

Finding Sara

A Daughter's Journey

Margaret Edds



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I.

Delina, Tennessee

1915–1932

February 1, 1927

Delina, Tennessee

Dear Virginia,

What are you doing tonight?

I haven't studied any, tonight.

We got a letter from Eleanor and you both today.

Daddy is playing "Mumble Peg."

*Katherine is studing.**

John O's in bed and asleep, and Mamma is writeing to you.

When you go out and hunt bugs you should faint gracefully when you find one.

I finished "Jo's Boys" Sunday afternoon. I read a little on "The Bishop of Cottentown." I've been reading "David Copperfield" but haven't read any in it for three or four days. And then I've been reading "Little Women" too but I don't think I've read any on it for two or three days either.

* While the collected letters are intelligent and articulate, I elected to preserve rare misspelling or misplaced punctuation (particularly in Sara's earliest writing) to preserve the flavor of the correspondence.

*We didn't go to church Sunday it was so rainy.
 I will be perty glad when school is out. Won't you? Guess I'll stop.
 Love, Respectily, Yours truly, lovingly, Your sister,
 Sara
 Bruce
 Barnes*

Nighttime at Hilltop View farm, Delina, Tennessee, 1927.

Eleven-year-old Sara Barnes describes the evening's activities to Virginia, the oldest of her four siblings, who is attending high school in Lewisburg, the nearest sizable town.

I envision the family in the two-story, white frame farmhouse, some seventy-five miles southeast of Nashville. They gather in the sitting room where an assortment of rockers and ladder-backed chairs cluster near the fireplace. A double bed occupies a spot in a back corner of the room, available for visiting relatives. Books, papers and games crowd various chests and tables. In daylight, floorboard-to-ceiling windows reveal a row of maple trees and a rock-wall fence separating the front yard from a steep hillside that leads down to an unpaved county road.

Rural electrification did not come to that corner of south-central Tennessee until the mid-1930s, so as Sara writes, kerosene lamps and a coal fire light the room. Her father, John O. Barnes Sr., a farmer and fruit-tree salesman whose territory ran as far west as Texas, occupies his usual spot in a cane-bottomed rocker to the left of the fireplace, long legs crossed, feet steadied against the mantle, a pipe close at hand.

My grandmother, Jennie May Downing Barnes, a teacher and gentle soul who gave birth to five children after marrying at twenty-eight, has finished the dinner chores and prepared the next day's school lessons. This year she is Sara's sixth-grade teacher at the

Delina school, a mile-or-so walk to the south. A tall, plain woman with steady blue eyes, a narrow nose and thin mouth, Jennie May combined strong faith and a kind heart. Her children spoke of her reverently. She died the spring after I was born.

I know this setting because each summer in the 1950s and early 1960s, Rachel and I spent several weeks in the farming community of Delina, playing Rook and Flinch for hours, soaring as high as the squeaky porch swing would carry us, concocting dress-up versions of fancy balls and pretend college, wading the creek, devouring novels, exploring the barn's intricate web of stalls and feeding chutes.

My stern grandfather bought us orange Dreamsicles at the crossroads store and, elevating us far above our ordinary status back home, introduced us importantly as "Sara's girls." Our aunts put bobby-pin curls in our hair, mended our clothes and—depending on the aunt—read us long passages of Laura Ingalls Wilder or allowed us to paint our mouths with tiny red and pink lipstick samples.

At thirteen, during one magical summer visit, I experienced my first, backseat kiss from a local boy while driven home from a Delina Methodist Church youth cookout. At the end of another visit, I lay awake far into the night, praying for the headlights of our father's car to crest the hill, stricken at the thought of an accident. If one parent can die, why not two?

"Living on a farm has its advantages and disadvantages," Sara wrote. "There are not many boys and girls at home to run around with and at times my life seems very lonely. But at other times it is unspeakably lovely."

I retain only one memory of my mother at Delina. Even that recollection contains no clear image of her, only a fit of activity with her at its core. So the discovery more than a half century

after her death of an account of her first sixteen years was to me as miraculous as the unearthing of a personal Rosetta Stone. The thirty-six yellowed, handwritten pages, composed for a college class probably in about 1933, illuminate our differences. She came of age in a lamp-lit, 1920s farmhouse, I in a post-Sputnik Nashville suburb. She was surrounded by a large and active family. Aunts, uncles and cousins lived a short Model T ride away. Days seldom passed without a visitor for dinner or the night. My father, sister and I lived in a setting at once more populated and more isolated. School, work and church provided social outlets. Neighborhood playmates came and went. But overnight visitors, parties and dinner guests were rare events. Minus a mother, our household was quieter, more shuttered by far.

Even so, I see glimmers of myself in the pages. For both of us, reading was an early and deep love. "I have never loved another character in the same way that I loved Dora, David's child wife [in *David Copperfield*]," Sara wrote. "My favorite author is Victor Hugo and my favorite book is 'Les Miserables' which I read when I was thirteen years old. I have read 'Jane Eyre' twice and each time I was scared for days afterwards." I read *Jane Eyre* twice also and loved Edward Rochester each time. For Sara, as for me, books were a ballast, imagination a transport, writing a release. She, too, saw herself as a shy young girl, and though I believe her later vivacity far exceeded mine, we each grew more extroverted with time. We both loved school and liked to excel, both vowed to see distant horizons, both knew solitude and, at times, loneliness. I recognize in myself the fierceness of her attachments to those she loved; I see in my sister Sara's strong, independent will.

I was a late Christmas gift. Or so I always call myself for I was born on the day after Christmas in 1915. . . . My first recollection is the

time I locked Eleanor and Katherine in the spring house. I only did it for fun and I meant to let them out in a few minutes but I had no sooner turned the lock than I saw one of our cows that was a well known butter coming toward me. I ran to the fence, leaving my sisters in the spring house. I do not know what I would have done if Virginia had not come along and let them out.

Sara's older sisters, Virginia, Eleanor and Katherine, were the mainstays of her early social life. Virginia came first.

In August, 1909, a tiny little baby girl was laid in Mother's arms. She was called Virginia. Not only was she adored and petted by Mother and Daddy but she was also petted by all the relatives. Virginia, as the eldest, has always been the leader of the other children. She finished High School at Lewisburg at the age of sixteen years. The next two years she attended Martin College [in Pulaski, Tennessee]. Then, after teaching two years at Ebenezer, she finished college at Vanderbilt.

In later life, Virginia melded certitude with self-doubt. Strikingly handsome in a severe, frowning sort of way, she rejected two offers of marriage from local farmers, preferring to pursue her dream—an English degree from Vanderbilt University. A celebrated student, she found herself devastated by inability to manage unruly students in her first post-degree teaching job. A switch to library science, a natural choice given her appreciation of literature, provided safe haven. Virginia agonized over decisions, an outgrowth perhaps of her station as the eldest child of a domineering father, but she never wavered in her politics (Adlai Stevenson Democrat), her philosophy (antiwar, antisegregation), her matinee idol (Clark Gable) and her insistence on truth (“I believe you look the worse for wear,”

she announced with typical frankness after the birth of my second child).

In 1910, fourteen months after Virginia's birth, Eleanor arrived. "Eleanor seems to have more initiative and leadership than any of the rest of us. She has that happy gift of making friends with everyone." Valedictorian of her senior class, winner of top honors at a local junior college, Eleanor later excelled as a teacher and guidance counselor. Saddened by her inability to have children after marrying in her late thirties, she showered energy on other people's offspring, semi-adopting several young people in difficult straits, mentoring scores of others. Gracious and poised in public settings, she often had her hand in so many pies that we privately accused her of being "in a dither." I retain an early memory of guests arriving for a party while Eleanor, in a housedress, was in the backyard snipping zinnias for bouquets. She grieved suffering in any form, whether next door or on a distant continent, which made it all the more surprising when a competitive streak transformed her into a shark at cards or Scrabble. Eleanor scripted and produced scores of class plays, could quote long stanzas of Wordsworth and Yeats and seldom let a visitor leave without a glass of homemade grape juice or a cup of spice tea. Mutual admiration and devotion made Eleanor and Sara the closest of siblings and Eleanor the nearest mother substitute for Rachel and me after our mother's death.

"Katherine is my third sister and my playmate. She does not care especially for books and school but she has her own talents. Katherine is the only member of our family that has ever been ill a great deal. This sickness has made her nervous." Less accomplished academically and professionally than her more ambitious siblings, Katherine did elaborate needlework, showed a facility for making friends and, when not saddled with a "sick headache,"

engaged in appealing playfulness. She slipped Rachel and me chewing gum and Coca-Colas, and on summer nights as we splashed in the bathtub at Delina, Katherine impersonated an Evil Troll hiding outside the window: "Trip-trap. Trip-trap. Who's that walking over my bridge?" We screeched in fright.

Next came Sara, followed by the baby and only boy, John O. Jr. (Johnny). "As he is the baby, he has been spoiled and petted a great deal, especially by Virginia and Eleanor. He is a regular boy who loves football and thinks he dislikes school." In later years, John O. would become an accomplished local orator and educator, facing perhaps his greatest challenge as superintendent of schools in Marshall County, Tennessee, during their racial integration. He told stories of deflecting white parents trying to escape court orders and moral dictates. John O.'s position as the only boy and youngest child in a world of sisters instilled a lifelong confidence. It also left him headstrong at times and hard to challenge. A childhood accident nearly crippled him for life. "He and I were playing with long jumping poles. While he was jumping his pole broke and he fell heavily." An increasingly pronounced limp resulted in a trip to a noted Nashville orthopedic specialist. "The thought that my little brother might be a cripple for life almost killed me." After six months in a plaster cast, Johnny was able to walk, although with a lifetime limp.

However settled life appeared at Hilltop View, America in the 1920s was a nation in tumult. Modernism clashed with tradition in music, literature and the arts. Sigmund Freud redefined the nature of human relationships. Jazz roared. Economic prosperity and optimism collided with the lawlessness of Prohibition and the rise of radical political movements. Women gained the right to vote; the Ku Klux Klan attracted numbers unprecedented since its 1865 founding in Pulaski, Tennessee, one county removed from

Delina. And a few hours' drive to the east in Dayton, a county seat town not unlike Lewisburg, William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow in July 1925 faced off in the trial of the decade, an epic battle between the forces of science and religion. Two years before Sara's letter advising Virginia to "faint gracefully" when encountering a bug, the Tennessee legislature made it unlawful "to teach any theory that denies the story of divine creation as taught by the Bible and to teach instead that man was descended from the lower order of animals." The decision of John Scopes, a twenty-four-year-old biology teacher, to teach evolution in defiance of that law led to his famous trial. Eventually, the Tennessee Supreme Court absolved Scopes by throwing out the statute on a technicality.

Sara's writings say nothing of politics. They describe a southern, rural girlhood light-years removed from anarchists and psychoanalysis, flappers and bathtub gin.

One of my chief joys lay in visiting my grandmothers, who lived only a short distance from one another. First I would visit Grandma Downing and Aunt Lillie. There was always plenty to do there. The attic was filled with interesting pictures and books and trunks. But most wonderful of all was the staircase, which I never tired of sliding down. . . . I could run down the hill to my uncle's and play with my cousins, A.M. and Edwin Downing. After spending a day (or two) with Grandma Downing I would visit Grandma Barnes. Another cousin, Doyle Harris Curry, and myself had wonderful times together. In the springtime we would gather strawberries and eat them. Later we would go to the orchard and climb the trees to the very tops until we had picked the choicest apples. One day we made little apple pies and had a store. Another day we took three or four apples apiece and a bottle of water and went on a long expedition. When we were tired

of playing Auntie would take me on her lap and Doyle at her side and read stories. At night we played with blocks and dolls or curled up on the divan and listened to the victrola. However happy these visits might be, I could never stay away from home long.

One of my favorite games was swimming dandelions. In the springtime when on every side dandelions were seen peeping out, was the time for this sport. We would find us a long pole and select the biggest dandelion we could and go down behind the large barn to the creek that danced merrily along. After due consideration we would throw our dandelions in the water and, with the use of our sticks, guide them down the stream. . . . How gay, how happy, how blessed we were.

In the orchid below our house was a large June apple tree. Its branches were so low that I could climb it quite easily. Every summer delicious red striped apples were abundant on the tree. This tree was a haven to me. Each day I would lie among its branches and muse, munching apples all the while. When I was tired, the tree seemed to rest me. When I was sad the tree could comfort me. Even yet in the summer time I go to this June apple tree when I want to be alone.

I know that I read too much when I was a child. I did not play enough with other children; consequently I am too reserved and shy with boys and girls. Reading has also made me very imaginative. When I was a child I was always trying to picture myself with blue, blue eyes and long, golden curls and a fascinating smile and dimples. But reality is not to be done away with so easily and before long I would realize that I was only a plain little girl with straight brown hair.

My first teacher was Mrs. Lizzie Smith. Mrs. Lizzie was not only my teacher but also my neighbor. I usually walked to school with Virginia, Katherine, Eleanor and all the neighboring girls. However at times Mr. and Mrs. Smith would stop on their way to school and let us ride. One morning I, with several others, was late to school. Mrs. Lizzie

lined us all up before her, and beginning with the first one, asked us all why we were late. When she asked me, I replied "Because you didn't let me ride." . . . When I entered Delina school the fourth year Miss Mary Dee Ellis was my teacher. The first day of school she wore a black taffeta dress trimmed in gold. Each day she wore a new dress. I privately told mother that she had more pretty clothes than anyone I had ever seen.

When I was in the fifth grade I went to Goshen school with mother as my teacher. One day at school we were all discussing what we would do if the school building should get on fire. About this time one boy shouted that the school house was really on fire. The ceiling was so high we couldn't get water to it. We all worked with twice our usual strength and when the building fell in every desk and book was out. Mother finished the school in a vacant house.

Another memorable event was the burning of my birthplace [from which the family moved when Sara was three]. One clear morning before I had arisen I heard excited voices downstairs. I dressed quickly and ran down. Someone told me that my old home was burning. I ran almost half a mile until I came in sight of the house. The fire had already gained too much headway to be stopped. So I saw my beloved home falling to ashes, leaving only a chimney standing as a symbol of all this home had meant to me. The great old oak trees that had probably stood there for centuries were badly burned and when the next spring came there were no green buds on their branches. The yard quickly grew up in weeds; the fence soon began to sag and all that was left of my childhood home was a beautiful rose bush that did its best each summer to make the spot less desolate.

Soon, a larger sadness would intrude on Sara's sheltered world.

During this time Elizabeth Sullivan was my best girlfriend. . . . Elizabeth was the best girlfriend I ever had. She is the only one to

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