

Seams Unlikely

by

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Dedication

To Ted and Tom

Prologue

The walk from the Green Room where my makeup is applied to the studio floor takes less than a minute. All is in order. Months of preparations for a two-part broadcast celebrating *Sewing With Nancy's* thirty-year history on television will take life as cameras roll.

In terms of years, only Letterman has had a longer run.

Unlike the more than eight hundred other episodes of *Sewing With Nancy*, this one takes place in front of a studio audience. Chairs have been arranged in the cavernous studio and every one of them is filled.

The significant people of my life are in the audience—my husband and sons, my daughter-in-law, my mother and step-dad, my aunt, my sister, and one of my brothers. People I don't know as personally are here, too—fans and those accompanying them, colleagues, business associates. Special guests—people who have become my on-air and off-air friends—are rehearsed and ready for cameras to roll.

The production crew is poised. The jokes they shared through their headsets while preparing to record have been set aside and everything is business. In the control room sound levels are adjusted, tapes are cued and cameras re-checked. My director searches me out in the Green Room and gives me an uncharacteristic hug. No words exchanged, just a glance that says, "You can do it Nancy." I fight back tears, she the same. Then she turns and heads back to the control room.

My walk down the hall is a short one, but a lot can go through your mind in a short walk. Life is full of the unexpected and I am the most unlikely of television personalities. But as this milestone is celebrated, the journey that led to this point is remembered and beginnings are acknowledged.

The audience is ready. I am ready. The countdown from the control room begins and tape rolls.

"...six...five...four..." (the audio goes silent and the floor director beats a silent three...two...one...and points at me).

"Welcome to a special broadcast of *Sewing With Nancy*."

Chapter 1



Father's Day June 21, 1953

My mother, Barbara Larson Luedtke was ten months married, eight months pregnant, six months past her twenty-first birthday and looking forward to a whole day away from the farm with my father—Ralph Luedtke.

The morning had started cool but was warming nicely. With house windows open, the coos of mourning doves mingled pleasantly with the lowing of cows and the wheezing of milking machines over at the barn. Skies were a clear, watery blue over fields, woods and farm buildings and it was hard to imagine better weather. The other Luedtke men—my grandfather Leonard, and Uncle Roy—would handle evening milking without Dad. The reprieve was welcome. Life would change soon enough, and a baby, plus the demands of twice-daily milking and chores would mean a long time until my parents could claim another day as theirs alone.

Not that my mother would have complained. Their life was a practical one and they approached its demands and changes with equal acceptance. As a bride Mother moved from her parent's farm to her husband's already well-trained in the skills required of a farm wife. She and Dad set up housekeeping in the small, one-story house built for them with lumber milled from logs cut out of the woods. Their life together had been prepared for Mother and she was prepared for it.

The navy blue maternity dress with blue and white plaid trim she wore that morning had been an indulgence at fourteen dollars. She

could have sewn something and saved the money, but the dress was pretty. Mom would never make claim to being pretty—it just wasn't right to call attention to yourself that way—but wearing that dress made her feel “special.” She hardly even needed maternity clothes. An attractive tall, slim, brunette woman, to others it seemed that her pregnancy had months to go, but her due date was July 26, just a month and five days away.

When Dad came in from milking, he showered and changed clothes, they ate breakfast and Mom tidied the kitchen. When they left their driveway Dad turned right, passing the large white farmhouse where his parents and sister lived, and the barn beyond.

They headed for church first, but not to St. Peter's Lutheran down the road. St. Peter's was the church Dad attended growing up and as a bride Mom had joined there, too. That day, though, they went back to Mother's home church, Grace Lutheran in Winchester, several miles east. A new Sunday school wing was being dedicated and my grandmother, Georgina Larson, had been on the building committee. In that region of northeast Wisconsin almost everyone was, in some way, tethered to farming. Dedication of the church's new wing was not only closure for a project that would help pass the faith of their fathers to their children, it was also a chance to celebrate the ties of community.

Mom and Dad shared a pew with her family during the service. Afterwards they greeted friends and family before heading to Mom's parent's farm. Temperatures were approaching eighty degrees by then and while the men shed jackets and rolled up shirt sleeves to expose tanned wrists, the women dished up a chicken dinner. When the dessert—strawberry shortcake—had been reduced to crumbs, Mother quickly copied my grandmother's recipe for the shortcake's baking powder biscuit cake batter and helped with dishes before she and Dad left.

They stopped to visit with more family and friends at a twenty-fifth wedding anniversary celebration before heading for a movie in Appleton, thirty minutes east. A double feature was playing at the Rio Theater, a fading relic of the opulent era of film with heavy velvet curtains, dusty upholstery and threadbare carpeting. *Fort Ti*, a 3-D movie starring George Montgomery, Joan Vohs and Phyllis Fowler, was followed by *A Queen is*

Crowned, a documentary on the coronation of England's young Queen Elizabeth II.

Dad paid for the tickets and they were handed standard 3-D movie goggles—white cardboard frames with one red and one blue lens. They found seats with a nice view of the screen and settled in.

Directed by gimmick-loving William Castle, *Fort Ti* was a story loosely based on the British and French conflict over Fort Ticonderoga during colonial America's French and Indian War. With a story line that was historically questionable, it was one of Hollywood's finest examples of screen-popping 3-D cinematography.

"There were things flying at us," Mother remembers. The couple flinched as arrows and spears shot toward them, and ducked at the threat of hurled tomahawks and swooping bats. Mother claims she was never scared, just startled by the unexpected. Then she felt a pop, and warm liquid began soaking through her dress into the cushion beneath her.

"Ralph," she whispered, "My water is breaking." He looked at her, startled. In the flickering light from the movie screen one wide eye beneath his goggles was red, the other blue.

"I'll go get the car," he whispered back. Neither panicked nor spoke aloud. He offered his arm and helped her to her feet. They slipped quickly out of their row and into the lobby. Having a big wet spot on the back of her dress was somewhat humiliating, and to this day my mother wonders what kind of mess she left behind in her vacated theater seat, but she wasn't physically uncomfortable. There was some mild cramping, but she felt no worse than during any monthly period. While Dad left to get the car, Mom hid the back of her dress and the trickle that continued to run down her legs by seeking privacy in a dark corner near a big Coca Cola machine.

In the reserve of her time and upbringing, there were some things people just didn't discuss openly. So when a woman Mother knew saw her standing in the shadows and paused to chat, Mom did not mention that she was in labor and on her way to the hospital. As the woman returned to the movie, Dad pulled up outside and Mom ran to the car.

Their destination, Theda Clark Hospital in nearby Neenah, was about fifteen minutes away. They checked in quickly. A few minutes

later when a nurse conducted an internal exam, Mom, who still hadn't experienced heavy labor, was already nine centimeters dilated. Everything went into rapid motion. Dad was scooted into the fathers' waiting room as Mom was wheeled into delivery. A mask was placed over her face and she drifted away on a whiff of ether.

"What day is it?" She was groggy and nauseous from the ether, waking up in a hospital room with Dad standing by her bedside.

He grinned. "Father's Day."

"What do we have?" she asked and he said, "A little girl, five pounds, eight ounces, twenty-one inches long."

"Are you mad?" she asked, suddenly concerned that he might have wanted their firstborn to be a boy.

"No, of course not," he assured her and she relaxed.

Later on his way home Dad stopped to tell my mother's parents the news.

"We don't even have diapers," my Larson grandmother lamented. "We haven't had a baby shower!" She was awake most of that night, planning a shopping trip to buy baby supplies.

Dad's last stop was his parent's home next door to his own where my Luedtke grandmother thought he was playing some sort of prank and had to be convinced that her daughter-in-law wasn't nearby, overhearing and enjoying the joke.

My weight dropped to four pounds, twelve ounces and I was placed in an incubator. Mother and I remained in the hospital a week. When my weight once again topped five pounds, they took me home.

The day after my birth they named me Nancy Lea Luedtke—Nancy because they liked it, and Lea because it was part of my maternal great-grandmother's name, Alice Lea.

When I was born, the farm to which my parents brought me had already been in the Luedtke family for ninety-seven years. Dated 1856, eight years after Wisconsin became the thirtieth state to join the union, the deed issued to Karl Luedtke was signed by President James Buchanan. While the 1856 document refers to the acreage in northeast Wisconsin's

Winnebago County as marshland, by 1953 the farm was three hundred acres of open land plus one hundred acres of woods.

The early Luedtkes (pronounced Lid Key), were farmers, but also hunters and trappers. A German immigrant, Karl Luedtke (on early documents Karl is sometimes spelled with a C, and Luedtke is sometimes spelled without a T) was part of an 1840s influx of primarily German and Norwegian settlers who were attracted to the area by the prospect of good farmland. While most settlers cleared trees and drained marshes for pastures and fields, others started businesses and provided services to support their efforts. Churches—Lutheran mostly—sprang up every few miles, leaving the land's occupants few excuses for not exercising their faith.

As the years passed, the descendants of early settlers inherited family farms along with a strong work ethic. They tended toward stoicism, minded their own business, were reluctant to draw undue attention to themselves, quietly raised their families, and respected one another.

Almost everything in their lives centered on agriculture; and after agriculture, family; and along with family, faith; and alongside faith, community.

The one hundred acres of woods are still there—the largest group of trees remaining in Winnebago County. In 1952 before my parents married, trees from those woods were cut and milled into lumber for a small ranch-style house that my father had built for his bride at a cost of ten thousand dollars. The white-sided house was small but it had three bedrooms, one bathroom, a utility room and a nice kitchen for that era, plus a combination living and dining room.

Hazel and Leonard Luedtke, my paternal grandparents, and my Aunt Mary, lived next door in a big two-story farmhouse. Within sight to the west, but still on Luedtke property, was another ranch-style home where my Uncle Roy and Aunt LaMae lived. Together my father, grandfather and uncle worked the Luedtke Dairy Farm, an operation that milked about thirty cows, morning and night, a bigger than average herd at that time.

My mother, Barbara Larson, grew up on a farm in a nearby unincorporated area called Larsen. (Remember, names reflect that area's Scandinavian influence. Larsons, Larsens, Olsons, Johnsons, Andersons,

Petersons, and other “sons” and “sens” populate the region.) Larsen is near Winchester, a small town in Winnebago County about six miles from the Luedtke farm. In Larsen, most of the people were of Norwegian heritage. My mother says that when her Norwegian father, Loyall Larson, courted her mother, Georgina Schaefer, who was of German heritage, people in that community were concerned about the implications.

My mother’s father, Loyall Larson, started out as a farmer until tuberculosis interrupted his life and he spent time in a TB sanitarium. While he was away, my grandmother, Georgina, who had my mother to care for, managed the farm with the help of a hired man. When my grandfather returned, his lungs were damaged and he gave up farming, becoming an insurance salesman to support his family. But they continued to live on the Larson farm and it remains in our family today.

My parents met in high school. Although my reserved mother would be unlikely to mention it, she was the valedictorian of her high school class of thirty-two students. She had a talent for drawing but did not go on to college. Instead she worked at a local bank after graduation. In the late 1940s and early 50s, her aspirations were parallel with those of many young women her age: She wanted to marry her high school sweetheart and make a family and life together.

My parents married on September 6, 1952. My mother was twenty years old and my father was twenty-three.

By the time my parents brought me home from the hospital and settled me into a small bedroom near theirs, my Grandma Larson had made good on her plans to purchase baby clothes and supplies. Since I was only five pounds, she had trouble finding clothes that would fit. In that era of cottons and natural fibers, hoping that the garments would shrink, she washed the tiniest clothes she could find in hot water, dried, and then ironed them.

I was the first grandchild on both the Larson and Luedtke sides of my family. My mother was an only child. My father’s brother, Roy, was married, but he and my Aunt LaMae had not yet had children. So, for a while, I was the center of attention.

September 11, 1954

The dark hair I had at birth gradually disappeared, replaced by blonde that curled a little at the ends. My eyes remained blue and I had inherited my father's fair skin. Twenty-one inches in length and just five pounds at birth, I continued the trend toward being tall and slim as I grew. At nearly fourteen months I was a cheerful, happy, thriving toddler who captured hearts with my smiles.

**Barbara Luedtke
Eckstein**

(Mother)

“She was a baby
about as beautiful as
anything.”

The official start of autumn was nearly two weeks away but temperatures had begun dipping toward winter. Some mornings it was difficult to know how to dress. It could be down to almost freezing at night, then in the seventies by midday.

On Friday, as she worked around the house Mother watched me more carefully than usual. She had noticed that while sitting in my high chair I pulled at my right ear. That was the only indication that something could be amiss. Otherwise I seemed fine and was not cranky or extra warm to the touch.

Mom's cousin's wedding was the next day, and she wanted me to be well for the occasion. In the evening she tucked me into my crib and checked later to make sure I slept peacefully.

Next morning when Dad left the house for milking it was about forty degrees. It was still a crisp fall morning later when Mom padded a few steps down the hall to get me from the small bedroom next to theirs. She remembers that I was awake, lying quietly in my crib, and not crying, but as Mother reached for me she realized something was terribly wrong. She considered my smile the first sunlight in her day, but that day I looked up at her without smiling. The right side of my face seemed pushed downward as if a heavy hand had pressed there and the flesh beneath had failed to recognize it had lifted.

Decades later, when my mother tells of that moment, she presses hard against the right side of her face, pulling downward as if the affliction were her own. She touches a tissue to an eye and remembers. Dad was in

the barn, my father's mother in the house next door. But holding me close, my mother dialed the phone to her own mother eight miles away and said, "Please come, something is wrong with Nancy."

Let me pause here for a moment and say a few words about Bell's palsy because that's what caused the paralysis on the right side of my face. It has shaped my life in many ways—directed the traffic, to offer a metaphor.

To anyone who sees me in person or on television, it is obvious that something is wrong. My face is not symmetrical.

There's also a way to check what people are asking for when they "Google" my name on the internet. Beyond all others "Nancy Zieman stroke," "Nancy Zieman face," or "Nancy Zieman mouth," are the top phrases that trigger their search. People are curious.

When I was fourteen months old I developed Bell's palsy which affects the seventh cranial nerve. When my mother noticed me pulling at my ear, it was likely an indication of a middle ear infection. Even a mild infection can cause swelling that presses against the seventh cranial nerve at a point where the nerve travels through the skull bones. That pressure restricts the nerve's function causing muscle weakness or paralysis. That's what happened to me.

Between thirty thousand and forty thousand people in the United States are affected by Bell's palsy every year. Only about six percent do not recover fully. I am among the six percent.

My parents sought medical treatment for me but were told my symptoms would diminish with time. The only recommended treatment was daily massages of the face to stimulate the nerve. For those who develop Bell's palsy symptoms today, corticosteroids offer some help in reducing inflammation. That treatment was not available in 1954.

Unlike many people with Bell's palsy, I do not suffer from facial numbness so I consider myself fortunate. As a child, my right eye wouldn't close, so my mother taped it shut at night. I am still unable to blink my right eye. I use eye drops to help prevent dry eye. Outside, especially when it's windy, I wear wrap-around sunglasses to protect that eye. For the same reason—protecting my right eye—I often wear them when it is raining as well.

My smile is crooked, and I speak carefully in order to speak clearly. But beyond the physical effects, one of the major effects of Bell's palsy is its assault on an individual's confidence. For more than any other reason, that is why I have chosen to write my story.

Those who know me well know that I am at heart a reserved person. My life is quite normal; I just happen to have a very public job.

Each of us faces challenges in life. Some are bigger than others. But what happens to us does not define who we are, unless we let it.

Several years ago when I first talked openly about my experience with Bell's palsy on an episode of *Sewing With Nancy*, I was amazed at the response. That episode has been shown numerous times in reruns and it never fails to bring more and more mail and comments from viewers. It even opened the door for my mother and me to talk about how Bell's palsy affected both of us. When I was growing up we didn't talk about it. My parents didn't allow me to indulge in self-pity, nor did they let me slide by because of any limitations. But, my parents always wondered if there was something more they could have done, somehow that they might have prevented what happened. Then over the years as I dealt with the physical and emotional effects of Bell's palsy, my suffering became their suffering as well.

Mail and blog comments prove that something about what happened to me has helped others cope with their own challenges. I find that both humbling and exciting. If this book can help others gain the confidence to achieve in the face of challenge, that will bring me great joy.