

THE EARLY YEARS

*Where we love is home,
home that our feet may leave,
but not our hearts.*

— Oliver Wendell Holmes

CHRISTMAS, 1921. IN THE KITCHEN, the embers still glowed in the cook stove from the wood fire that kept the house warm through the night. I sat across the room from my mother as she prepared breakfast for the family. We had arrived a few days earlier from Minnesota to spend the holidays with her family and were staying in the old farmhouse of Cecil, her favorite younger brother. Mother grabbed the can next to the stove to relight the fire. She was twenty-one years old with round, wire-rimmed glasses and brown hair fixed in a loose bun at the nape of her neck. When she reached down for the kerosene, she didn't notice there were two cans sitting side by side. It was an oversight that changed the course of many lives in an instant.

Afterward, my uncle suffered enormous guilt for leaving the unmarked gasoline next to the stove. The flames that shot out burned so hot that over the next few days the flesh



*Edna Txxxxxxx Bxxxx, holding
infant daughter Dortha Mae*



*Edna Txxxxxxx Bxxxx,
who died when Dortha Mae was
eighteen months old.*

fell off my mother's arms. She was standing between me and the stove when the accident happened, and her body blocked me from the flames. On the sixth day after the explosion, the family called in a specialist, who ordered her body to be wrapped in paraffin. She died shortly thereafter. I was eighteen months old.



Both my parents grew up in Coffey, a town of about 500 residents in northwestern Missouri. After serving in World War I—what people back then called the War to End All Wars—my father married my mother and they moved to Minnesota, where he set up shop as a blacksmith. When Mother was due to give birth to me, her second child, she traveled from Minnesota home to Coffey, where a midwife helped deliver me in a bedroom at my grandparents' house on Main Street. Vera was her first daughter, delivered still-born; I was born in 1920.



My father intended to come back for me, but it didn't work out that way. After my mother's death, he left me with my grandparents in Coffey and returned, alone, to Minnesota. A few years later he remarried and had six more children.

When I was little I sometimes wondered why other kids had dads and I had uncles, but I grew up so loved that it didn't bother me that my father was gone. I had family around me all the time. It could have turned out so differently if he had brought me back to Minnesota. Who knows which direction my life would have taken if I had gone north to live with them? I would have been the oldest in a family of seven children, far from any grandparents, aunts or uncles. Instead, I grew up much-loved as the youngest in a household where education was highly valued.

Before she started having children of her own, my grandmother