. In those days few of the medicines came bottled or capsuled as they seem to come now, and I used to love to watch my daddy as he mixed several powders on a marble slab—mixing, mixing, then smoothing and cutting into exact portions and expertly pressing each portion into a tiny capsule. It was an artistic operation that never failed to fascinate me. I used to like to wander among the strange-smelling boxes and bottles on the shelves in back of the shop. One bottle I especially remember—second bottle from the end, third shelf down. It was called "creosotonic." Daddy used to give it to us for colds, and I loved the taste.

Things were not always easy for Daddy, especially during the Depression. At various times he worked as a bellhop or waiter in hotels, and for a long time as a waiter in railroad dining cars. Even in the roughest times he never allowed me to look for work downtown for "you know how these white men are about Negro girls." Nor did he allow the boys to bellhop or work in any of the hotels because "in such a situation a Negro boy can get in trouble through no fault of his own."

Anyway, we were so much better off than many of our Negro neighbors that I think the help Mama had—Mr. Anthony or Miss Flora or Miss Bessie who came to wash (not always, as I can distinctly remember helping with the wash myself, with three tin tubs and an iron pot in which to boil clothes) or Lynn or Chester or any of the succession of teenage boys from the alley who came to bring in wood or coal or scrub the kitchen floor or dust—were hired for a number of reasons. Partly they were hired because Mama really believed in gracious living. Whether this was because of a deep feeling that a lady did not do hard work or because she was fundamentally lazy or because she was really more interested in a lively bridge game or a chat with a neighbor than she was in a spotless house, I do not know. I do know that housework was not for her. She worked the living daylights out of me, and even now I can see her rocking on the porch, her eye on the living room where Lynn was dusting—“Lynn, honey, you missed that chair over there.” Part of it was not that Mama actually needed help or could afford it but because she really wanted to help those who had less than herself; and she had a way of helping that left a man his pride and self-respect. What Mama had meant to these people became ever so clear to me when I went home for her funeral and observed the many, many people who came to pay their respects—Lynn from the back alley, married now, with children and a better home; drunken Miss Flora; Mr. W., the white man who had lived for a few years across the street; the white grocer two blocks away, as well as Atlanta’s Negro society from the plush homes across town. All of them had loved and been loved by “Miss Eva.”

So if we were poor, we had compensations—a telephone, a big yard, and Mr. Anthony. Mr. Anthony lived only a few

blocks away and seemed to exist entirely on the vegetables he shared from Miss Eva's garden and the few dollars "Dr. Neal" (my daddy) gave him. He loved gardening, and after a cup of black coffee and a good conversation (or I should say monologue) in which he explained in exquisite detail the various books of the Bible, he could work all day outside with a rake, a hoe, and a definite green thumb. Our yard flourished with roses, corn, and collard greens.

Of course the gardener's green thumb must have been considerably helped by his predecessor, the cow. The cow belonged to a Jewish lady, Mrs. Goldstein, who had heard of Mama's lend-lease policy and requested the upper lot for grazing purposes in exchange for a share of the milk. So the cow did her part toward fertilizing the land. That nobody ever complained but us kids is proof of how the neighborhood had deteriorated since Grandpa's day. And although I could never understand Mama's position (a cow in the yard was too much!), after four kids and a running battle with the local dairyman (my kids each drink at least a quart a day), I have at last come to understand Mrs. Goldstein's position. She had a brood that followed her around when she came to fetch the cow for milking. But Sophia is the only one I remember—and that only because of the candy.

I had a brother, Ed, who dearly loved to cook—not fundamental things like collards and cornbread but candy and cookies, all sorts of dainties. And that was another peculiarity of Mama's—he made it, we ate it, and I had to clean up. But that's beside the point. On this particular day he emerged from the kitchen and approached us at hopscotch.

"Want some candy?" I glanced at the creamy white tidbits, wondering how many pans were awaiting me. Sophia had another problem. Poised on one foot in the middle of the

hopscotch square, she eyed the candy and said plaintively, “I can’t eat it if it has lard in it.”

My brother’s eyes sparkled.

“Oh, it doesn’t,” he assured her. Whereupon she accepted three pieces. Ed watched until she swallowed the last one, then stated ominously, “It does have lard in it.”

Sophia let out one bloodcurdling scream, turned, and made a beeline for home, Ed running after her claiming, “No, it doesn’t, Sophia—no it doesn’t. I was only teasing.”

I never did know whether the candy had lard in it. But many emancipated years and miles later I attended a beautiful ceremony, the bar mitzvah of a friend’s son. There, in the Jewish synagogue, I made my silent and belated apology to Sophia—for not respecting and not understanding. We didn’t know.

For though I lived half my life among them, I never really knew any of these people, my neighbors. My world existed across town where the richer Negroes lived. And if the people around me were poorer than I was, most of those people with whom I associated were richer. All had cars—comparatively rare in my day—many had fine houses, some had maids, and most attended private schools. This didn’t bother my mama either. Not because she was not the “keep up with the Joneses” type but because she honestly believed that anything she owned was better than anything anybody else owned—her name, her stove, her icebox. Her family name was unsullied, gas didn’t cook as well as wood, and those new electric refrigerators had to be defrosted and poisoned your food.

Anyway, balanced as I was between the two worlds, I somehow got to think of people as people—not white or black or Jews—and when tragedy came I was able to keep that balance.

It came one Christmas Eve night, when I, then a teenager, returned home from a party at one of the big homes across town. Mama and I chattered gaily as we came up the walk. The house was ablaze with lights. Daddy and the boys were perhaps decorating the tree?

Daddy opened the door.

“Don’t get excited!” he shouted. “*Don’t get excited!*”

So naturally Mama fainted even before she reached the living room, where both my brothers lay bleeding, the doctors gathered around and two policemen. No, I think the policemen came later. It isn’t very clear—mostly I remember the blood and that my dress was blue and very beautiful. Everything seemed unreal, and I moved as one in a dream, changed my dress, gave Mama aromatic spirits of ammonia, held a flashlight, and watched through my tears while a doctor sewed up the wounds.

I learned the details later. My brothers had been walking home from work. They both had jobs driving trucks for High’s department store. Ed had just finished high school, but there was no money for college that year, so he was working. Sam was out of college, but that was the only job he could get. And late this Christmas Eve, after delivering the last of the packages, they were walking home. I kept thinking, *just walking home from work*. My brothers were good boys—no fights, no squabbles, no trouble. Some white boys were standing around a tavern and jumped them for no reason at all. And this too I kept thinking: no reason—not anger, not robbery, just prejudice. And such a vicious prejudice. They had cut them with switchblades and left them for dead.

But, somehow, ingrained as my mother’s philosophy was, this prejudice did not transmit itself to me. These were simply hoodlums. The *white people* were still Mrs. Brookman, Mr.

Smith across the street, the boys' bosses from the store—who all came to bring flowers and candy, tokens of affection. And strange as it may seem, I never heard my brothers mention the boys who did it. Somehow they did not seem important—at least not as individuals. But as symbols of the cruel bigotry and fanaticism under which we lived, the wounds went deep.

It was the scars that bothered Sam. He had several across his face and he would look into the mirror and say, "Now I look like just what they think I am—a good-for-nothing cut-throat. Now I'll never get a decent job." And my mother and father got medicine to put on the scars so they'd fade away; with hardly any money to live on they got medicine for the scars. But I knew the scars were deeper than that.

Past the surface scratches of the hoodlums' switchblades, buried under the sugarcoatings of the Mrs. Bookmans and friendly whites that we knew, were the deep, ugly bruises of a lifetime of blows—the long, long walk on a cold, wintry day to the segregated school, the push to the back of the bus, the climb to the "jim crow" section of the theater to see a special movie, the longing walk past the spacious parks and swimming pools reserved for whites, and his job—truck driver, under the supervision of a man whose education could not touch his own. The switchblade scars were only surface marks—a symbol of "what *they* think I am."

But it was to Mama's credit that what *they* thought we were was no indication of what we thought we were.