

The Honest Answer

A excerpt from
the award-winning *This Is The Place*

By Carolyn Howard-Johnson

1958-Holladay, Utah

Sky braced her body against the slope until her Gram had started her old pick-up truck for the third time. It ground and lurched its way down past where she lay hiding like a child in the June grass and mint by the side of the driveway. Gram was in her old age and wasn't afraid to learn to drive. Sky, on the other hand, had youth and strength on her side but was afraid of something and didn't know what. She pushed her foot against a granite boulder to brace herself, rolled over on her back and got her balance. She wiped her wet cheek with the back of her hand. She felt small, angry with herself. She sat a long time and listened. Finally the sound of the Chevy faded away and she could hear only water in the creek below, puddling its way out of the Wasatch, and her own heart, beating.

What Sky had come for, after all, was to hear her own heart beat. The shade was calming, the trickle of the creek below her soothing. She sat down on a small, eroded ledge and slid down toward the bank mossed in green, wetting the seat of her Levi's. She took off her socks and Keds and tried to wash the tingling—stinging—from her legs and then tried to put the socks back over wet feet. Wet feet, wet bottom. She felt the memory come onto her and she let it, too, slide, slide. Anger, fear. Her oldest boy cousin, Lee, had caused her to make a very similar slide down the walls of the hollow years before. It was the first time she realized that she was different from the other cousins, that day of her trek to the hollow when she was small. It had been summer then, too, dead center summer.

Lee was named after Lehi from the Book of Mormon. Lehi had led his relatives and friends out of Jerusalem in 600 BC during the time of the city's corruption, built a ship with the help of his sons, and sailed to the new world. His leadership was simple; the sole path to redemption was to obey the laws of God. Such a name gave the modern day Lee a kind of dignity and trustworthiness in Sky's eyes, though it seemed to her as if, even then, she should have weighed his name against the streak of meanness that played like snarled gut among the games they played.

The modern day Lee, Sky's cousin, organized the boys to ditch the girls. He organized the older cousins to ditch the younger ones. He had a preference for war games. He led a contingent of small warriors camouflaged with asparagus ferns, on their bellies through the rows of tomato plants, down past the hedges to spy on the adults. He was like a praying mantis, sure of the good he did as he went to devour his menu, the diseased, like Japs or Krauts or others outside his purview. They were all damaging insects that he could righteously devour. It was a contagion. The cousins went along to

belong. Or they followed because they were drawn to a magnet, like metallic filings. They were attracted to the forbidden, the core of evil that they weren't allowed to explore otherwise.

For Sky there was a sense of power to be among those who inflicted the pain for a change. A scent of thrill permeated the air, even for the one who had become the target of this band of youthful barbarians. Even when that target ran, flushed and sobbing, into the protective skirts of mothers or aunts, there was certain relief. It was like experiencing a horror movie and somehow surviving.

Lee whispered, "Don't go down in the hollow past the property line. There's an old coot who lives over there. You know, from the other side of the family. He hates us kids and will drag you off if he finds you on his property." His eyes were wild and blue like Uncle Todd's eyes when he sang "Minnie the Mermaid" and only strummed his ukulele when there were parts he didn't want the children to hear.

"Lee, one of these days I'm going," Sky said, and one day she did.

Sky took her brother by his pudgy little hand, "Bobby, we're going to see an old coot." Sky had pictured an old geezer of rooster like dimensions, put together like a satyr, with cocks-comb hair and a nose like a beak.

They slid down the hollow to the creek on their bottoms, embedding clay into the weave of what covered their behinds. The proof of Bobby's indiscretion brushed off of his Sunday trousers leaving a foxtail or two protruding from the seams. Sky's panties were black and wet so she took them off and put them under a rock to retrieve on the way back. They found stones to step across the boiling creek and plopped an additional river rock where Bobby's short legs needed an extra one.

"Try not to disturb the trout," Sky cautioned as if they were on a safari in the deepest, darkest wood for she was the big sister, the person in charge, and she could think of no other way to achieve proper authority than with the trout. Their shadows beneath the water were slow and green. Perhaps wild things shouldn't be disturbed. Perhaps it was the same with the old coot. But Sky had a need to do Lee one better. Being twelve shouldn't give him all the advantages. The two children pulled themselves up the other side of the hollow using roots and brush for leverage.

"I'm hungry. Maybe we could eat the trout for lunch." Bobby's voice sounded like the ice of high notes flowing through a sieve.

"Bobby, the trout can be very fast when you try to catch them. I've seen Lee catch them with his hands but I never could. Maybe the old coot will have some food for us." Sky's idea of a treat was peanut butter and jelly on Wonder bread which they never ate at home but the cousins had it a lot and Sky thought that perhaps it was an staple of the Eccles family and that, if the old coot was an Eccles, he might have some too. Bobby did

not seem to see much promise in the possibility. Tears began to run down his cheeks and he snuffled in time to the shuffled dragging of his tired feet.

They found a dirt path that followed the bends of the creek. Purple shadows were on one side of the hollow and fields were on the other. They picked dandelions to take back a bouquet to mother, who liked to play the “Do you love butter?” game with the yellow reflecting off her throat.

“If we pick enough, we’re sure to get lots of butter color. She’ll like that.” The idea comforted Bobby and his sniffing stopped. They sat down on some weeds that were still soft and green reminding Sky of her delicate condition of undress. They ate some of the dandelion greens, even though they both hated them almost as much as they hated the tiny green apples the cousins all ate when they slept out on the side yard of their grandfather’s property. Lee and the others sneaked out to pick the hard, green nuggets from neighbors’ farms because Grandpa would be sure to notice if the lower ones were missing from his tree. They were about the sourest things on earth right up there with rhubarb and mint from along the irrigation ditches. They were worse than sour cherries—the ones that were mostly pit. No one bothered to pick them or even gather them when they fell from the trees so they finally shriveled and died with neglect.

Sky blew a puff of seeded dandelions into the soft air. You could make a wish when all the little silks were off the stem so they picked the last ones that would not release at the whim of their gently blown breeze. “I wish for grandma’s chicken and dumplings!” Bobby declared. Sky had hoped the dandelions would be a diversion from food.

Sky felt helpless. Chicken or peanut butter or nothing, she was responsible. She considered having Bobby suck the milky ends of the dandelion stems but they might be poisonous like mushrooms. “Bobby, if you need to tinkle you can. No one can see you and I won’t look.” They could now see houses but they were a long way off.

They scooted under barbed wire fences and over weathered stiles, picking their way around dried cow dung and listening to the sound of grasshoppers whir their way through stinging thistle. The houses grew bigger because they were closer.

Sky wasn’t too concerned with finding the coot any more. Food was a much bigger issue. They traipsed up to one of the houses and knocked. “They’re probably at church,” Sky whispered. The house looked shabby with July grass dried to umber around the foundation. No one answered. There was a road in front of the house not paved but rutted with wheel tracks. A trail of foxtails and thwarted yarrow between the ruts was stained with drips of oil reflecting rainbow swirls in the sun. The two children followed it a long way to the next house with orchards and potato fields and a garden. An old truck came along the road and stopped in clouds of tawny dust.

The man sat behind the wheel and stared at the children dressed in Sunday clothes. “What on earth are you kids doin’ here? Where did you come from?”

The woman jumped out of the truck. She looked at the man behind the wheel. "Look at this dress. Expensive." She picked the fabric of Sky's skirt between her fingers. "And short. I've never seen these kids before."

They put Sky and Bobby in the back of the truck and drove past the garden into the next driveway, rutted like the road but narrower. Their house smelled like babies lived there, wet and sour. A telephone hung on the wall and a linoleum mat lay askew on the floor in front of the sink, its corners curling.

"What's your name, honey?" The voice was soft but there was a sound of perturbation about it that made Sky feel shy.

"I'm Bobby Eccles and I'm hungry."

The phone got a good working out. "These kids say they're Eccles but I've never seen 'em at the ward. I don't think they're Eccles and I don't think they're from around here." There was a silence. Then she rang off and called someone else.

"Feed the kids, will you?" She sounded cross at the man, like she didn't have too many words to use. Her husband put two bowls of oatmeal, gray and lumpy, leftovers from the Fridge, on the table. He poured the top, creamy part of the milk from a pitcher onto it. The Fridge had a funny tower on top that looked like a giant stack of silver dollars and a yucky smell that came from its innards. Either the lady didn't notice the cereal wasn't hot or they ate it that way all the time.

"We don't have sugar," the man said. The spoons were big ovals and didn't match. The lady was saying, "Why on earth would I call the sheriff? They couldn't be from too far away." She put her finger in the cradle of the phone and turned to her husband. "Why would we want to call the sheriff?"

"Well, because they say they're Eccles kids but it's obvious they aren't. They aren't Eccles and they aren't from around here, so how're we going to figure out even who to call first. Maybe they're from the Eccles family on the other side of the crick."

"We are, we are!" Bobby squealed with his mouth full and milk coming out of the corners of his mouth. "We're looking for the old coot!" A baby wailed from the other room and other voices shushed it.

The man took the phone, said two numbers into the spout at the front of it. "We've got two kids here who say they're Eccles, maybe from the Brock Eccles on Meander Lane. Wanna come get 'em and see where they belong? I'm not calling them m'self!" He turned to his wife. "They got a call four hours ago about these kids. If you could quit meddling we'd've had 'em home a long time before."

Sky finished her porridge, like Goldilocks. It was very good to feel the round, heaviness in her stomach, warm, even though it hadn't been when she ate it. She attempted to slide off the chair seat covered with slick, shiny diamond patterned vinyl. Her bottom stuck. The lady's eyes widened. "Mel, this child hasn't a stitch of underwear on under her clothes!"

Sky's humiliation was complete. She wasn't an Eccles, from either side of the creek, but she was exposed. "Can I, can I use your bathroom?"

"You most certainly can." The lady hustled Sky down a dark hall. "Don't lock the door," she said.

Sky perched on the toilet, her spirit of adventure crushed, worried about what her mother would say about her daughter being out in public without her panties. The lady reached her hand inside the bathroom door. In it was a pair of big underpants, thin and gray and shabby in places like shredded twine drooping from an animated hook. Hanging from the pulled elastic waist was a safety pin, which came in handy.

"Thank you. And thank you for the mush." At least maybe Sky could make it home with no one else knowing of her humiliation.

The sheriff was dressed all neat with a patch of the State of Utah with a beehive in the middle on his sleeve and nice, ironed creases in his shirt. Sky always liked the shape of Utah. When you played geography games you could be sure you wouldn't get Utah wrong. Utah was the state with a clipping out of the corner. Also, they sometimes gave you hints about it with the huge blue lake just a little above the center. "So you two are my lost Eccleses, huh?" The sheriff grinned.

"Do you think Mom will be mad?"

"We only wanted to meet the old coot," Bobby assured him.

The sheriff shook his head. He got down on one knee. "When are you kids ever going to stop the bogey man stories about the other side of the family? Polygamy's over, kids. One side of the creek's no different from the other side. We're all cousins—once, twice, three times removed maybe, but cousins. We'd all better be forgetting which is the first wife's family, which are the basta . . . which are the other wife's kids, you know?"

The sheriff looked up at the lady, who didn't say anything about the underpants and the man who didn't like it but fed the children anyway. "Thanks Mr. and Mrs. Eccles. I'll see they get home!"

"They didn't look like Coats, Sky!" Bobby took the sheriff's hand and Sky followed hitching her pants so they wouldn't droop below her good dress.

Grandma Eccles was waiting on the porch. They had given Sky's mother something to make her relax, perhaps the secret wine one of the great uncles made with cherries, and she had gone to sleep. Dad was still out looking for the children, leading the adult siblings through the canyons in columns like a giant brush. Gram's arms went out and circled the two of them. "Thanks, Tom, for everything," she said to the sheriff.

"It's my pleasure, Harriet." He looked at Sky. "Your brother's too young but you remember what I said about bogey men."

As he walked his huge boots to the car, Sky drew back from Grandma's arms. "Grandma, what does it mean to tell bogey man stories? Why didn't anyone think we were Eccles?" Lee had come out of the house with a peach, gnawed to the center of its dark, wrinkled pit, and sat in Grandma's rocker. "Well, that's 'cause you aren't Eccles. Not like the rest of us. You're not even Mormons!"

Grandma put her foot on the rocker runner purposefully as if she were shanghaiing a lizard, immobilizing it with both force and strength of will. "Lehi, you go back in the kitchen to finish your snack and you think about what you just said."

Sky felt a victorious throb in her heart; for once Lee didn't get to name the games. At the same time, there was a new empty spot there that victory didn't fill. Gram Harriet took Sky's hand in hers and Bobby's in the other. "Would you like some cookies and milk out here on the front porch or would you like to take a warm bath and be in bed by the time everyone comes back from searching for you?"

Sky chose the bath and Bobby went along with that. The tub was a big one with claw feet like a lion, kind of a hybrid monster. Grandma still used her own lye soap for tough jobs and the two were really tough, layered with perspiration and dust from the road. There were tendrils of hair clinging to Sky's neck and Bobby had wiped his nose on his sleeve leaving slug trails up the dark blue cotton. Gram Harry folded his chlorophyll stained Sunday trousers and snotty shirt. She took Sky's Sunday dress, undefiled as it could be under the circumstances, and unstained, baggy underpants with a safety pin in them and looked at them. She folded them, too, and put all the clothes in a laundry bag she had made out of flour sacks.

"Telling bogey man stories is like telling lies. It puts a mask that doesn't fit on folks' faces." Gram added more hot water for she believed that hot water cleansed the soul and promoted deep sleep.

"About those panties, Sky. You don't want to tell lies but you need only tell the truths you want people to know." She sudsed the children down until they smelled like her washing machine with rollers on it that you had to crank. She put them in bed under rafters made with mud that seethed from the cracks between them. That ooze that sometimes made a home for yellow jackets was evidence of the way Grandpa and Great Grandpa had built the place, the strength of its underpinnings evident with no attempt to disguise them with style.

“And another thing,” Gram said as she pulled stiff sheets up around them. “I learned a long time ago that you better be who you think you are.”

“Grandma, are you an Eccles?”

“Once I wasn’t. Now I am. Or at least some days I think I am.”

“Grandma, are we Eccles?”

“Sometimes, when we wonder just who we are, the most honest answer is, ‘I don’t know,’” she said. There were little cat’s claw scratches around the corners of Grandma’s eyes when she scrunched her face in protection from the power of her words.

Sky carried the memory of those eyes, that moment with her. She usually wasn’t aware of it but it became real for her, nudging, supporting, pricking, reminding her when she least expected it like starch in a crisp, white collar.

The stinging on Sky’s legs brought her thoughts back to the present, to her perch on a log that was sometimes used as a bridge over the creek. She opened her hands, palm up, and looked at them. They were red and stinging, too. The idle trout were still green, sludge brown and slow, just as they had been when she was little. She tried splashing her feet and legs, cooling the tingle, rubbing her hands together. She pushed her wet feet into her shoes, the canvas gripping them as if they didn’t belong.

Sky crawled up the hollow edge and when she got to the driveway, grasping and pulling her way up, she almost grabbed a plant of lush green. From this low position she could see little white hairs, microscopic and venomous like tiny cactus spears, on the leaves. It wasn’t mint but stinging nettle. She knew from experience that the irritation would subside and leave her legs numb in exactly the same places the leaves had touched her, anesthetized and insensate.

Carolyn Howard-Johnson’s first novel, *This is the Place*, has won eight awards. Her second book, *Harkening: A Collection of Stories Remembered*, is creative nonfiction; it has won three. Her fiction, nonfiction and poems have appeared in national magazines, anthologies and review journals. She speaks on Utah’s culture, tolerance and other subjects and has appeared on TV and hundreds of radio stations nationwide. She is an instructor for UCLA’s Writer’s Program. She loves to travel and has studied writing in the United Kingdom; St. Petersburg, RU; and Prague. Her website is: <http://www.carolynhoward-johnson.com>