

MOTHER: THE EARLY YEARS

By: Gus Dick Andros

"Isn't that your mother over there?" Bill asked.

"Where?"

"On the other side of the auditorium." Bill stood up and pointed. My eyes followed his finger, and there she sat, filling the chair completely, wearing her picture hat and white gloves--a real southern lady.

"What is she doing here?" I asked. "She didn't say anything when I left the house." I was puzzled.

"Maybe she was in the neighborhood and dropped by to see you."

"You know damn well my mother would never go to that much trouble." I tried to get her attention but couldn't get her to look my way.

The assembly started with the president of the student council leading us in the Pledge of Allegiance. I was vice president and this would have been my job if he were unavailable. At Central, we had an assemble every Friday, but this was Wednesday and the assembly was announced only that morning.

Central High was the largest high school in the state; in our senior class alone there were 650 students. It was very easy to be unnoticed, so I was always happy to know how much I had done at this school.

When the principal took the stage, we learned that this assembly was called to present awards for scholarship. Although I was a good student, I wasn't good enough to get an award for scholarship. I wasn't listening because my mind kept wondering, "What is my mother doing here?" or "Could I be in some kind of trouble?" There was nothing I could do but shift from one hip to the other in my seat, and wait.

"Now I want to announce the winner of the Citizenship Award." The principal said. "Three years ago this young man came to Central via Webster Junior High. He immediately became active in school activities and it wasn't long before he was a leader of his class and many organizations."

Why doesn't he get to the point, I thought, so I can get to the other side of the auditorium? I was only half listening as he began to recount the accomplishments of the award winner.

"He was Vice President of the Sophomore, Junior, and Senior Classes and Vice President of the Student Council. He was also President of the Art Club and the Ciceronian's Debating Society. If that weren't enough, he was Cheerleader of

the Red Shirts and chairman of the committee for your Senior Prom last year. He was the first Junior Rotarian for 1943, which we know is an honor in itself." Now I was listening with full attention; my heart began to pound in my chest, and my fingers were tingling -- he was talking about me! Bill was kicking me and I flushed even more. "I could go on and tell you more of his attributes, but what I am most pleased about is that he did all this while being a member of the honor roll. I know that you know that I am talking about Gus Andros." There was a big round of applause. "Gus, would you please come to the stage."

I tripped over everybody trying to get out of the row. The guys were swatting me on the butt as I crawled over them. I did my best to keep my composure as I walked down the aisle to the stage, thinking that it was a coincidence that my mother was, by chance, there to see me win the award. I never thought for a moment that she was attending on purpose. My mother never came to any plays or recitals I was in. I was hoping that maybe she would be pleased to see me on the stage. I thought that now she would have to admit that I was worth something.

After the assembly, Bill and I went over to my mother and Bill said, "Mrs. Andros, aren't you thrilled with Gus?"

"Of course I am." She turned to me and said, "I've got to get home and start dinner." There was no kiss, no hug or no "I'm proud of you." I covered this up with a smile. "I'll see you later," I said, but Bill knew I was hurt.

"What's wrong, Gus?" Bill asked, knowing full well.

"She would have been happier if Mr. Born had told everyone I was the most rotten kid in school, but I have the satisfaction of knowing she was here to see me win the Citizenship Award."

What hurt worse was about a week later, Maybelle Conger, who had taught every member of our family, told me that when she heard that I was to be given the Good Citizenship Award, she called my mother to ensure her attendance. Miss Conger was surprised when my mother told her she was too busy to attend, "You get your ass up here so at least the school can see you care." What motive Maybelle may have had in telling me this I will never know, but it deepened the hurt.

When the school called to tell me I had been chosen to be the first Junior Rotarian of the year, she was not excited and when I asked her if she were proud of me, I was told, "I expect that out of you." I once asked her why she was the homeroom mother for Plato's and Dee's classes and never even came to my class activities. She answered, "I'm tired of doing all the work, let somebody else's mother do it in your class." And I bought it.

I have given thought to my mother's distancing herself from me and have come up with the only answer that makes sense. After the birth of Plato and Dee, Mother was told that if she had another baby it would kill her; Dee weighed fourteen pounds and mother had a difficult time in the delivery. She was pregnant again with me seven months after Dee's birth. I can see how it must have frightened her, knowing that the baby she was carrying could kill her. It must have plagued her throughout the pregnancy; I'm sure she felt that at any moment she would die. She did not die, nor did she ever let me forget what she went through. She told me many times I was a perfect baby. "You didn't have a mark on your body and never cried. You were always a happy child." You would think that would make me the favorite, but not so.

From the beginning, I was different from my brothers in every way. I was a cotton top with blue eyes. Plato and Dee had black hair and big brown eyes like mother's. Although Daddy had blue eyes, his hair was jet black. Mother told me that Daddy was kidded about "the milk man" every time someone saw me, and she made me feel I was an embarrassment for him. Although I was baptized in the Greek Church, Daddy never let me go there unless it was a holiday. I know for a fact that there were members of the Greek community that didn't know I existed.

Sometimes I would tag along with Dee, but most of the time I made my own friends or would stay in the house and play by myself. I loved to draw and listen to records on a machine that had to be manually wound up. Mother had a collection of old "78's" that I would listen and dance to for hours. Having two athletic brothers, I was a freak in the family. Mother would say, "Too bad you weren't a girl."

My brother Plato and I fought all of the time, but mother would ignore the beatings I would get from the All American Football player, who was five years older than me. When I would tell Daddy about the beatings, mother would say, "He is trying to make a man out of him." No matter how bad it got, I had no one to turn to for help. There was no refuge if my mother and father thought it was good for me. I tried to isolate myself from the family and even ran away to actually scare them into some kind of coexistence.

I had two major illness in the first and second grades. The worse was scarlet fever, and when the house was quarantined, Daddy and my brothers had to move out, leaving me alone with mother. In those days, there wasn't much to do except to make the patient comfortable with cold packs. I was confined to one room and had to amuse myself.

Although mother didn't spend much time with me she was there in an emergency. After my illness, I suffered from such severe headaches that many times I went to bed as soon as I got home from school. My Uncle Nick would stand at the foot of the bed and say, "Do you think he will live the night? Maybe we should call an ambulance, he doesn't look good to me."

Mother, a devout Christian Scientist, would read to me from Science and Health, but I wanted to be held. I wanted to curl up in mother's lap and feel the warmth of her body. I told her once that I felt sorry for a friend whose mother was so skinny that there was nothing to love. It's funny that mother would tell this story to her friends and still not let me cuddle with her. I gave up hope of ever getting that hug. When I cuddled up to her to keep warm at the State Fair, she turned and said sharply, "Won't you ever grow up?" I was nine.

I think I could have coped with this lack of attention if mother had not made such a fuss over my brothers. When she was angry with them she would take it out on me. I would hear what she was going to do when they came home, but when they walked in the house it was "sweetheart this" and "sweetheart that." I would remind her of what she had told me she was going to do, but it became a joke.

Plato, would call her "fatso," and Dee would never let her come between him and his social life. One night, we were waiting dinner when the oven exploded and burned mother's hand. She was in immense pain, but my brothers went out, leaving me alone with her. She was crying and wanting help. I called my aunts and our practitioner and no one offered to come to my aid. I was fourteen years old and knew nothing about how to stop the pain. I put her hand in ice water and read to her from Science and Health. I was up all night trying to get someone to come and help her. Finally she fell asleep and I slept on the couch in the next room.

My mother only hit me once for telling her to "shut up," but it was with such force that I was knocked across the room into the sideboard. Mother didn't come to see if I was hurt but left the room and waited for me to apologize, which I did.

At a very early age, I was aware of sex and my mother didn't seem to have any hang-ups about her boys' sexuality. Once she caught Dee and me in the garage making it with the girl next door. She sent the girl home and made us stay in the house for two hours, but she never said what we were doing was wrong. Being the youngest of three boys, I guess I benefited from my bothers. When I started to masturbate, her only remark was, "If you had to clean the sheets you wouldn't do that."

"If I get it on the sheets then I had nothing to do with it." I said referring to having a wet dream, and the subject was never brought up again.

Mother seemed to have an interest in all our male friends, and when they were there she was the ideal mother. She would feed them and if she knew that they liked a certain kind of food, she would prepare it for them. To this day my friends tell me what a great mother I had. When I hear that, I think that my mother should have been a politician.

I didn't feel comfortable in my own home, so I spent much of my time at my friend Bill's house. I had a good rapport with his mother, because Mrs. Callahan was as interested in my activities as she was Bill's. When Bill wasn't at home, I would often spend time just talking to her.

Lying has always been difficult for me, so I usually say what I think. When I started smoking, I hid my cigarettes. When mother found them and confronted me, I told her I was keeping the cigarettes for the boy across the street. She believed me until she found my pipe. She was yelling at me because I was smoking and I was yelling at her for invading my privacy. Mother started to cry -- the only other time I saw mother cry was when she burned her hand. She didn't even cry at Daddy's funeral. "What are you crying about?" I asked in frustration.

"It is the first time you have ever lied to me."

That it made a difference to her was the first sign I had that I was part of her life.