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# THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

One year.

One tiny year out of a lifetime. . . .

That's the only chance I had at a "normal" existence. Nor do I remember a single thing about that brief span, for shortly after my first birthday, my dad was called to preach—and "normal" flew out the window.

Thereafter, I lived in glass parsonages, see-through trailer houses, fish-bowl church annexes, clear plastic attics, or Saran Wrap basements. And I felt very sorry for all the poor souls who had to live in an ordinary, plain, brown-paper-bag world.

Don't you just hate autobiographies with boring baby book statistics? Makes you want to cut your teeth on the tome—or the author—doesn't it? After all, who cares that I weighed exactly eight pounds at birth (the least I've ever weighed in my life even on a diet) and that it took my father a whole year to pay Doc Pike's ten-dollar home delivery fee?

I was a quite expensive baby; that amounts to \$1.25 a pound, though the charge may have included mileage. I have no idea how many miles-per a Model T consumed or whether gasoline topped twelve cents a gallon. The doctor had to drive all the way across the minuscule Bosque County town of Walnut Springs, Texas, probably some six or eight blocks.

By the way, saints, if you are itching to know the year of my birth, you can find it on the copyright page of my earliest books, which some of you have already figured out. I had big ears and

no hair, and though few newborns are beauty contest candidates, I might have placed first in the ugly baby category had there been such. At six weeks, my feet were almost four inches long; I doubt that I ever wore a “Size 0” anything!

Right away, the government got me mixed up. They listed my name on my birth certificate as T. Zoy instead of LaJoyce. I was “over the hill” before I finally got the document straightened out with the help of my mother, who happened to be present when I was born. I haven’t trusted the government since, but can you blame me? What if Mom had died and I’d been stuck with that dreadful misnomer? Look at my picture on the cover. Do I look like a T. Zoy? (Please say “no!”)

My pre-four-year-old days are mostly hearsay and hearsee. As ancient history has it, I was rather a romantic from the onset. One of the six sister-maternal-aunties had made a small quilt for me, embroidering nursery characters on each square. I was totally in love with Little Boy Blue. I knew exactly where he abode.

It became a game with the sitters. They’d spread the coverlet on the floor and sit me on it. Then they would tease, “Where is Little Boy Blue?” I would jump up, removing my sippy diaper from Little BB’s horn-blowing Carcass and say: “Sittin’ on ’im!”

Personality traits sprouted at an early age—both good and bad—faster than my patient angel-mother could chop down the weeds and cultivate the flowers. Thus, the wheat and the tares grew up together, and it fell to my lot in later years to burn the chaff with unquenchable heat.

Self-assertion showed up in my very first sentence. I was sitting in Grandma’s porch swing, and I wanted down. “Up, up!” I said to the person watching me. “You want down,” she corrected. “*I want down!*” I thundered. Why not speak one’s mind and make waves? Or hurricanes. (I’ve done both.) My tongue’s guard often went to sleep on its job.

A penchant for sympathy surfaced when I saw the picture of two babies crying in a magazine. I burst out crying, too. “They wanted

to go with their daddy,” I sobbed, missing my own dad, who was out of town.

A sense of humor became evident right away. An aunt and uncle showed me my reflection in the headlight of an early model car. I laughed aloud for five minutes.

Well before my first birthday, I was in my first car wreck. Rounding a corner between Iredell and Hico, Texas, the vehicle slid into a ditch and overturned. No one was hurt, and no damage was realized except a bent fender and the loss of a hundred-pound sack of pinto beans. However, that must have set a precedent for accidents as our immediate family has been in sixteen smash-ups that included seven totals, six injuries, and one death.

A love for music came to the fore in my wee days. I would try to clap my hands, pat my feet, and sing when only ten months.

A desire to be helpful appeared at twenty-eight months when I dried every single dish for my busy mother. (Unfortunately, that industriousness was rather sporadic.)

Proof of my generosity lives in my baby book in the form of a tuft of straw-colored hair that I whacked off with scissors to share with a playmate. I didn’t poke my eyes out with the implement, and shears have never abused my God-given glory since.

An aptitude for writing came quickly. With a pencil and tablet, I scribbled all over the page, the results rather resembling the path of a drunken spider with dirt on its feet crisscrossing the paper. When Mother asked to whom I was writing, I responded, “Tanky Sea’ah,” my mother’s youngest sister, Frankie Seale Rhodes, who had me spoiled.

As traveling evangelists, our little family stayed in the homes of “saints,” who weren’t always saintly. Some of these places were not at all kid-friendly. One of my earliest memories calls up an unkind soul, dissatisfied because my mom couldn’t “keep that young’un quiet.” To scare me into “being good,” she donned an ugly mask, which, of course, made me howl the louder!

Before my memory was old enough to hold solids, my father became desperately ill. It looked as though he would not survive,

and it was surmised that his appendix had ruptured. In spite of day and night prayer for his recovery, he only grew worse. My mother had a dream or a vision of a casket on a railcar, but it passed on by.

When it seemed he could not live a day longer, he yelled for my mother to bring him some clothes. Whether she thought him delusional or just didn't get them to him in time, I don't know, but he grabbed the bedsheet, wrapped it about his body, leaped from the bed, and danced all around the room, completely healed. That was the first of his "Seven Valleys of the Shadow of Death" that he gave in his personal testimony years later.

After I had reached age three, a nine-pound baby boy completed Donald and Lorene Berry's us-four-and-no-more family. With black hair and a lovely olive complexion, he was a much more beautiful baby than I!

Mom and Dad told of a time when we needed milk. They prayed for a miracle, and a knock came on the door. A woman had brought a five-cent can of condensed milk!

In spite of my shortcomings, these special parents thought I was "special" and evidenced it in this poem, pasted in the front of my tattered, falling-apart baby book:

Dear little girl of mine—  
Sweet, adorable little tot—  
There's not another one so fine,  
In all the wondrous lot  
Of cherubs in that fairy land  
Beyond the cloudless skies of blue;  
In all the happy angel band,  
There is only one little you.

God put the sunlight in your hair,  
And in your eyes a mystic gray,  
And gave you a smile sweet and fair  
To bring me joy this day.  
Your laughter with melody rings,

Filling my heart with greatest joy,  
Bringing to me every good thing.  
Somehow, I'm glad you're not a boy.

Oh, no, my dear, there is none so fine.  
Because, you see, God made you mine.