

CHAPTER 3

One Bright Spot in My Life

Often, when my work on behalf of animals has thrown a spotlight in my direction, I have been asked *why*...why I came to love animals so very much, and why have I devoted most of my life to doing what I could to help them. I can never answer these questions easily, because the answer to me is obvious: Because I love animals, I cannot stand idly by while they suffer. But there's more to it than that.

I think I have a special understanding of how animals feel when they are lost, abandoned, or neglected. For—while I was never really mistreated—I knew abandonment, loneliness, and despair as a child. Though my life since then has contained much joy, I don't think I shall ever forget the sadness of my childhood. And I know I will always want to do whatever I can to prevent others from experiencing those emotions.

Please do not think I was not loved, or that anyone was cruel to me. Far from it—but circumstances beyond anyone's control overwhelmed our family early on. My father died when I was three, leaving my mother with four children to support on her meager wages from a government job. She struggled to keep the family together, but finally she took the advice of relatives and placed us in orphanages.

My sister, Margaret, and I were sent to St. Vincent's Orphanage in Washington, D.C., our home town. But though we were just a few miles from home, we were petrified with fear. The terror I felt on my first night there is still clear in my mind these many years later. Looking around, we saw a huge building with many corridors *and* 150 girls of all ages. It was confusing, strange, and—that first night—a cold and unfriendly place.

Like many a lost puppy or homesick kitten, all we wanted in the world was to go home to Mother. But we could not. And when the Sisters put Margaret in a separate dormitory for older girls, I screamed so loud and so long that the Sister in charge finally had to allow my sister to come and keep me company for the night. It was the only way anyone could hope to get some sleep.

Young people today might wonder what it was like to live in an orphanage. In St. Vincent's, the orphan's life was not a bad one. Regimented, yes: Bells rang and we formed lines; obedience was firmly demanded. We had to make our own beds and perform various duties. We kept the corridors waxed and shining, every piece of furniture dusted, and all the clothes mended. It was hard work; still, we thrived. The food we ate, though bland, was nourishing and wholesome. And even though we missed our family members and our home, the Sisters were good to us.

But I can remember the days when the halls were full of whispers that someone was coming to look us over for possible adoption. I did not realize that Margaret and I were not eligible, since we still had our mother. The prospective adoptive parent would arrive, and we would all be lined up in the playroom.

I'm sure each girl hoped fervently, as I did, that she would be chosen. In our lonely children's hearts, the hope of a real home still lived on...the hope of our own loving family. But I was never chosen. Each time I was passed over, I was despondent.

I wonder if this is how dogs and cats feel, penned up in small cages in animal shelters, longing for their home, watching a friendly human being walk by, hoping without words for the love every animal thrives on.

At least we human orphans were not threatened with impending death when we were not chosen for adoption.

But however lonely I might have felt at the orphanage, I was soon to know an even less pleasant reality. After Margaret and I had spent several years at St. Vincent's, Mother decided to bring Margaret home. For some reason, she sent me to live with an aunt and uncle in Frederick, Maryland. The separation from my sister puzzled and hurt me. But in those days you did not question your parents; you did as you were told. I had no choice: Off to Frederick, Maryland, I went.

There I was enlisted to do all the chores for the household. In those days, there were few modern conveniences, so housework was long and laborious. Having been well trained at the orphanage, I took up my tasks without hesitation. There was not a moment of time to spare for playing at home. Worse yet, I was told that I could not even play at recess at school...because my aunt forbade me to get my dress dirty.

Soon I was given additional duties: I became responsible for the entire family's laundry. Remember, there were no washing machines or dryers in those days, no drip-dry clothes, nothing to make the task quicker or easier. I knew many a tired and discouraged moment before the age of 12, leaning over a washboard, feeling very alone.

In the summer, my aunt—like most country people of that era—did an enormous amount of canning. So I spent my summer days washing Mason jars and preparing fruits and vegetables. Bushels and bushels of beans, tomatoes, peas, squash, peaches, and apples passed through my young fingers. And *then* there were the jellies and preserves.

For the four years I lived at my aunt's I could not even enjoy the simple pleasure of reading. Though her stepson had a few interesting-looking books on the bookshelf—including some Horatio Alger volumes—I was told to read only the *Bible* or *Pilgrim's Progress*. Before this edict was handed down, I had a chance to read one of the Alger books. Then I was told that such books were not suitable reading for girls, and I was forbidden to touch them.

But the rags-to-riches, action-filled Alger stories were tempting to a curious child. Taking pity on me, one of my friends at school brought me an Alger book to read there. But one day the teacher caught me reading it, instead of my textbook. I was soundly scolded. Worse yet, Miss Rinehart reported my crime to my aunt the next Sunday morning after church. My aunt glared at me as only she could, and I burst into tears.

I was lucky that day, however. Our pastor, Mr. Royal, overheard my outburst and asked me what was wrong. I was crying too hard to speak, so my aunt explained my grievous misbehavior. To his everlasting credit, Mr. Royal defended me.

"I should think Miss Rinehart could do better things at church than tattle on a little girl who wasn't doing any harm," he said firmly. My aunt never gave me the punishment I'm sure I would have received had not Mr. Royal—the father of two young girls himself—intervened.

Truly, there is no end to the fantasies an unhappy child can create. From that day forward, I dreamed that Mr. Royal was my father and that his daughters were my sisters. I got through my grueling household chores pretending I was doing them for my *own* family, the Royal family.

These were the darkest days of my childhood. I longed for my mother and sister. I longed for play, and for playmates. My aunt forbade me even to play with dogs. She said she had been mauled as a child. Therefore, she said I must cross the street if I saw one. Not knowing dogs, I had no choice but to obey.

When I think today of the many thousands of wonderful dogs who have given me joy, I only wish I could have had a dog friend in those sad, lonely years.

Those years with my aunt stand out in memory as years of isolation and yearning, hard work and little reward for a child so young. I am sure my aunt never meant to mistreat me, but she certainly saw my role more as servant than as family member.

Try as she might, however, my aunt could not suppress all the joy in my life. She kept a canary in a cage in her parlor. The beautiful bird sang and chirped happily, keeping me company on my household rounds. When my aunt took her nap, I stole the time to talk to him for a few moments. I loved taking care of him—cleaning his cage, feeding him, and fixing his bath.

As has been true so many times in my life, in those years an animal gave me the gifts of love, pleasure, and companionship. That little canary was the one bright spot in my life—a spirit-restoring presence in a sad little girl's days.

Today, when I have an opportunity to do something for an animal, I think of that canary, and I'm grateful to be able to return the favor.

I only wish more animals were free to share their sweet companionship in good health and good spirits, as God so clearly intended them to do.