

Chapter 12 - Clarice Gilbert



I liked living at the Gertrude Ramey Home. I believe my mother found a good place for me when she took me to Miss Ramey, because she could not take care of me on her own. Living at the Ramey Home was complex but the hard work we learned to perform, and the rules we followed taught us self-discipline and personal responsibility. For example, a method to keep us apart from the boys was to send the boys away while we girls worked. When the boys went to swim at the Y, we girls used a toothbrush to clean the table covers, scrubbed, cooked and cleaned as only Minnie Suttles dictated. As soon as I was tall enough, Minnie placed a vacuum cleaner in my hands, and set a chair up to the sink where I washed dishes. Minnie grew up at the Home too, and when she left she always came back.

Besides hard work, we learned about dangers. Clyde Sloan, Minnie's husband, was free to roam the Home on a daily basis; it was soon discovered he abused the little girls living in the lower rooms. I was spared, but we all experienced a new level of fear. Here we were living with no pretensions, but we were vulnerable. Often, Miss Ramey employed unprofessional staff. She tried to help everybody.

Bettye Jayne Sullivan was another child who grew up at the Ramey Home and never left; like Minnie, she terrorized us little girls with her harsh discipline. As young children, we were in bed by 7 p.m. If we felt sad or wanted to giggle or talk, we did so at our own peril. We learned to fear the Sock-It-To-Me daisy paddle painted with flowers and big holes cut into it, and there was a converted boat oar. Even Miss Ramey spanked us as did Maxine Enyart, but they were gentle with us.

In retrospect, it is clear how her basic, and always simplistic provisions of a safe home, food and school stabilized my life. Records indicate my mother took me to the Ramey Home three times in two years, and I presume she came back and took me home twice, because at five, she left me there for good. What happened to me in between those episodes is still a mystery. After that, I became a permanent resident, as did my young sister and two brothers.

There was no overt hurrah such as 'You can do it,' from Gertrude Ramey that I remember. It was subtler. But her influence and guidance elevated our sights. She found the resources by inspiring the conscious of local benefactors to provide them. When we needed a dress, music lessons or anything else, Gertrude Ramey went out to ask for them. She shaped my life from five years old, when I was left in her permanent care.

She broadened the scope of our world in so many ways. For example, she took ten of us to Washington DC to call on President Gerald R. Ford. Roger Ray, a US Marshall; himself a former Ramey Home child gave his house over to us while we were there. With us were Terry and Brenda Clevenger, Tammy Taylor, Donna, Juanita, Kim and Marina Blevins, Jamie Ramey, Pam Long, and Ella Gallagher. She also invited Dr. Robert French.

Mrs. Nicholson, a former dancer, choreographed a dance from *The King and I* that we performed during a benefit at the Bellefonte Country Club. I played in the band and marched in local parades.

I also learned the joy of books. My favorite spot was lying on the floor between two beds where it was quiet to read about the Hardy Boys or Nancy Drew.

On Halloween, we did not go out to trick-or-treat. With thirty children in the Home, there was no way to keep us safe. Instead, we placed a shoe outside our bedroom door and the Great Pumpkin filled each shoe with candy. On Christmas morning, we gathered in the hall downstairs in front of the closed dining room doors. When we were assembled, the doors opened and we rushed in to find presents from Santa Clause.

Besides the holidays, when we decorated the Home, held festivities, and sang for our visitors, our average days were delightful. After breakfast, we were pushed into the large yard to play until lunch; we went out again until dinner. We were bathed and tucked into bed. It was a strict schedule that delivered basic needs. There were no hugs, but we thrived. Miss Ramey collected musical instruments including an upright piano for us. So, when the band instructor at Ironville elementary encouraged me, I chose a clarinet. Soon I achieved the status of first clarinetist, in the first seat. On my report card, she noted: "With practice, Clara can be great." I gained even more confidence when Les Thornsby of Thornsby music store, and Bill Caldwell who sang with The Interpreters drilled us. We sang Moon River until we sang it perfectly; then we trained for stage presence at the Paramount Arts theatre and to perform for civic clubs. It was another projection to expose us to success. In more ways than one, I believe Miss Ramey saved my life. Without her, I might not have survived.

There were disappointments as well. Visiting day at the Ramey Children's Home was the second Sunday of each month but I waited for my mother every Sunday. After church dressed in my best clothes, the other children and I grasped scrawled drawings and schoolwork to show off. I was anxious and excited for my mother to come, or for any parents to come; they never stayed very long. My mother promised to come, but she seldom did.

My father smelled of liquor the one time he came; but usually he just called from a rehab center where he went to kick his alcoholism. As the elder of the four Gilbert children, I was brought in to listen on the phone while he sobbed he loved me; asked me to forgive him. I was part of his therapy, I guess because a nurse placed the call. He was never able to keep his promises though, nor did he overcome his addiction.

I lived with my mother and father in a proper home for the first three years of my life. After that, despite a few brief visits during the next ten years, I still loved my mother and wanted to see her. When she didn't come for me, I felt hurt and grew resentful.

My father David Allen Gilbert died in 2004 in Pike County, Ohio. We did not ever become well acquainted. Nor did my relationship with my mother develop. I accepted the Ramey Home as my real

home until I was in 8th grade at Summit Junior High. Just as my arrival at the Ramey Home was traumatic, my departure was bewildering and abrupt. With no discussion or explanation, several of us young teenagers were scooped up by social workers and taken to foster homes.

I lost my close friends from the Ramey Home: Billie Jo Stephens; Cindy and Mary Miller, and Tammy Taylor; in my case, my younger sister came with me, but our two young brothers were sent away to the Hack Estep Home for Boys. As a result, our family unit of four Gilbert children was broken, again.

Two decisive episodes provoked my departure from the Ramey Home, and catapulted me into the real world. They were isolated events apart from our lives on the sheltered grounds of the Home: First, an automobile accident on US60 killed the mother of four nearly grown girls. This tragedy had no direct connection to us at the time, because they were from Chicago. However, those four injured and orphaned girls came to live with us. Their presence was powerful. We were shocked at the liberties they took and even what they said. When they boldly walked to the store alone, something Miss Ramey forbade us to do, it sparked our interest.

But it wasn't over. Miss Ramey brought in another family with foreign ideas to work with us older girls. Our cloistered lives unraveled. We were sent away to foster care. I was twelve when I was deposited in Olive Hill with my first foster family. The Seagraves were kindly people. Several times each month, they drove all over Carter County to attend church services and I lived by their strict interpretation. I felt unsettled though, having been yanked from the only home I knew, even though it was an institution. I had just settled in when Carolyn Bays my social worker came for me. She packed my clothes and moved me to a second foster home. Soon Carolyn was back. She transferred me to a third place. I lived in four foster homes, from 1978 to 1981. For my fourth move, I lived with Lois and Isaac Moore until I graduated from high school. My sister Paula remained with the Seagraves family.

When Carolyn planned for a fifth foster home, my boyfriend took a more pragmatic action. As young and inexperienced as he was, he suggested we marry to get me out of the system. I was seventeen. For this ill-advised adventure, my mother accompanied us to Virginia where she signed for me. I graduated from high school one week later. My marriage lasted two years. I gave birth to a fine son. When I was pushed into the Kentucky foster care system, I was shocked at everything I saw; married life confounded me further. I was still a child.

What had I done to bring me to this place? Armed with very few life skills and only a high school education, I survived. But even today, I wonder, was it the hard work and discipline of washing dishes, scrubbing with a toothbrush and the 7 p.m. curfew that carried me through my anguish and uncertainty? On my own, I worked at an industrial job for eight years before I enrolled at Ashland Community College. With few jobs in the Ashland area, I moved to Florida in 1996. I worked full time and attended school to earn my BA in accounting. I earned my M.B.A. degree after returning to eastern Kentucky in 2002. I was one of hundreds of children left crying at Miss Ramey's door; between 1944 after she welcomed Violent Stevens, her first needy child, until 2003 when the Children's Home doors were shut for good, did she ever promise or imagine a smooth landing for me or for any of us? Was her prescription of hard work and discipline enough to build character? Had Gertrude Ramey ever promised me more than a safe place to live, food and a basic education?

"If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway." Mother Teresa

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