

My writing has been going slowly. We had had lots of company and I am making Christmas ornaments from my growing collection of seashells. I seem to be experiencing another bout of "writer's block" and true to form, rather than deal with it, I dream up ways to procrastinate.

Maybe it's time to clear another runway. What angel hovers overhead, requesting permission to land? I try to contact Florence [Kimball], but she doesn't answer. Perhaps I can find her if I return to the little church in South Orleans where I first "discovered" the Kimballs when I was not yet twelve years old....

There is one particular day every Spring in New England, when the first summer air just suddenly arrives like a stunning surprise, transforming the world. That was the day when Mother would let us take off our long winter stockings and go outside in ankle socks for the first time. I would somehow forget from year to year the way it felt – that sweet, soft air caressing bare legs beneath a cotton skirt.

On such a day, I wandered for the first time into the garden behind the tiny Church of the Holy Spirit. Danny, our German Shepherd, was close on my heels. A number of small buildings were nestled willy nilly in the churchyard, forming a soft, salty gray by the Cape Cod air. Bit by bit I would learn the history of this enchanted spot, where seventeen creative people had conspired to build a church. Dick, in his sixtieth year not yet ordained to the ministry, served as their salaried lay reader. The year was 1935.

Three baby goats – white, with pink lined ears and tiny pointed tails – frolicked about a large boulder in the garden. They nuzzled at crevices with curious pink noses, and tumbled over contours too steep for their wobbly legs. I watched with delight as Danny (an animal so gentle that one could entrust a baby chicken between his paws) bounded into their midst to join in the revelry.

Suddenly, a tall, imposing woman in an ankle length batik dress appeared in the doorway of what looked to be the goat house. "No, no, no, dear!" she shouted with alarm. "You mustn't let that dog play with the baby goats. Call your dog, dear, call your dog at once!"

"But Danny won't hurt the baby goats," I said quickly grabbing hold of Danny's collar. "We just came by to see the Deaconess Doozleberry and her kittens."

The Deaconess Doozleberry was a silver Persian, whose phenomenal fertility had brought her fame throughout the lower Cape. Her kittens were said to be sold for whatever the buyer was willing to pay and the proceeds used for the purchase of babies' shoes. I had twenty-five cents – my entire week's allowance – and Mother's reluctant consent to negotiate a deal.

"You take your dog home and lock him up.", said Florence. "Then you can come back and I'll show you the kittens." Her voice was gentle, but very firm as she explained that the baby goats had a fragile little tendon in the cleft of each front hoof; and if a dog should nip that tendon ever so slightly, the goat would have to be destroyed.

"We have a dog, too." deftly steering me along the flagstone walk that led back out to the road. "He's an English Setter and his name is Spinnaker. Old Spinnie Spoo wouldn't hurt a flea, but we don't let him play with the baby goats!."

Her sun streaked chestnut hair was pinned in an unruly twist at the back of her head. A lively breeze was undoing it wisp by wisp, but she didn't seem to notice. She stopped at the edge of the road and assumed what I would come to recognize as a characteristic pose: knuckles resting high on hips, elbows flexed and bent slightly forward revealing the broad backs of two powerful hands.

"The kittens are in my workshop," Florence said, leading the way.

There on the floor, in a protected alcove between a kerosene stove and a high wooden workbench, was a large box amply padded with a soft woolen blanket of royal blue. In this elegant birthing bed, appointed to befit her station, lay the Deaconess Doozleberry, imperiously preening her silver coat while six tiny kittens of assorted hues struggled for access to her ample bosom.

"There ought to be seven," said Florence, "but Bozo Bobolinkso has stolen one again."

Bobolinkso was a plain white cat of "questionable breed," who, according to Florence, was far more loving and humble than a proper cat should be. Her gender had been somehow "undetermined" when they chose to name her Bozo, but she turned out to be female in every sense of the word. She had never had kittens if her own and clearly yearned for the experience of giving birth. Her maternal drive seemed to wax and wane with each of Doozleberry's pregnancies. Whenever another litter appeared, Bobolinkso would "adopt" one kitten, carting it away by the scruff of its neck to tenderly mother it under the goat house floor. While Florence talked, I silently lost my heart to the only snow white kitten in the box.

Before we left the workshop, Florence told me how she raised the money to pay Dick's salary by hammering aluminum at her workbench and selling her things in the church craft shop. It was a full time job which consumed many hours every day. Once when a well-meaning vestry voted to give Dick a small raise, Florence, exhausted, would beg them – "for the love of God!" – to reconsider.

She showed me how her beautiful designs were hammered onto plates and bowls and assorted pieces of jewelry, and told me how she had forged her own dies out of nail heads. Then she let me sit at her workbench and try my luck at making a bracelet. While I hammered, she told me wonderful stories about the little church and all that was happening there.

She told me about a goat name Alleluia who was born on Easter Sunday morning and liked to wander into Church in the middle of Communion; and about that first Christmas Eve service in the new chapel, when the furnace broke down and the children's choir belted out "No Oil, No Oil" for the whole world to hear.

And she told me about the "Peddlers' Parade", when Orleans people of all religions (or no religion) dressed up in outlandish costumes and came to sell (and buy) all sorts of things they didn't want, to help a little church they didn't attend. Dick would lead the parade down Monument Road, dressed like the Pope in robe and miter, carrying a pastoral staff and selling Indulgences. For a nickel, you could be forgiven for kissing your wife on Sunday; if you kissed someone else's wife, it would cost you a dime!

I guess it could be said that Florence was a homely woman. She had coarse features and large bones. There was a wide space between her front teeth. Every year, she and Alleluia would dress alike for the Peddlers' Parade and Florence said people had trouble telling them apart.

She had a large irregular scar on her forehead which partially effaced her right eyebrow. It was caused by a forceps injury suffered at birth and had resulted in years of skin grafts, severe infections and repeated attempts at plastic surgery. When people met her for the first time, their eyes were drawn to it – partly because of its location and partly because of curiosity. Florence was sensitive to their discomfort and had learned to put new people at ease by averting her eyes – before they averted theirs – to give them a chance to take a good, unhurried look.

"That way," she said, "it doesn't come between us. They stop being afraid to look in my eyes, and then they can see beyond it." And she was right! I thought she was beautiful.

Florence was a master story teller. Clearly, she delighted in playing to an audience, particularly one whose adulation was as evident as mine must have been. Her language was colorful and salty, artfully designed to shock.

"I went to bed with a writer," she liked to say, "and woke up with a minister. But I'm the same person I always was."

Hell and *Damn* were the only four letter words I ever heard her use, but she used them freely and with gusto. I always suspected that she found them more useful after she became a "minister's wife." That role, like the scar on her face, could produce a barrier. It was important to her that people see beyond it.

When I finished making my bracelet, she walked ahead of me to the door. As she stepped outside, I heard her cry out in disbelief, "Well I'll be damned!"

There in the grass at the base of the rock was my intrepid Danny, lying motionless in the hay while baby goats cavorted all around him. Now and then an inquisitive pink mouth would nibble near his head, and the great tongue would dart out to gently wash its owner's face. Florence just stood there shaking her head. Danny was never barred from the churchyard again.

I think we'd better rescue Doozleberry's kitten," she said getting down on all fours to search the crawl space under the goathouse floor. I followed suit, stretching out on my stomach in the warm grass.

"Ah," said Florence. "Here they are."

It was easy to find Boblinkso, a snow white silhouette in the deep shadows. She was busily bathing "her kitten" with long, gentle strokes of her pink tongue. Looking at Florence through sleep green eyes, she yawned and rolled over on her side, purring loudly as the hungry kitten pulled in vain at the dry little buttons in her soft white fur.

Florence wriggled her way under the house and somehow managed to achieve a sitting position close to the cats. I thought she was going to reach for the kitten, but instead she just sat there gently stroking Bobolinkso's head. Her face had softened and I thought she looked a little sad. Then suddenly she shrugged her shoulders and threw back her head in a gesture I would one day recognize as a characteristic ploy to conceal her vulnerability.

"*Manganese...*" she said, "that's all mother's love is made of – just simply an excessive secretion of manganese!"

I was never able to uncover any scientific evidence to support that theory, but Florence had a way of making such pronouncements with an authority I never would have dared to question. Still stroking Bobolinkso's head, she took the kitten and passed it out to me, skillfully maneuvering her large frame back out into the open.

Many years later, when Forrest and I left New England to follow the Kimballs to their mountaintop home, Florence would remark that she was just like Bobolinkso. "I couldn't have any kittens of my own," she'd say, "so I had to steal one from Edna and Paul." [Doris' parents]. I'd look at her and smile. "Just manganese," I'd say. "That's all it is." But when we waited so long for a baby of our own, I would implore her through tears of disappointment, "When does it stop, this excessive secretion of manganese?"

[I suppose we can consider that Florence was the first CHS Church School Directress and Teacher and, by today's standards, a little unconventional as evident from the following Story of Adam and Eve as told by Florence]

It's hard to separate the stories she told on that particular day from those she told me later on that summer, or in the years to come. But each one is inscribed in my memory forever. I search for a way to make them live for Katie and Kristen. [Doris' grand-daughters] So much of Florence's "spell" was cast by the way she blended her outrageous sense of humor with a startling and often unexpected tenderness. Both were projected in her "voice," which was so much more than sound.

Today I sense some presence of that voice – closer perhaps than it has been since her death. Florence is hovering about a bit impatiently, daring me to risk the telling of one or two of her celebrated stories.

"Don't try to replace me, dear," she says. "Just write as you remember me, and it will be fascinating enough!" She thinks that's funny and I can hear her laugh. So I ask her where she thinks I should begin, and she says "*Genesis*, where else? My version, dear – not 'theirs'."

Florence believed it was wrong for children to be indoctrinated with messages of fear and punishment, so she took it upon herself to rewrite the Book of Genesis. "A slight revision," she called it. Caught up in her own wit and originality, her eyes would dance as she told the smallest children in her Sunday school classes the "real story" of what happened to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This is the story as I remember it:

Before their "Father" left them alone in the garden, he gave them both a big hug and told them he didn't want them to worry about anything. They would never have to work, or dress up, or cook dinner, or take a bath. He only wanted them to love each other and play together all day long.

*"I've given you lots of apple trees," he said, "and the fruit is ripe and sweet for you to enjoy. But there's **one** Forbidden Tree in the middle of the garden. The apples from that one tree would not be good for you, so I want you to promise you'll never eat from it!" Then, just to be sure they wouldn't forget, he put a little fence around the tree and made a sign that said, "NO TRESPASSING."*

Adam and Eve were happy in their beautiful garden. Every week the angel Gabriel came to see them, and they would run to the front gate to meet him, giving him hugs and kisses to take back to their Father.

But they couldn't help being terribly curious about that tree! They thought the apples looked redder and juicier than any of the others, and they were tempted to climb over the fence – just to smell one. Once, they even asked the angel Gabriel if he thought just on little sniff would be O.K., but Gabriel answered crossly, "Absolutely not!"

That made the apples look even more delicious than before, and Adam and Eve began to dream about what it would be like to pick a whole apple off the tree and eat it all. But what if Gabriel should notice? Of course, he'd have to go and tell their father.

Then one day, one of them had an idea. (Florence was always careful never to suggest which one.) Since the angel Gabriel always came through the front gate of the garden, they would climb over the fence and take one bite from the back of an apple – surely he would never notice!

So that's exactly what they did!

And because it was forbidden, it seemed that they had never tasted anything so good...Before they knew it, they had taken a great big bite from the back of every apple on the tree! Feeling a little queasy, they climbed back over the fence and ran around to the front of the tree to see if anyone could tell. But thank goodness, all the apples looked round and firm. Not even their father would have guessed what they'd been up to.

They couldn't understand why they felt so scared and unhappy....

The very next week, Gabriel returned on his regular day. Adam and Eve were waiting for him by the front gate.

But, oh my goodness, can you guess what happened? Who would have thought that Gabriel would suddenly decide to come in through the gate at the rear of the garden?

But that's exactly what he did!

And the very first thing he saw was the back of the forbidden tree and the great white bites out of every apple!

"Dear me," said Gabriel, looking up at Heaven. "This is too big a problem for me to handle. I think I'd better go and get your father."

Adam and Eve were very frightened and hid themselves in a pile of fig leaves. But when their father arrived, he found them anyway.

And can you guess the very first thing he said?

He said, "Hey, kids, don't look so scared. I'm not mad at you. Don't you know I love you no matter what?"

Then he said he was sorry they hadn't been able to keep their promise, because the apples had been very bad for them and "bad" was a word he had hoped they would never have to learn...

Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea for them not to have to work, or dress up, or cook dinner, or take a bath.

He still wanted them to love each other, but maybe it would have been better if he'd given them more to do than just play together all day long.... So he gave them a job, and some clothes, and a stove, and a bathtub. And then he gave them a big hug and left them alone in the garden just like before.

Only things were never quite the same again....

And some people say that's really how the world began, and some people say it's just a fairy tale, but it's certainly true that people keep on craving fruit they know is very bad for them....

[Next month, you will read another of Florence's stories and