Crystal

A MEMOIR

BY JEANIE KORTUM

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THE LITTLE GIRL who would eventually become my daughter was only four years old when I met her, living on one of the meanest streets in San Francisco. Her name should have given me a clue. Crystal. Refracted light. She had a voice that scratched the sky, powder white legs, loved the color pink, and walked the streets as if she owned them, greeting every single drug dealer by name. Her older sister, Charmaine, age five, was more tentative, large doe eyes, given to sudden storms of tears. They lived on the street corner opposite the Kok Pit Bar, mom a prostitute and heroin addict. The year was 1986. I was living with my first husband in a pretty little house, primroses in the window box. Adamantly middle-class. I was volunteering in a youth program. On weekends my husband and I took some of the children in the program up to my family's farm. I was about to wake up to what I was born to do.

First times bloomed the day we took Charmaine and Crystal to the ranch. The first time across the Golden Gate Bridge, first time touching a horse, first time moving across pastures speckled with wildflowers, the sky domed blue above them. "Look, Charmaine," Crystal

called. "There's an upstairs and downstairs in this house!" They slept that night nestled between stuffed animals and a purring cat, and the next morning when we brought them back to the street corner, I remember, their mom was wearing rose-colored satin hot pants. She opened her purse, and I saw high heels wedged inside, exchanged for the more comfortable flat shoes she now wore. The poppies the girls had picked for her wept golden tears all over the backseat of the car.

The girls' mother, Sandy, was in and out of jail. If she collected enough money by the end of the day, they could afford a hotel room, often with strangers. Otherwise shelters. Things falling apart but always the bright optimistic star of Crystal, even at the age of four, steering her tattered family forward by the sheer force of her will. And Charmaine, soft but strong enough to voice the sisters' secret terror. Two different ways of coping, two different colors of skin, but their hearts saying the same thing. "We're only children. We don't want to feel this scared."

"Acute bronchitis," the doctor said when I took the girls to see him about their coughs. And because of his diagnosis and the fact that Charmaine, five, wasn't yet registered in school and it was already September, my husband and I decided to report them. The court made us emergency foster parents, and we made the girls a promise. As long as we knew them, we would try to keep them safe. Always. That promise was broken a mere two days later. A social worker called. "Get the girls packed up, ready to go," she instructed. "We're going to pick them up, and, no, you can't know where they're going. Policy."

It was like a bad movie. A man dressed all in beige showed up, the girls began to wail, we watched their faces get smaller and smaller in the back window of the car as they were driven out of our lives. "Have a nice day," the beige-colored man said over his shoulder.

We only wanted to know where the girls had gone and if they were safe. We decided to launch a determined fight and called everyone we knew. Eventually the pressure worked. We were told to go to court and meet the person who had been awarded custody of the girls, their Aunt Bessie. In better times, Bessie's brother, Charmaine's father, had been married to Sandy. Crystal's father is unknown.

I was nervous the day I went to court. After all, we had reported the girls. What would Bessie think of me? Meddlesome white lady? Rich do-gooder?

But the moment I met Bessie, I knew everything would be alright. Turns out Bessie hadn't known about the girls' plight, and more than anything in the world,

she too only wanted them safe. She had no time for petty blame. "Are you going to fight for these girls?" I asked. I don't believe Bessie has ever had to search for a single opinion her entire life. Her eyes narrowed. "I sure am," she said in a voice resolute with authority. She told me a little about her life: single, her daughter almost in college. A close family, five brothers. She ran the cafeteria department at the California Pacific Medical Center. It was my first experience of the easy grace and charm of the Williams family. I walked away feeling on top of the world.

Two weeks after I met Aunt Bessie, she called. "Can you take the girls?" she asked. "I can't do this, work full-time, raise both my daughter and these two new ones. I can't do it right, and I need to do it right."

Then, for several weeks, a long marital conversation ensued, marinated in all the years my husband and I had been together. Gradually an answer took shape. We had the resources and time for one child. And then the terrible question. Which one? We didn't know. We loved them both.

Bessie had the good sense to let the girls choose. Charmaine chose the comfort of what she knew, while Crystal pushed herself into the great unknown and, the day before kindergarten, walked up the steps to our home, all of her life packed in a large plastic bag. Someone had braided and plaited her hair, anointing it with the oil used to keep African American hair from breaking. Crystal had not comprehended the fact that she was white. Months later she saw a picture of herself with Bessie and Uncle Billy and said, "But I'm white!"

As the sisters grew up, we occasionally heard news of their mom, drug addiction worsening, sleeping on a chair outside her drug dealer's room, and then one day when Crystal was about six, a visit with her in Golden Gate Park, Sandy too skinny, clearly nervous, Crystal wearing a new pink dress, riding her shiny pink bike, yelling, "Mom, look at this!" and each of us—Sandy, the mom who had given birth to her, the one who had cuddled with her late at night watching old Elvis Presley movies when she was scared, the mom who had cut the gum out of her hair when she was three, the one now crooning the words, "Good job, honey, good job," along with the unspoken sentence, "Please forgive me"—past and future, both moms turned, and then we both laughed, the unity of our sound releasing the thin layer of our differences, spilling us directly into what matters most of all, the fact that we both loved this little pink confection of a girl who for the first time in her life was riding a bike with no hands. And Crystal seemed to effortlessly straddle both worlds. "Two moms to love me more," she said.

And then nothing, no word from Sandy for a very long time.

Until a day shortly after we had officially adopted Crystal at the age of eight. The phone rang. "This is Sandy," said the scratchy voice on the other end of the line. "I'm dying. I'm at San Francisco General Hospital, and I want to see my kid."

She was thirty-six years old, with chronic emphysema, tethered to an oxygen machine, and crazy with all the things she needed to say.

Bessie and I arranged for an apartment for Sandy. There Sandy and I talked first about the easy things—her favorite color (purple), her favorite ice cream (rocky road). Then, slowly, our conversations deepened. Who might she have been if she hadn't gotten involved with drugs? I began to understand on a visceral level the connection between drug addiction and her barren, often brutal childhood. We both knew what was happening. Beneath our chatter and teasing, she was giving me her child, giving me as well the responsibility of remembering Sandy. I would become her scrapbook, for the little memories at first and then, as Crystal grew older, the deeper questions, "Why did my mother do drugs?" and at last the hardest one of all, "Why did she give me away?"

Sandy was giving me something as well. Despite all my work with children, I remained a little bit reserved with Crystal. I was frightened of loving her all the way, worried that one day something would implode inside her and she would go the way of her mother. By revealing herself to me, Sandy allowed me to love Crystal with all my heart. Crystal was no longer some unknown junkie's child, she was *Sandy's* child; when she laughed it was with Sandy's laugh. Crystal has the same warm impish humor and, just like Sandy, understands almost supernaturally when people are in pain. During those long afternoons of talking to the melodic sound of Sandy's breathing machine, Crystal embraced us both. Sandy was her past, leaving some good times to remember, and I was her future, all three of us aware that something profound and rare was occurring.

One day, however, when Bessie and I called, no Sandy. We knew where she had gone. Tethered to an oxygen canister, under a hundred pounds, barely able to breathe—and yet she was using. We hopped in Bessie's car, drove like fiends to the drug hotel we knew she frequented. "Sandy!" we called, making sure that everyone knew we weren't cops. "Have you seen Sandy?" We were eventually directed to the second floor. We pounded on the door. "Sandy?" No response. Bessie and I exchanged a look. "Sandy, if you keep on doing this you're going to die!" one of us said. The door slowly opened to a small room that slithered with the movement of

half a dozen cats. A large grizzled man, dirty T-shirt, the slack flesh of his belly falling over his pants. A rubber tourniquet wrapped around Sandy's arm. She nodded, slurring her words. "I'm so sorry that you have to see me like this." Bessie and I tied the knot of our different colors around our girls' mother, harnessed her to us, and brought her home. I believe that was the last time she used.

A couple of nights before Sandy died, when Crystal was only nine, Bessie and I joined forces one more time, this time to say good-bye. It was a bad night for Sandy. Her eyes were enormous; they looked like Crystal's. She struggled up one side of breath, trying to bring it in, fell down the other side trying to let it go. For the first time, I understood life as entwined with something as invisible as breath. "Relax," I said to her, "try to relax," but platitudes don't work with emphysema. She couldn't do it, and that was also the first time I really understood that she was dying; she had never refused me anything before. After all, hadn't she given me her daughter? I called Aunt Bessie, who came immediately.

"You can go, child," Bessie crooned. "He's waiting for you on the other side."

"I'm in my house, why can't I sleep?" Sandy mumbled.

"Everything will be all right on the other side," Bessie comforted, and something emphatic in her voice pulled us both straight into her large and courageous heart.

When I told Crystal her mother had died, she pushed her head into my stomach like a kind of reverse birth. That afternoon we went up to the hospital one last time to collect Sandy's things. We picked up a tiny suitcase and, once home, opened its lid carefully. The rush of enclosed air exhaled the draft of long-ago dreams; Crystal began to cry. We found very little—a few skeins of yarn, two neatly folded sweatshirts, a necklace with a cross, an address book, a few yellowed newspaper coupons for crystal glass and coffee cups, a small stuffed animal, and a copy of an old arrest record, Sandy crashing hard in the police photo, her skin bubbling mercury, her eyes flat.

Hungry to know her own DNA, Crystal touched her mother's things, running her hands across the unspent promise coiled in the skeins of yarn, touching the hope in those coupons, even lingering over the arrest record, moving slower and slower. Afternoon's light glazed her face. She smoothed her hand across the stuffed animal (one she still sleeps with), flipped once more through the address book, unable to sever the final umbilical cord with her mother. And then, in a gesture similar to Sandy's, she rescued an errant strand of hair from her cheek, placed it behind her ear.

She was sobbing, and I could only hold her. What words can you say to banish loss? N