

EXCERPT FROM TALL WEED

7weed - THE NUTTY NABER

I think it may have been because my father dared to be different; or maybe because we children were encouraged to think for ourselves. My parents enjoyed all our innovations. And there were many.

In Kansas where I was born, we lived just off campus. Our home was an old farmhouse, I think. We had a dog that just had had pups. One day my brother Joe who was five years old, rushed into the house, got a large kettle from under the sink, and ran out again. My mother was busy caring for me. When he came back a while later, he was carrying the kettle and brought it to her and said excitedly, "Mother, Mother, we don't need to buy milk anymore. See, I got three splashes." Dog milk!

Ellenada, who was three and a half years old, and later became just Nada, went off to tell her friends about the new baby. She often visited the college students in their group homes. The big girls enjoyed her visits and since there were no close neighbors with little girls for her to play with, she often spent time with the college girls. They asked her what the baby's name was and of course she said "Faith." When she came home she asked, "Is own baby's name weawee¹ Faith, Hope and Chewy Twees?"

Now Joe was shy and stayed home near mom, but Nada was a social creature. We lived in Aurora, Illinois when she was five and in kindergarten. The kindergarten was at a Normal school nearby where the family lived. Some of the children had birthday parties and she wanted one. So she told one little girl she was having a birthday party on Friday. The little girl's grandmother wrapped up a handkerchief for the little girl to bring and she came to the party. Our dear and innovative mother produced a party for two on demand.

I have this memory of the very early days. It was a hot day and my mother put the three of us out to play under a tree. We had a pail of water to splash in. After we splashed awhile, my brother and sister decided to play

¹ Translation of baby talk: "really' Faith, Hope and Charity."

someplace else. They had me sit in the pail of water and then they left. Since I was caught in the pail with my rear down in and my head and hands and feet waving around, they were able to leave without having me follow. I finally realized I was trapped and started to scream. I screamed and screamed until my mother came to get me.

I did make up a poem when we lived on Halsted Street and 110th place. This was where we lived in Roseland in Chicago where we were, the year before Betty was a year old. I was looking out the window watching the birds. And I said, they tell me:

*“Three little birdies sitting in a tree,
Sticked up their noses so merrily.”*

Nada said mother changed the ending to, “and sang merrily” and that was handed down by word of mouth as my cuteness.

After we moved to THE HOUSE, I could remember for myself the things that Betty did. One cute thing was that she was standing on the couch beside where Dad was reading and saw the bald spot he was getting on the top of his head. She grabbed his chin and pulled up his face and said, “Dad, Dad, see the hole in your head.” She saw that he couldn't see it and so she put her other hand on the back of his head and tried to push it down, so he could see the hole in his head! Of course, he couldn't.

We had a piano. Someone, somehow, had left a chisel on the piano keys. Betty was not tall enough to see the keys but she wanted to play the piano and reached up. The chisel dropped down and cut a gash in her big toe. It bled a lot but did not break the bone. Our parents knew a lot of home remedies. They stopped the bleeding and, yes, Betty got well.

One day I was drawing on the dining room table. Betty came over and wanted a paper and a crayon. I looked up to see her and, behold. Her eyes were as high as the tabletop. On tiptoe, she could see my picture!!!! My little sister was growing up.

About then we got chicken pox. Betty was very sick. Joe and Nada were sick enough to be kept in bed. I wasn't sick at all so when my mother had to go to the store two blocks away she set me as watcher to tell the others when I saw her coming home.

Finally, I saw her. She had a paper bag of something and in her other hand she was carrying a cardboard ice cream cone holder. These holders were made of a certain gray papier-mâché stuff with holes for the cones to rest in. As soon as I saw her from the upstairs window where I was stationed in the room where the others were all in bed, I called out, "There she is and she has Ice cream."

It was a warm day and my mother was hurrying. Even so the ice cream was a little melted, but wonderful. She fed Betty's to her with a spoon from a little dish. Later when Peter had chicken pox all alone by himself, my mother told me that when the others had them, she had found two poxes on my tummy and that apparently made me immune to chicken pox.

Peter was a pet to all of us. Even to Betty who was three years and eight months old when he was born; and he was pretty cute, too. He was still just a little boy when he had his very first swimming trunks. They were a dark red color and looked very cute on him. He and Betty and some neighbor children were out in the back yard playing in the sprinkler water.

Suddenly Peter left the group and ran into the house. He was gone a little while and then ran out again. I was doing something on the back porch. I chanced to look up as he ran through the sprinkles; and saw what he had done when he was in THE HOUSE. His new bathing trunks had no fly and he had cut one in them. It was a very nice round hole. I dashed out and brought him in and changed him to a pair of shorts. He wore shorts in the water the rest of the summer.

My father did some cute things, too. He really liked to be clean and neat. He went to get a shave and haircut from time to time and when he wore whiskers he spent a great deal of time on the grooming of them. I liked the goatee he wore sometimes.

He would stop after work at the park near the Pullman shop where he worked to take a bath. They had public showers there and for a nickel, he could rent a small towel with a bit of soap and have a shower bath.

One day he brought home a tin tub. (Remember, we had no plumbing in the house.) He put the tub on the south side of the house on hot summer days and let the sun heat the water. He tried it with his swimsuit on and then he put up a frame and hung the frame with his drop cloths. (Those are the

big heavy muslin pieces he laid out to protect a floor when he was painting.) My sister said, "We could look out the window in our bedroom and see him."² I wasn't at all interested. I have no idea if she ever did that.

We went some time later to a campsite on the Des Plains River where the Craybecks spent part of the summers fishing. My father wore his bathing suit there and swam in the river. My mother didn't go with us that time. Just Joe and I were there with Dad. When my father put on his swimsuit, he got it on inside out. It was one of those old-fashioned things that went over the shoulders and had a little skirt. Without the skirt in its proper place, the suit didn't cover him very well. The Craybecks were all guys and probably never noticed. I never said anything about it but I was embarrassed for him anyway.

Joe was there and took me for a walk across the river and through a railroad yard to a place all sheltered with trees. It was called Rocky Glen. An underground stream came out of a wall of limestone and fell in a sprinkling shower down to the hollow it had carved out over the years. This is where the Craybecks came to get drinking water. I was wearing my swimsuit so I had a shower there. I had no towel but the shower was very nice.

Halfway to this Glen was a bottomless pit. It was a hole in the rock that was full of clear water. As I remember, it was about three feet across. Mr. Andrews was there with us one day. He was wearing his swimsuit since that was the proper clothing for the Craybeck's camp.

He decided to see how deep the bottomless pit really was. He carefully got into the pit and let himself descend [by] pushing himself down using the shelves of limestone rock that jutted out along the sides of the pit. We watched him go down and down and then he pulled himself up. "Did you touch bottom?" we shouted. "No," he answered. He didn't go down again.

One time my mother went with us for the day. Nada was along that time and she and I took mother for a rowboat ride on the river. She enjoyed that very much. She was already very ill and it was a treat for her.

² Naked.

I did a terrible thing at that camp. Being the only female in camp the first time I was there, I was told to clean up the dishes after we all ate fried fish and so forth. Well the fry pan was just full of grease so when I got to that I wondered what I should do with it. I had heard that you can use newspaper to wipe most of the grease out of things but there was no newspaper.

I saw a dime novel on the table. I knew dime novels were on cheap paper and decided to use some of that to wipe the grease from the fry pan. I did my terrible deed and I tore out a handful of pages. I wiped out that greasy pan with the pages of that dime novel.

The second son of the Craybecks had been reading that book and he went into a real snit. A real rage!

No, I never owned up that I had done that book in.

The Craybecks were a wonderful family. The father and the older boy, Garrett, who was just a little older than I, went on the March to Washington. When they came back, the teacher asked Garrett for an oral report on his trip. Garrett gave a wonderful enthusiastic report.

Actually, my father got to know the Craybeck family through the community organization that began when everyone was so needy during the Great Depression. In fact, when we put up our flag on Memorial Day, I told a friend about it and she said, "Is it a red flag?"³

I was shocked that anyone would think that; and she was no longer a good friend, although she had been the only one to come to my tea party.

Another family who became friends was the Sperry family. They had lost their home in the city and had come to live in the garage where some relative lived. The doors of the garage were locked tight and stuffed with something for insulation. I think they had cardboard on the inside walls to keep it warmer, too. There were three children, all younger than I. The whole family lived there for several years. They also were part of the community organization group that met together trying to find ways to keep busy since there was no work to be had. I finally remember the name of that organization. It was the Mount Greenwood Benefit Association.

³ I believe the "red flag" was a reference to the communist party at that time.

Mrs. Sperry made peanut butter cookies. All the ingredients came on the food truck delivering goods and staples and produce once a month to people on relief. I helped her make those little cookies and ate my share. She gave me the recipe and I still have the copy as I wrote it on the flyleaf of my mother's cookbook.

This was the time my father taught an art class for kids. Someone donated paper and pens and ink and watercolors and so forth. The classes were free. A room was donated by a service garage in town. It was upstairs from the shop where cars were repaired so it was warm for the kids all winter. There were a few big tables and enough chairs and a few kids came regularly. I went and learned to copy pictures by the grid method.

I did a watercolor of a pig copied from a tiny pig drawing in a coloring book. I kept the picture and eventually framed it and gave to my granddaughter Robin. A friend of mine, Henrietta Fisher, copied a group of silhouettes from a poetry book. I really liked her pictures because they were very lovely and neat.

Mrs. Andrews found a dance teacher for a class of little girls. The young woman had no job so Mrs. Andrews offered her a meal and what little money she could get. Classes were 25 cents but Mrs. Andrews said she would pay for me. I rather think I was just free since my parents sent garden produce as often as they could. In fact, it was to Mrs. Andrews that I took our red wagon full of corn.

I loved those dancing classes. The teacher brought silk scarves for us to dance with. They sailed behind us as we ran around holding them over our heads. They made floating balloons when two of us held the corners of the scarves and flung them up into the air. We walked like elephants and leaped like deer. We danced in circles or in lines or even any way we wanted to. Such fun!

We had to have a place to go for the dancing lessons. Mrs. Andrews had found two places. One was the big yard of someone who had a lovely big house with a garden pergola. Their daughter who was my age was in boarding school, so she never danced with us. When it rained, we had no place to go. The little church our family went to couldn't afford to heat a place for us but there was a little building called Hamburger Hall that was made available to us one day a week. So we finished the summer there.

It was at Hamburger Hall that the young people met. We had meetings there and learned Robert's Rules of Order. My brother and sister went to the meetings and when I turned twelve, I went with them. I don't know where the adults met. I do know it was these town meetings that made some people say it was communism.

People without work needed to keep busy. Many people turned to crafts. Can you imagine people making flowers from tin cans? Well, they did. You have to have a pair of tin snips. These are like a big heavy scissors. Then you take a clean empty can and cut off the top edge. Then you cut it open opposite the seam. Now you can lay back the metal and cut it into stems with leaves and flowers. You arrange these stems in an artful way and you have a bouquet! They got to be intricate and very interesting; and they could be colorful for people who had some old paint around.

Or, you can take the cans and fill them with sand you can get on the sand hill at 119th street. Then you fasten three tall cans together and take some old coat and make a cover for the cans. There! You have a doorstopper; or a footstool or a child seat.

Or you can make a cellophane belt. You could buy some cellophane or you can save candy wrappers. I saved the wrappers. Whenever I had a piece of wrapped candy, I saved the wrapper. You fold it a certain way and you can link the pieces together and make a zigzag string. It took me a long time since I didn't get much candy. I think I finally finished it after my father was working again. It did hold together for wearing. I put a buckle on mine that I got from my mother's button box. I did wear it a few times. No, I don't have it anymore. I folded a few pieces the other day and inserted them together. However, I won't tell you how. Kids make bracelets now. They don't need to make cellophane belts.

Women made powder-puff quilts or pillows. You have to have sewing scraps for this. You cut circles of your cloth and turn over the edges and stitch up the edge loosely then gather your stitches making sure the right side is out, knot the thread and you have one powder-puff. You make more and then you attach them together with a little stitching and you do enough to make whatever.

I saw a completed powder puff quilt at a resale shop last year. It was an old one made with the old calicoes. It was the same calico stuff like my

mother had sewn into dresses for us girls. Just this year someone made me a clothespin doll dressed in “antique cloth”. It was the same calico. If that's antique, I must be, too.

My mother made me bloomer dresses. In the twenties little girls wore underwear that came down to the top of the knee and was gathered with elastic. The bloomers could be made of the same cloth as the dress. The dress was about knee length, too. My new dress was a blue print with matching bloomers. My mother had made a pink housedress for herself and had had enough goods left to make bloomers for herself. So she did.

We were out in the garden one day when my uncle was visiting. I had been so pleased that my mother had made herself a dress like mine. My uncle said how cute I was, and I just reached over and raised my mother's dress to show off her matching bloomers. My uncle guffawed. My father laughed, too. My mother turned red. I realized I had done the wrong thing and went off to play. This probably was in 1928.

Ten years later, my mother was very ill. Our village had a doctor by then. He came regularly to see my mother and do what he could for her. When my mother became so very sick, she went to the county hospital where she was able to get regular care.

So we kids carried on at home. We kids did some of the strangest things. We cleaned house our own way. In good weather, someone inside the house handed all the loose stuff out the window for someone out there to clean and polish or shake and dust or air and sun. Then inside the house was a flurry of washing and polishing and when the inside was done all the small stuff, now clean, was handed back through the window and put into place.

My brother Joe was a very clever guy. He decided one day to make lighting fixtures for our house. (I can't remember what we had before; and I'll have to call Nada and ask her.)⁴ Anyhow, he got some special glass panes, smoked glass, I think he called it. He cut them into rounds with a hole in the middle. He fixed three sockets for each room and fastened them for a three way light. He sent me to the Edison store to get bulbs. Bulbs were free at the time. So I asked for a dozen bulbs. I explained that my

⁴ Faith, my mother, may have called her sister, Nada or Ellenada to ask. She writes that she will do this several times in her book. She does not always report in her book what she learned from Nada.

brother had made new fixtures and so I carried home all the light bulbs we needed. I think at that time if you took in the burned out bulbs or the ends of the broken ones they would be replaced. It did cost the streetcar fare because the store was not in our village.

One day my brother decided to paint the kitchen. My mother had planned to have a cream and green kitchen and it was really pretty. It had been painted years before and the old coal stove had left the smoke grime all over. There was no money for paint at that time so my brother gathered all the paint cans from all the house painting he had been doing. There was a little left in each can. He mixed all the light colors together, and then all the dark colors so he had enough to paint the kitchen. Well, we had a kitchen with peach walls and lavender wood trim. And our kitchen was clean.

I would visit my mother in the hospital and tell her things we were doing. The hospital was a long way from home. It took about an hour and a half for us to get there and the same time to come home. It was a trip with two transfers. Fortunately, on the way home, the last two rides were to the end of the line and we could tell the conductor we were going to the end of the line in case we fell asleep. I always took some homework to read which was good, except that I was dreadfully susceptible to motion sickness. I spent many a ride in the front next to the motorman to get the advantage of the fresher air away from the odor of the exhaust gas that made me so sick.

There was a drug store across from the hospital where I always stopped to get a half pint of orange ice for my mother. It would be hand packed into a small cardboard container and would be given to me in a small paper bag with a little wooden spoon. It cost fifteen cents. My mother loved orange ice and would happily eat it all.

We replaced the coal stove while my mother was in the hospital. Since three of the family were now working, we got a tiny square apartment-size stove all in white. It had a broiler which I began to use. Joe went to some distant shop and got little broiling chickens and I fixed them in the new stove. I took some pieces to my mother and she sat there in bed eating the little bones clean.

Then we got a refrigerator. We didn't have enough money to buy it so it had a money lock on it. The company we got it from put on this lock. We had to put a quarter in the box every day in order to open it. My brother

found some slugs to use if we didn't have a quarter. Of course, when the man came to collect, we had to have the money for him. The man would give us back our slugs and we always had the cash for him. We finally got the refrigerator paid for.

My mother never saw our stove and refrigerator. She died in the hospital May 1, 1937. My father died September 15, 1937. He had not been well, either, for a long time. So now, we were orphans. Joe was 22, May 8 that year, and Pete was 9 years old.

[How Could Alicia Sit and Watch Television]⁵

I read again about Lattie McGee and how Alicia sat and watched television.

I didn't sit and watch TV, but I feel guilty. Maybe I am.

My first son was only two when my husband Rick began to beat him.⁶ I told Rick that a two-year-old doesn't know what he did wrong and don't beat him.

I had told Rick about a bit of mischief Sonny had been into.

Anyhow, Rick broke a yardstick on the little back.

Rick said, "I'll make him good or know the reason why!"

Twice more Rick broke yardsticks the same way.

My yardsticks were gone.

Then Rick pulled the sticks out of the window blinds to use.

I yelled at him to stop or I would take the children and leave.

He said if I left, I would ruin his career. (He was a pastor.)

⁵ I named this chapter. Here Faith Naber writes about her regrets. Her husband was abusive, lecherous, and a child molester. Sometimes she wished that she had never married him; she regrets staying married to him. However, she had five beautiful children and she loved every one of them and still had her regrets.

⁶ Faith Naber died April 6, 2007. I gave her a computer in 1994 and showed her how to use WordStar 2000, which I was using at that time. I upgraded her computer every so often. After her death, I got her computer from the home of my sister, Faith Ann, where my mother lived the last years of her life. I found my mother's memoirs on her computer. They were still in DOS. When I transferred them to Microsoft Word, I had to guess by the title and subject matter where they should go in this book. I believe that writing about Frank, my father, was so painful that she changed his name to Rick.

That was a guilt trip I couldn't handle.
Besides, my parents were dead. Where would I go?
I thought if I loved enough and worked hard enough I could change things.

I learned that in some families the father doles the punishments.
I realized then, the beatings were a response to my reports on what I thought were "cute" things of the day.
I stopped reporting what we had done.
I tried to keep Rick away from the kids when he came in the door.
He missed a lot of the fun of child rearing.

The second child was a girl.
She did not receive her daddy's wrath.
Indeed, I thought he was cured of the beatings.

My third child was another boy.
One day he saw his brother whipped and decided to cry BEFORE.
As Rick reached for him, he set up a howl and I came running.
I saw the older boy rubbing his backside, but not crying.
The younger one was yowling.
Why? They had argued over a toy.
Child 3 learned to howl anytime his father looked at him.

A fourth child, a girl again.

The fifth a boy, but never beaten.
The older four loved that child so much they helped protect him.
In fact, he is the only one his father gave positive attention to.
This is because Rick insisted that I go to work.
He took me from school to school until I got a job.
Which I didn't want.

However, after hours of wrangling about it, I gave in, if he would do the morning work, and take care of number 5, the half day he wasn't in school.

The first one told me years later, the beatings continued until he was 13 and big enough to challenge his father.

I hadn't known that.

He is still wishing for a pat on the head from Daddy.⁷

The second one was the only one who sided with Dad when I sued for divorce.

But she says now that she understands.

The third one, now 44 years old, has been in therapy, working on self-assertion.

He has been able to tell his dad candidly about the childhood abuse.

The fourth one told me years later that beginning when she was 8, her father would come into bed with her when no one else was home and feel her up.

When she was 14, I saw such things going on and had some violent discussions with Rick about leaving her alone. Well, he did.

He found a girl, who was ripe for attention. (She was a year younger than my daughter.) He had an affair with her.

When I realized this, I confronted him again.

But, you know, he had been belittling me for years.

He had discredited things I did. He had depreciated me.

He derogated me in front of people.

He put me down for whatever he thought could build him up.

Moreover, I knew this and adjusted to it always. I had allowed it.

I lived with it because I really did not believe in divorce.

When I confronted him, I told him I would leave for sure if he did not

⁷ Maybe so, maybe not. I do recall when the family moved from New Madison to Union City, that I had a bedroom downstairs and the rest of the family had bedrooms upstairs. I felt isolated and abandoned and decided that I had been born out of wedlock and I was not the child of my mother's marriage. When Rockefeller's son died in Borneo, I asked my parents to let Rockefeller adopt me.

change his ways.

He put me down again. “You surely can't think that sweet little girl could do anything wrong?” he said.

Then he yelled at me about my shortcomings; mostly his imagined ones, getting louder and louder and talking faster and faster, until I turned and left the room.

He quit his job and we moved away.

However, he couldn't change and I left him.

People came to me to say, “How could you leave that wonderful man? That great preacher!”

The guilt of “allowing” my children to be abused is too much for me.

I know I tried to keep his anger from them, but I still cry at night. I cry for my children.

How could Alicia just sit and watch television.

It is September 5, 1994.

I have something I must write. For one thing, I must say I am sorry I lost my cool at the college anniversary. I did not know I would say anything at all, but I did.

Let's go back 51 years ago today. That's when I got married. I had wanted to wait a year until I graduated from college. He begged and I gave in. However, I really wasn't prepared to have his mother veto my plans for our wedding rehearsal. Well, she did and we did it her way. We had a good marriage for three and a half weeks. That's when he compared me negatively with another woman. It took me a long time to realize he had been in love with her but she married someone else. He used her as the ideal I should live up to for 32 years at which time I left him. Fortunately, I was able to keep my own ideals that I had learned from my own parents. My struggle for a college education was a memorial to them.

I had been raised a critical liberalist. I was so liberal that when I saw the picture of my husband-to-be at four wearing a Ku Klux outfit with his

grandfather,⁸ I accepted that as an expression of a time.

He had been raised a fundamentalist. He and his mother thought I wasn't good enough for him and tried to make me over.

For instance, she supplied him with a list of at least 40 tenets of fundamentalism like Jonah in the whale was fact not allegory.

He was to teach these to me one at a time. Meanwhile I decided that I could love enough and work hard enough to make the marriage work. Whenever I ran into a new snag in our relationship, I pondered to myself how I could accept this thing, too. I didn't believe in divorce.

He had to have his way in everything. He was a very selfish person. He wanted to control me, and later the children. He was also very cruel. He was angry at our puppy one time and slammed it down and killed it.

Evening devotions must be his way. I wanted to try turn about. He said, absolutely not. I said, okay but you do them. He said, no, I must do them and I must do them his way. Well, we just didn't have them together anymore. There, you see I'm stubborn.

Everything that went wrong for him was my fault. One day he swore. He said that was the first time in his life and I had made him do it.

If I responded to love making he would say, "Shut up, women aren't supposed to like this. If you make a sound I'll put a pillow over your face;" and he did. To keep my precious vows, I learned to be quiet.

I got pregnant and he was furious. (That's when he told me he had married me to put him through seminary.) When the child was two, he beat the poor little one with my yard sticks. When I objected he said he would make the child good or know the reason why.

After our second child, a girl, was born he told me he didn't want me 'to wife' anymore. I told him that was cause for divorce. He said if I left him, I would ruin his career. He tried to please me and became a 'once-a-month' husband. (His mother was very upset when we announced a third child on the way. Her son was still having sex, for goodness sakes.)

Second son saw his brother beaten and planned his own reaction. His father would just look at him and the boy would burst into tears. He got out of the beatings but has needed therapy to find self-assurance.

Second daughter was eight when her father turned 40. I objected to his third grade type sexual teasing of her, not knowing there was more going on. She has had years of therapy, too.

⁸ John Nelson Robinson, my great grandfather, was a member of the International Order of Odd Fellows. He carried a sword and wore a white hood during patriotic parades. My father, at the age of four-years-old, wore one too.

Someone had told him I had a funny name. In front of the kids, he called me 'Mom.' In private, he called me 'Stupid Idiot.'

I learned later that he used the children as counselors telling them what a horrible marriage he had, and what a loser I was.

He found a 13-year-old girl who would listen to his gripes and eventually he took her as his mistress. Isn't that statutory rape? He admitted to having as mistress a married woman whom I knew. He also told me a wife and children were millstones around a man's neck.

Eventually I understood. The way he was raised had been abusive. What he did was part of what he was. He never asked forgiveness for anything. Nor did he ever express remorse since he claimed everything was my fault anyway. But when he gave away my father's Bible books I was never able to accept that. This was a sin against MY being. I realized I was a 'nothing' to him.

One day I told him to clean up his act or I would leave him. He said he could get another woman any time he wanted one but that I was too old and too fat to get another man. I had no choice but to stay with him. But, of course, I had a choice.

One counselor I went to told me I had been a battered woman. I had only thought I was doing what had to be done. Now I know that I was battered from the beginning. And my children were abused. I feel so guilty. I am sorry that I tried so hard and so long to make it work. And I cry for my children.

Someone asked, was there anything good? I have five fine children. My husband was good to me through each pregnancy. That's 45 months out of 32 years. I lived in the Orient for five years, a wonderful experience. I enjoyed the church work I did.

A counselor asked me: what was the saddest day in my life. It was my college graduation day. The story of that is another whole paper. It was good to go to the fiftieth anniversary last spring. I have my certificate framed and hanging by my bed. It has my real name on it.