CALL ME MARTHA

I never wanted to be exceptional. Fame? Keep it. Standing out in a crowd? Revolting. Money? OK, now you’ve got me. I’ll take it. But what I’ve always wanted more than anything in the entire world was to be ordinary. To blend in. To be one of the crowd, no different than any other kid in existence.

But my desire was doomed from the start, thwarted by my weirdo parents, my grody appearance, and a book; a fat, green book that I received on an otherwise totally inauspicious Friday night.

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“Guinevere come inside. He’s not coming.”

Mom slammed the screen door with a bang that precisely expressed her exasperation with my father who had NOT called to say he wasn’t coming, but as he was two hours late it was strongly implied. The slam also shifted some of her exasperation on to me for being stubborn enough to sit on the front porch with mosquitos swarming and my small suitcase beside me for two whole hours while I waited.

I ignored the implications of her slam and focused on the words coming out of her mouth which had far more personal significance to me during that month of May 1976. I had just turned 13 and I assure you, everything was deeply personal.

“It’s Martha, remember! Not Guinevere. I’ve changed it.”

My shout reverberated through the lowering dusk and briefly disturbed the skeeters that were snacking on me, but I doubted that it had any effect on my mom who steadfastly refused to
call me anything but the romance-tinged, hippie-inspired name that she had dubbed me with at birth.

The mosquitos weren’t deterred for long. Fair and freckled, I shone under the porchlight like a beacon to all the biting insects for miles around. My Granny always told me that fair and freckled was the favorite treat of the Okie skeeter and I hadn’t yet seen evidence to contradict her. I slapped a plump one that was feasting on my kneecap and it gushed out onto my knee and hand.

“He’s not coming,” I murmured to the gross splotch of blood and mosquito guts on my palm, finally admitting the sad truth that I’d been forgotten again.

Geez, why couldn’t I be normal? A tanned Martha with straight teeth, and hair that didn’t frizz at the slightest provocation. A girl with normal parents who didn’t, under any circumstances, name their progeny Guinevere. A girl whose father showed up when it was his weekend.

When I went inside, Mom stared me down. Her eyelids were coated in the smoky eyeshadow design that she’d copied from Cosmo, page 67, “Eyes to Make the Men Go Wild.” I knew because I read her magazines when she’s wasn’t looking.

“I had plans, Guinevere.”

“Martha! And I’m sorry. I can go to Granny’s if you want.”

“Tonight’s her square dance group, I already checked.”

“At least somebody’s having fun.”

She gave me that look that showed she was above my sarcasm and would not stoop to acknowledge it.

“Why don’t you leave me here, then.”
“Last time you forgot a pot of mac and cheese on the stove and almost burned the house down.”

“I’m sorry. It was an accident.”

“Never have been able to get that pot clean.”

I rolled my eyes. Geez, how many times did I need to apologize?

“Eye rolling? Really?”

She walked away muttering about unfairness and cross-bearing and my lousy, no-good Father, while I retreated to my room and closed the door.

Belly down on my bed, I opened These Happy Golden Years. I’d read it a thousand times at least, along with all the other Little House Books, but it was my favorite because of the romance. I was re-reading the part where Almonzo proposes, when the familiar smell of Charlie, Mom’s favorite perfume, permeated the atmosphere. She’s changed her mind, I thought. I marked the page with my thumb and turned to see her standing in my doorway.

“I’ve changed my mind. We’re going out. And change out of those gross cut-offs.”

She disappeared before she could hear my response, which was a wise move since I had nothing nice to say. Groaning, I rolled off the bed and looked in my closet.

I wasn’t sure where we were going, but I could narrow it down to two possibilities: the head shop or the Jesus Freaks. Contrary to popular perception, it was essentially the same group at both places. But either way, I was going to do my best to prove I DIDN’T fit in.

My favorite outfit was a red jumper with a red plaid skirt that I wore over a white blouse with puffed sleeves and a bow at the neck. I was excited when I found it at a garage sale in one of the rich neighborhoods where Granny liked to shop because it looked like a dress Marcia Brady wore in an episode of The Brady Bunch, a show I liked to watch because Greg Brady’s a
fox. It was the perfect outfit for a gathering of Mom’s friends because nothing says “I’m totally ordinary” like The Brady Bunch. To make it super-normal – and cover the smell of Mom’s grody friends - I spritzed on some Love’s Baby Soft.

Driving down 11th Street, I saw the familiar blue and yellow house in the distance. The head shop. Joy. Honestly, Mom wasn’t into weed that much. She was pretty responsible, even if she didn’t want to be, probably because of me, I’d guess. But all of her friends were into it and her best friend, Cherri, worked at the shop. Most of my formative years had been frittered away sitting in the back room waiting for Cherri to get off work. Hours I’d never get back. At least with the Jesus Freaks, you got to sing songs, which was kind of fun.

That night started out as boring as usual, and to make it even better Cherri’s son Benny was there, too. Mom and Cherri were pregnant at the same time, a story I’d heard again, and again, so I’d known Benny my whole life. He thinks we’re getting married one of these days. He’s wrong!

Benny’s the antithesis of ordinary. The polar opposite of normal. The inverse of typical. And he was going nowhere. I was only thirteen, but I’d read enough Cosmo to know that if I married Benny, I’d spend my life living in a trailer park with a bong on every table. Besides, we’re completely incompatible; I’m The Carpenters and he’s the Grateful Dead. I’d spent the last six months trying to ignore him, so he’d get the whole “destined to be married” idea out of his head, but it wasn’t working, especially not after my boobs grew. He was more interested than ever.

I swear, I was the skinniest girl with the biggest boobs in existence. Granny always said I looked like a bean pole, but then puberty happened, and I looked like a bean pole with tumors. I was disgusting. Did Marcia Brady have a massive chest? Of course not. Her’s was normal-sized.
As soon as I walked in the door, Benny came bounding over.

“Hi, Guinevere.”

“It’s Martha. Remember? I told you last time.”

“Oh yeah. It’s just you’ve been Guinevere for thirteen years. It’s hard to remember.”

His eyes flickered to my chest and he became suddenly dumb. Well, dumber. He’s never had a lot going on upstairs.

While he stammered, my mom’s friend Daryl came over and put his hand on my shoulder and whistled, low and skeezy.

“Well, well little girl, haven’t you grown.” His eyes swept up and down, then settled on my boobs. “You look NICE! Your mom’s gonna have to lock you away. Hey, Dawn, your gonna have to lock this girl up or she’ll be all kinds of trouble.” And he whistled again.

Mom laughed, actually laughed, while her skeeze-ball friend tried to undress me with his eyes. She was too busy flirting with some sappy dope to notice I was practically being molested. Geez, and all for a sap that could probably quote Kahlil Gibran but couldn’t hold down a job if he tried. According to Granny, that’s the only kind of guy Mom’s attracted to.

Benny was no help either. While I broke out in a cold sweat, he laughed. Sure, it was a nervous chuckle, very nervous, like he was as freaked out about Daryl as I was, but still – he did nothing useful.

Thank God for Cherri.

She noticed my dilemma and offered me a way out. Cherri was smart, not smarter than my mom necessarily, but she noticed things about me that Mom couldn’t see. For instance, she was the one who told my mom a couple of years earlier that I needed to start wearing a training bra.
Anyway, that night she called me over to where she was organizing boxes of merchandise on the shelves in the back room.

"Martha, come here."

Another great thing about Cherri, she remembered my name.

I went over to her and Benny went too.

"Scoot, I want to talk to Martha."

"Awww, Mom."

"Vamoose."

He slunk over and crashed on a bean bag.

"Martha, there's a book in my bag. You'll like it." She cocked her head to point at the chest-oglers, "I'll make them stay clear."

"THANK you!" I gushed.

I found her bag and withdrew the thick book, weighing it in my hands. It was heavy. I figured if I didn't like the story it would be a useful weapon if Daryl came slinking around; that book could do some damage. I turned to the last page and gave a silent "Whoop!" It was 972-pages. The worst thing in the world was finishing a book in a single afternoon when you wanted the story to go on forever. Cherri's book would keep me busy for a long time. I turned the old green book over and looked at the spine. In faded gold the title was stamped:

Forever

Amber

~

Winsor
That was it. There was no synopsis on the back or recommendations from famous authors. Nothing to preview the excitement within.

I sat cross-legged behind the shelf and opened the book to “1644” and began to read. It wasn’t long before Benny, Skeezeball Daryl, Mom, the sappy guy, and the funky smell of the head shop faded away. When closing time came and we moved across the street to the Coney Island Lander, I kept reading, interrupted only briefly by Benny.

“Guinevere, how many coneys are you gonna git?”

I looked over the book at him and narrowed my eyes.

“I mean, Martha…”

His voice trailed off as I lowered my eyes and kept reading.

By page 24 when Amber St. Clare raised her arm, pointed and uttered her first, “M’lord,” I was hooked. And by page 45 when Amber and Lord Carlton did it for the first time, I was obsessed.

I can’t remember what else we did that night except that once we finally went home, Cherri let me keep the book.

On Monday morning, I was still reading. I read while I ate my Raisin Bran and I read while walking the five blocks from the tiny house we rented from my Granny to the junior high. I reluctantly exchanged *Forever Amber* for my textbooks and left it locked in my locker, but as soon as library period came around, I released it from its jail, which smelled like Fritos and the thermos of chicken soup that I spilled last winter.

In the library, I took my seat and propped the enormous volume open on the table. My table-mates exchanged unfathomable looks, but I could guess what they were thinking. Weirdo. Show-off. Nerd. I can personally guarantee that they’d never read a book with so many pages,
especially not that spaz, Stacy Nelson. But for once I didn’t care about standing out. I’d gotten to page 654 where the great fire is destroying London and Amber is trying desperately to get back and save all her money. I had to find out what happened next because I had math after library. It was my worst subject and I knew I’d never be able to concentrate when I had the Great Fire on my brain.

I liked being in the library, but I hated our librarian, Miss Thompson, a short, squat old bitty with steel gray curls and sensible shoes. She was about 107 and I’m pretty sure she’d been wearing the same two sensible tweed skirt suits for all those years. She’d made us do career reports early that school year and when I’d told her I wanted to be a writer she said it was impractical. She made me do a report about being a secretary instead, which I’ll admit is a pretty ordinary thing to be, but maybe a little too ordinary. Anyway, you can see what she was like.

During class, she made the rounds of the tables to make sure we were all reading and not passing notes, chewing gum, holding hands, or anything else deemed unseemly by the “Rules of the Library.” However, she never seemed to notice the problem with her sensible shoes; they creaked. You could hear them as she made her way around, like a cat with a bell, so you always had time to hold the note, stop chewing, release hands, or whatever else it was that you needed to stop.

That Monday all I was doing was reading so I didn’t pay attention to the creak as it circled our table, until it stopped opposite me.

“Gasp!”

I looked up to see Miss Thompson with her hand over her mouth and her eyes wide. Her tight little curls were quivering in indignation.
She hissed, “Guinevere MacKenzie, come with me this instant. And bring that...that...book!”

And then she did the unthinkable. She left the library with students still in it.

The collected eyes of my 26 classmates swiveled in my direction. That was 52 eyeballs searing into me, Guinevere, who wanted to be Martha and not, under any circumstances, stick out in a crowd. The spelling bee, which I’d won four years running, was bad enough, but nobody cared about the spelling bee, so they didn’t pay attention. But now? They were all paying attention because I’d never been caught doing anything bad before.

I dog-eared page 657 to mark my place and slid out of my chair. I started to slump out under the gaze of those 52 eyeballs, a practice I’d developed lately to hide my, well, development, but then I got mad. I knew with certainty that I’d done nothing wrong, so I threw back my shoulders, straining the buttons of the floral print, green mini shirt-dress that my mom had sewn for me, and marched out of the library in Miss Thompson’s wake. Somebody whistled and I’d swear I heard a “hubba-hubba” before I got out the door.

Miss Thompson was standing in the hall bristling. She pointed to the principal’s office across the hall.

Principal Duncan was leaning on the counter talking to the secretaries while he smoked a cigarette, but he stubbed it out when Miss Thompson sputtered, “Must see you! At once! Very Serious!”

Gecz, she was so upset she couldn’t even speak in complete sentences.

The orange vinyl chair squeaked when I sat in it and I knew my nervous sweat was going to cause the backs of my thighs to stick. I thumbed the pages of the heavy tome I held in my lap
which seemed to be the cause of this visit to the principal’s lair, though I couldn’t think why. Uncertainty hung in the air as heavy as the cigarette smoke in his office.

One of the secretaries came in briskly, handed Mr. Duncan a file, then sauntered out taking time to give me the side-eye. She lingered by the opened door until the principal asked her to close it. Apparently, she was as interested in finding out what I’d done as I was. I didn’t have to wait long because Miss Thompson started right in.

“Mr. Duncan, this student has brought a book of... well... of smut... a smutty book... she’s brought a book about... sex... to school and she was reading it in the library.”

The principal’s eyebrows raised slightly, but otherwise, he looked bored. I’m guessing bringing an alleged smutty book to school pales in comparison to last week when Dusty Dinkins “accidentally” tried to set the school on fire to get out of science.

I was more surprised than he was to find out what had landed me in his office. There was an entire shelf of Judy Blume books in the library, why did she think we checked them out? The warm life lessons? It was a complete injustice. I sat up a little straighter in the chair and raised my chin.

Mr. Duncan flipped open my file and scanned it. “You haven’t been in my office before, Guinevere.”

“No, sir, and if you don’t mind, it’s Martha.”

His responding look contained a question.

“My name, sir, it’s Martha.”

“Your saying I have the wrong file.”

“No sir, I’m saying that I changed my name. A couple of weeks ago.”
Mr. Duncan rubbed his forehead, but Miss Thompson *tsk-tsked* as if my name change was a sure sign of my downward spiral – and we all knew where it would end.

“Mr. Duncan, what are you going to do about that book and this girl?”

“But Miss Thompson, it’s not inappropriate. It’s...educational. My mom’s friend gave it to me, and she wouldn’t have if it was a bad book.” Maybe I lied a little, but only a little. It was clear to me that Cherri and my spinster librarian had different views about things.

“It was banned, Miss MacKenzie.”

“Banned? When?” Geez, that’s something Cherri should have mentioned.

“In 1946.”

After a heavy pause, Mr. Duncan spoke up, “Times have changed Miss Thompson.”

“Good morals never change, Mr. Duncan.”

Mr. Duncan fingered the pack of cigarettes that lay on his desk, telegraphing his longing to be done with this issue. “This is what we’ll do. I’ll hang onto the book and call Guinevere’s mother. If your mom wants you to have the book, she can come to the office to get it.”

“But...”

“No buts, Guinevere.” He looked at me pointedly.

Jesus H. Christ! Mom would never _take_ off work to come get my book. She’d say it served me right for taking it to school and she’d ground me just because she could. I’d never find out what happened with the fire, or if Amber and Lord Carlton ever got back together, or anything.

I left the office mad and the more I thought about it the madder I got. It didn’t help that everyone was talking about my trip to the principal’s office, and they all seemed to know why,
though most people got it wrong and said I’d brought a sex manual to school. Susanna Leitch even asked if she could take a peek at it if I ever got it back.

I figured since my whole life plan of trying to be ordinary and blend in with the crowd was busted, I might as well go whole hog and come up with a plan to get my book back – without my mom knowing about it.

The first step was to make sure Mom didn’t get the call. She usually got home from work at the same time I got home from school so instead of going to my friend’s house like I’d planned, I ran straight home after school and took the phone of the hook and hid it under my pillow so Mom couldn’t hear it beeping. Then after four o’clock, I quietly put it back where it belonged. The aptly named Kent Madewell, who’s in the principal’s office about once a week, told me that Mr. Duncan never calls after four because he has to get home to give his wife a break from their juvenile delinquent kids. Mom never noticed a thing.

I spent the rest of the evening hidden away in my bedroom working on step two: posters. As crazy it might sound, I was taking a page from my mom and dad’s playbook. Neither one of them was exactly parent of the year material, but back before I came along, they’d stood for something. I’d even gone to some marches with them when I was little, though I couldn’t remember them. I asked Dad once why he quit doing that stuff and he said he got burned out and disillusioned and dropped out of pretty much everything. Now he just sits around on his duff and watches the boob-tube.

The next morning it was time for step three. Instead of going to class, I set up in the hall across from the office. I taped three big posters on the wall that said “Sit In to End Oppression” and “Say No to Censorship” and “Books Aren’t Dangerous,” then I sat cross-legged on the floor.

It was NOT a Martha kind of thing to do, but somehow, I didn’t care.
A couple of kids joined me. They were mainly the kids who liked to skip class anyway, but I appreciated the company.

I sat there all morning. Eventually, the other kids got bored and wandered back to class or over to the Stop-n-Go to smoke. I could see Mr. Duncan in the office rubbing his forehead and talking to the secretaries. I overheard snatches of their conversations.

“Called... Mom’s not home.”

“...constitutional rights.”

“She’ll get bored.”

“...skimmed the book... not that bad... but Thompson...”

At lunchtime when my best friend Tabitha Jean came down the hall, I tried to get her to sit with me. She said if it were any other day, she’d do it, but today was bean chowder and cinnamon roll day and she didn’t want to miss it. Some friend! Kent Madewell did sit with me and he gave me half of his bologna sandwich. He’s such a fox, almost as good as Greg Brady!

Kent told me that the whole school was talking about me. They thought it was cool that I was sticking it to the man and everyone except for Mary Louise who’s super-religious, thought that it was unfair of the principal to take my sex manual.

I never thought I wanted to stand out, but now that I was a celebrity, it was kind of cool. Weird, I know, but I figured if Miss Thompson was a representative of the normal and ordinary, I’d take a pass.

When Mrs. Stevens came clomping down the hall in her clogs, I figured she was going to tell me off for missing her class, but all she did was point to Kent and say, “Back to class, Madewell,” before she went into the office. When she came out, she was carrying a thick, green book. My book. She held it out to me.
“How’d you get it?” I asked.

“I simply told Mr. Duncan that you’re the only student in this school willing to take the time to read a thousand-page book and that suppressing exceptional intelligence and understanding is an appalling thing for an educator to do. He agreed.”

“Exceptional?”

“Yes. Exceptional. Now come to class.”

My smile was about to split my face in two when I turned to take the posters from the wall. Mrs. Stevens stopped me.

“Leave them, but do me one favor, Martha, don’t bring that book back to school.”

“I won’t Mrs. Stevens – and you can call me Guinevere.”