



LOVE SEX AND 4-H

a memoir by
ANNE-MARIE
OOMEN

LOVE, SEX, and 4-H

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Needle without thread.
Point without purpose.

Thread without needle.
Back with no bone.

What is more unlike
the one that pierces
than the one that binds?

From *After That*, “Fastenings” by Kathleen Aguero

To all of my 4-H leaders and, most particularly,
my mother, Ruth Jean Oomen



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Memory is a slippery creature. The least thing happens, and it shifts. You and I may experience the same thing, but we will remember differently, and in the art of telling, memory shifts yet again. And then there's all that stuff about the brain making copies of a memory, and none of the copies are exactly alike. So let's just agree that memory is kind of a mess and different from history or facts, no matter how much they overlap. These are my memories, not a history, and they have been shaped for story. And yet, the book is as true to the real things as I can make it. Because of that, resemblances to actual people may be unavoidable, and so, except for my immediate family, I have changed names to avoid—as much as possible—offense, and the order of events, particularly of the 4-H projects, may have been reshuffled for sense—sensible order being another thing memory defies. So, some inaccuracies may exist, but I have tried to be respectful, and though a few people may be softly lit, most of them come off looking pretty good as they are—except my brother Tom, who takes a couple of hits, for which I hope he will forgive me.

4-H Emblem

The emblem of the four-leaf clover with the letter *H* on each leaflet—
symbolizing the four-fold development of head, heart, hands, and health—
is protected under federal law.

4-H Pledge

I pledge my head to clearer thinking,
my heart to greater loyalty,
my hands to larger service and
my health to better living
for my club, my community, my country, and my world.

4-H Motto

To make the best better

4-H Colors

green and white

PROLOGUE: THE SIXTIES

Our family, that straightforward, plainspoken, clean-faced (for the most part) farm family, lived on the eve of great change, the brink of a national upheaval, the cusp of free love. We had no idea. I had no idea. We lived near a small town in the heart of the Great Lakes, a town named Hart—the pun delighted me—near the coast of Lake Michigan, one of the freshwater seas, in a rural Michigan that had yet to feel anything more than the mildest tremors of turmoil. We might have seen the cracks and quaverings in our cities—Detroit, Milwaukee—if we had not been so insular. There was trouble of course, as there always was in small communities, but that trouble was in other families, separate enough from the Oomens’ acreage that we felt our safety as the norm.

Yet, even in our isolation, change seeped to the surface: assassinations, demonstrations turned to riots, a war that scarred us for a half-century. The deaths that became legendary—John, Martin, Robert, and even Janis, Jimi, and Jim—are the edges of my experience, the critical periphery. These famed names and their narratives are common parlance even now, but I was not part of it. That said, because the sixties were so big, those years became the all-important and formative backdrop of my small life. And love and sex insisted on coming, too, dressed in psychedelic colors and higher than kites: rainbow and rain.

For a long time—surrounded by the bandanas, tie-dyed T-shirts, and the black-lit signatures of our youth—I held those quiet vows created by home, church, and 4-H. Home represented my loyalty to my parents and our farm, church represented my loyalty to God, but 4-H—head, heart,

hands, health for my club, my community, my country—represented an oath to the larger world. These oaths became a ragged and slowly disintegrating armor. They might have lasted a lifetime if not for those other two, love and sex, those vagabonds and vanguards that broke the forces holding me in place. If they couldn't be brazen, as they couldn't be in Hart, they would be subtle in their purpose. Here were sex and love dressed in church clothes, shirt collar just starting to unbutton—utterly seductive, surreptitious as snakes. Except for the fierce familial love of my people, I had no authentic understanding of either of those lunatics, love and sex, as they were expressed in that time. But I had 4-H, and, because of that, I knew this much: I knew how love and sex would be dressed.

PART I: 4-H

Each time the buttonhole opens its mouth
A back door history escapes.

Kathleen Aguero



DECENT CLOTHES, 1959

The first lesson is the dish towel.

Or an apron.

These are beginning sewing lessons in 4-H, regular as a linen rectangle 15 inches by 30 inches, traditional as a yard of gingham check or a plain waistband. If the ties that loop like long roads at the back of the apron seem like extravagance, they are merely a small feminine extravagance. The lessons—a dish towel and an apron—at first appear logical and clear, and no one questions them; no one considers them deeply at all, certainly not a child of eight.

In the fall of 1959, no whiff of feminism or cultural unrest, let alone uprising, has yet driven down those gravel roads to the farms of Oceana County and my mother's domain. In our farmhouse, the simple majority of four females to three males means only that my mother must be more watchful of the dangers to her three daughters. My mother knows this, especially knows my weaknesses, and wants me focused on *good behavior*. She wants me to have practical skills and someday be a fine *wife and mother*. Perhaps most of all, I need to learn to be *efficient and self-sacrificing*. She knows already these qualities are not housed anywhere in my nature. Sometimes she says things to me as though I am someone older. But most of the time, I am either too young for something or too big for my britches. My mother has a sharp eye on me: on the part of me that talks too loudly to strangers or plays alone for hours, has too many imaginary friends, lies in the grass and stares—the part of me that stares at everything, doesn't listen, and doesn't like to work.

She worries about all five of us because she wants us to *have it better*. Sometimes she tells me stories about going to school when she was my age, about other children who picked on her. When I ask why they did that, she goes quiet, then says, “Well, I didn’t have decent clothes.” And after a long pause, I hear the shadow in the silence.

The shadow is from her childhood. It is her family’s barn burning and horses perishing in flames and then all the insurance transferred to the barn and then the house burning without any insurance and them living in a tiny house with no indoor plumbing. It is a brother dying. It is Grandpa drinking a little too much in order to get through it all. It is the shadow of little money. She doesn’t want me to know about any of that. She makes a point of telling us how good Grandpa is, how he came all alone from Belgium to our country when he was twelve, the youngest of twelve, and how he went back to the “old country” to fight in the first World War—there were two?—then returned as a hired hand to win the hand of the farmer’s daughter, my grandma Julia. It’s only later that I learn that Grandpa Joe’s mother died giving birth to him, that his oldest sister was his wet nurse, that there was no place, no land for him in the old country. That even here in this country, with hard work and land, they lost almost everything and had to struggle. She never wants that again; her fear is her secret shadow, except it’s not secret.

Mom always invites Grandma and Grandpa to Sunday dinner, and my brothers love to play in the smoke of his cigarettes, the wreath of gray encircling him as he tells stories or jokes with my dad. Grandpa and Grandma look happy then, after the ham or chicken dinner, visiting, their faces like apples just going soft, still sweet but tough.

But sometimes the shadow comes into our rooms with my mother, and that is when her voice is sharp as vinegar. The word *shame* is undefined, unknowable, and more powerful than all the other words of that time. The shadow is made of that word. She has to keep us from being touched by it, from joining it. It is up to her alone: even my father, good as he is, cannot fight this. We all have to be better. Better than anyone imagined possible. So other words, hardworking words, fill up the house, but still they connect like threads to that unknown word, the one still in my future but always in her past.

This shadow word is behind all the other words, the good lesson words, though she isn't at all sure I have any talent for good. Still, it may be done. *Might as well get started now.* There's church, of course, but that's about the soul. She is more worried about keeping my hands busy with constructive work. Practical things are good things. *And so we'll just begin with that dish towel,* because maybe I am *a little young for the apron.* *We'll see how it goes.* *Maybe the apron next.*

Depends on how fast I catch on.

Eventually, *decent clothes.*

I look at our hand-me-downs, our church-box sweaters, and wonder how that will happen. But my mother has a plan: my mother has figured out a way to keep all the shadows at bay. It's called 4-H.

I am thrilled that a 4-H club is starting. On a farm where I am the first born of five, I have learned this already: even though I am not yet nine, I am separated from the others by the fact of being the oldest. I know already there are many kinds of loneliness, and being oldest is mine. But in 4-H, there will be a whole clan near my own age covering up the familiar scent of loneliness, of oldest-ness. There will be a *club*, with other boys and girls but mostly girls, and we will do things together.

And there is more news.

I will be guided by my own mother, another reason I can start learning to sew even though I am so young—so I will always have decent clothes, so I will know how to take care of myself. This is part of her plan, as straight as a line of stitching, as square as the grid of a township, as comforting as an old hymn. No one speaks of how the looping ties of the apron can catch in the wind and fly loose. Now one speaks of the shadows, the silent knowings.

Here are the knowings that come to me from the stories she tells us after supper or while she and Grandma peel the peaches for canning.

She was not always our mother.

What? Because we have always all been here, haven't we, in this old farmhouse in Crystal Valley Township? Certainly my brothers, Tommy and Ricky, and I have been here. I can remember a time when there weren't little sisters, Marijo and Patti, but that doesn't really mean we weren't all here in

this old farmhouse, does it? They were just someplace else. They are here now. I have thought of this other time but not in the way I am about to learn.

Mom tells us there was a time when she was very young. As young as we are. *When could that have been?* We sit around the scattered peach peelings, shoving the halves, round side up, into the jars. Yes, there was a time when she went to a one-room schoolhouse and washed the boards for the teacher, which meant she was the favorite, but she was lonely because she couldn't walk home with the other kids. I nod; I understand this. She loved school, she tells us pointedly, but before she finished high school, she left her parents' house, left it all suddenly. She does not tell us why, because it's almost time to *put those peaches into the canner*.

Where did you go?

She carries a case of jars to the kitchen.

Chicago. She says this over her shoulder.

Where is Chicago?

She's busy.

Another time: ice cream on a Sunday night. The sweet cream makes her tongue happy, and she talks. She tells us about the train to Chicago: how long it took, how it stopped at every town, how noisy it was. The man who meets her wears a red carnation. She had never seen a red carnation.

She tells us she went to work as a nanny.

She took care of other children. First one family, then another.

Stunning news. We look at each other and giggle but not because we think it's funny.

Were they good? Of course, Tom wants to know.

Well, they were little, but, yes, they were very good.

In a big house.

In a very big house.

Were they farmers?

No, they were bankers.

What on Earth are bankers?

Marijo is pounding on her high chair and making little songs.

Another time we learn how Mom came home. Grandma called her back after Grandpa had a terrible car accident. He was hurt so badly that she left that banker's children and took the train back to the farm to help.

When Grandpa finally got better, she worked in the fruit orchards near Walkerville, saved all her cherry-picking money, and took the test to become a nurse, even though she hadn't finished high school.

We mull this over for a while, licking our spoons. This is the answer to another word that lives in our house, the word *education*. She never wants us to have to *pretend* like she did to take the nursing test. She tells us she passed all the tests, but it was hard, because she didn't have her algebra like the others. She passed and took nursing training in Manistee during the war, the second one. She worked in the hospitals. Sometimes she took care of soldiers who were coming home from the battles. Sometimes she took care of new babies.

Her face is happy.

Another time, late one stormy winter night when school has been called off for the next day and we are eating popcorn, dropping kernels all over the freshly swept floor and playing with the salt, which she asks us not to do, we ask her about the "olden days." She doesn't seem to mind. She tells us that she and Dad knew each other from childhood, that the two families were friends from church. *All those Dutch and Belgian families knew each other from the old country*, she tells us. She's Belgian; he's Dutch. So the families went back and forth, keeping company in the new country.

Here's the best one. The first time Mom and Dad went to the fair together, he asked her to marry him. She said they walked down the midway, and he said, "Well, Toots, let's just get married." And they laughed their heads off. And we do, too, sitting around the table. We don't know what's funnier: that he called her *Toots*—we hoot the word around the table—or that he asked her to marry him when then they were just goofing off.

They were *just kids*.

Dad wanders into the dining room, listening to our giggles. He puts his hand on her shoulder, and she lifts her hand to touch his. I remember he still calls her Toots sometimes.

He went into the army to serve two tours, and she forgot about him.

When I ask about how they got together again, they both get quiet. They smile at each other, but then Dad usually has to go to the barns or fix a machine in the shop. There is always a pause, and then she talks of something else: how they rented our old farmhouse from Grandpa Henry,

Dad's father, who had bought it for the land, so the house was falling apart, and how finally, when they were fed up with renting, they bought it from him. Or how they never borrowed money. Or how everything is made from something else: machines, barns, clothes.

What I figure out is that she keeps secrets. How they got back together is one. It makes me want to know this story above all other stories. I want to know if my parents are like people in the stories I have learned to read or the TV shows I watch: *Walt Disney Presents* or *The Shirley Temple Fairy Tale Hour*. If there was a time when she was not our mother, when she was a nanny and a nurse, was she ever a princess to my father? Did she get wakened with a kiss? Does she ever still?

When I think about it, I don't believe it. My mother is wakened by laundry early in the morning, by my little sister crying in the night with a diaper rash, by the green beans not being picked on time, and by mumps, measles, chicken pox, and croup. Not a kiss. Not love. She doesn't have time. Or not much. She loves us when we are good: when we take our boots off before coming into the house, when we pick up our dirty clothes, when we somehow manage to get through church without crawling under the pews or getting into a tussle with each other. This applies to me particularly—not because I cause trouble but because I am not a good worker. I don't do much that is bad; I just don't do much that is *helpful*. I don't really believe I am good at anything much, but especially not the helpful part. But now, I wonder, is it possible, with this club, with luck, that I will learn to be useful?

Could I learn to make decent clothes?