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### For Lilabet

On the morning of your birth, you weigh in at four pounds. Your name will be Lilabet, pronounced “little bit.” A month in the incubator raises you to five pounds, and you’re on your way home.

Only home isn’t so good. Cleveland winters are full of snow, wind and coal dust. Mom and Dad drink, and you’re in the way. The only soft touch comes from Grandpa.

The year before you were born, Grandpa bought a farm in Western Massachusetts. Beginning at age four, you will spend your next 10 summers snug in the Berkshire Hills.

Now it's time. Grandpa takes you by New York Central Railroad to Adams, Massachusetts. When you climb off the train at Adams, you two catch a ride with Cliff Orr, the nasty-mouthed mail carrier and sometimes taxi driver. Mr. Orr steers the wobbly station wagon along Route 9 until it stalls. He curses. You giggle. He continues on to Savoy, past the long bend in the road. Just as the road straightens, he turns right into the farm's driveway, grass growing between the tire tracks. Along one side is a brick wall where garter snakes sun themselves and shed their skins. The station wagon slows around the garden and parks in front of the steps leading to the round porch. Grandpa walks up to unlock the door, then brings your belongings through the porch into the living room. He walks Cliff out while you stand dwarfed under the huge wooden beams on the ceiling. When Grandpa returns, he shows you Grandmother's bedroom downstairs, complete with a dressing table and large mirror. Just like the one she has in Cleveland. He sighs as he tells you Grandmother will come to visit in a couple months.

On the left side of the living room is Grandpa's bedroom. Smells like menthol, pipe tobacco and mice. When it's hot, he sleeps outside in the hammock strung between two pines.

In the kitchen, you find both wood-burning and kerosene stoves. Grandpa must not notice the fire hazard. The kerosene stove sits on a table skirted by oilcloth, behind which mama mouse tends her brood. When Grandmother comes, the mouse will take one baby at a time to Grandpa's bedroom to nest in his mattress. Grandmother will scream, pick up her skirt and jump on a chair. You'll laugh like crazy.

The kitchen sink has a hand pump. This is eventually replaced with a faucet and sometimes running water, which helps Grandpa rinse the blueberries before canning over 20 quarts.

To the left of the sink a red door opens into the barn. It's heavy and works on a pulley. To the right is the sun room.

Grandmother will paint the sun room floor blue one year. She'll start on the wrong end and work herself into a corner. You're going to watch from the backyard as she climbs out the window. You'll snicker when she shows garters holding up her stockings. Grandmother always wears garters attached to her girdle. A lacey bra covers her ample bosom. Even when she's painting the floor, she wears a fancy dress with a belt cinched to her waist. Her face is powdered and rouged; her lipstick's called "Picnic Pink." Not what you'd call a typical grandmother. Grandpa, on the other hand, wears the same old plaid shirt under his overalls.

Upstairs are two dormer bedrooms, one of them yours. The old-fashioned bed creaks. A window faces the two big rocks that your soon-to-be friend, Shirley, will hide behind. Also a crabapple tree, under which a billy goat waits to buck you.

Shirley from New Rochelle, New York, turns out to be your best friend. She and her mother spend summers at one of the Hilltop cabins, one mile away. Shirley's Dad comes up on weekends. Shirley claims the biggest rock on the farm to hide behind. So she's the queen and you're the princess, hiding behind a smaller rock. She says only Catholics go to heaven. You say Catholics worship idols and Lutherans have the gift of grace. But you ask yourselves, is there a God? One summer you and Shirley test the

existence of God. You both traipse up to the blueberry patch with an old rag rug. You roll it out on the ground. If it is there the following summer, there is a God. The next year there is no sign of it. And there you are—empirical evidence and you both declare your atheism.

That same summer you and Shirley are sitting under the crabapple tree enjoying peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Billy goat pulls on his long tether to get a taste but you just tease him. You start to run off, but Billy races behind you, bucks your bottom and you fall down, bleeding. Shirley rushes to tell Grandpa. “What did I tell you, girls?” says Grandpa. “Stay away from Billy!” He runs up to inspect the damage. “Let’s go inside and I’ll put some iodine on it.” He applies some yellow-brown runny stuff and kisses you on the forehead.

One August, Mr. Orr drives Grandmother up from Adams, after her train ride from Cleveland. As he drags her five pieces of luggage to the door, he says, “Nice tits you have there, Granny.” You won’t wait for the slap she’ll give him. Instead, Shirley and you run upstairs, flop on your bed and wet your pants laughing.

Meanwhile Grandmother sets about unpacking. It won’t be long before she makes you bathe, sweep the kitchen, take out the ashes from the wood stove, change your sheets and clean your room. Meanwhile, Grandmother’s busy primping herself when she’s not serving you pickled beets, smelly cheese and *fiskeballer* (fish balls you could do without). Thank goodness she makes blueberry pancakes on Sunday mornings. When she’s gone, Grandpa lets you have P&J sandwiches, pickles, Twinkies and lots of cookies. He eats sardines out of the can.

Sometimes Grandpa takes you bullhead fishing in his leaky rowboat. Your job is to bail out the water with a Maxwell House coffee can. The bullheads on Plainfield pond can bite and prick with their whiskers. You'd rather go walking. Grandpa makes you a walking stick just like his, but smaller. You paint red stripes on it. Way up past the blueberry patch you and Grandpa go, through the duck pond to the Svenson property. Mr. Svenson goes into the hospital now and then for his heart. Grandpa always checks on his place when that happens. Years later, Shirley heard Grandmother slept with Mr. Svenson one summer.

Your favorite hike follows the old Route 9 through Plainfield Cemetery. Grandpa points out where he and Grandmother will be buried. You ask him when that will happen. "One day, Lilabet," he says.

You get a lot taller. People start to call you "Liz." Grandpa spends more time dozing in his hammock. One afternoon, he doesn't wake up. Grandmother sells the farm and you must spend summers in Cleveland. Your parents drink, and father has uncontrollable rages. During one dinner, he pulls the tablecloth off, along with all the food, plates and silverware. Mother never holds him accountable.

Hang in there. At 17 you'll head off to Smith College in Northampton, just 30 miles from Grandpa's old farm. After graduation, you'll begin your nursing studies and become an RN at nearby Cooley Dickinson Hospital.

Home will be among the Berkshire Hills and you'll never have to see Cleveland again.