The Dancing Monroe

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I guess one way you could best describe me is normal. Normal Norma. Out of two sons and two daughters, my parents had to stick me with a family name. Great-Aunt Norma was a missionary in Africa, and she won some award, something like a Pulitzer peace prize, but not so important. Anyway, while the rest of my family have names like John, Christopher, and Bethany, I got stuck with the tapioca name of Norma. In view of my Great-Aunty achievements, and of mine, I figure she must be turning over in her grave.

I'd imagine that if you were to walk by me on the street, you wouldn't think to look twice at me, unless you have an obsession with the normal. I'm your usual gawky twelve-year old. You know, I'm at the stage in life where everyone's always telling you, "You'll grow out of it," or "It's just a phase." Hopefully, everyone is right!

To sum myself up: my feet are too big, my arms are too skinny, and I look like a southern beanpole during a drought. My eyes are brown, and my hair is too, (sticky-straight, I might add) which is O.K., if you are Italian or beautiful, or both which I'm not.

I have a beautiful family, which only makes it worse! My mom was the homecoming queen for her high school, and a cheerleader in college, while my dad was the captain of the football team, and class salutatorian. I know that sounds corny, like the "All-American" couple, or something, but it really is the truth.

People are always saying my older brother, Johnny, who's 16, is the spitting image of my father who everyone says is handsome! "John has a strong jaw" is what my mother says.

His girlfriend is all giggly, and is always at our house. She wears Blossoming Pink lipstick. I know because she left her purse here once, and I looked through it. Just to make sure it was hers, you know.

Christopher, my younger brother, who's eleven, has blond hair and freckles. He takes after my mother, (lucky him), and everything he does is excellent. Ever yone says he should be in commercials, but somehow, I just can't see Christopher selling toilet paper! He's a bit of a pain, especially when his stupid friends are with him, but I guess if we weren't brother and sister, we'd be pretty good friends.

Christopher, (for some reason no one calls him Chris), is the best artist I've ever seen. I don't mean comic books heroes or cartoons, but real painting kind of stuff, like trees and bowls of fruits. When we went on vacation last year to the ocean, he painted this sunset, and my mom bought it from him like he was a real artist. She has it hanging up in the front hallway. I sure wish I could draw half as good as he does!
Now, Bethany is the youngest and everyone knows the youngest practically means favorite. She gets things and does things and says things I know I never got, did or said! At least not when I was her age. I hate to admit it, but Beth is really is adorable. She has curly black hair, just like my dad's and Johnny's, (Don't ask me where I got brown!), and a little pugnose like all four-year-olds seem to have. She is always laughing about something and getting into trouble. Her favorite family member is definitely John. In the morning she always runs into his room and jumps onto his bed to wake him up. I think if I were him, I'd strangle her, but he doesn't, he just laughs and pretends to beat her up. She loves it.

So, you see, I'm into it deep. I have a handsome father, a beautiful mother, a brother who looks like my father, a Leonardo de Vinci, and roly-poly little adorable sister. Where does that leave me?

Well, once our family had this open house, and I overheard this stuffy old woman talking to this stuffy old man. She said, "The Monroes have such adorable children! That John is going to be exactly like his father."

"Yes," answered the stuffy old man, "probably end up with a football scholarship!"

"And I hear the younger boy is a real artist, he wants to be a painter or sculptor. Martha says he's very talented."

"Oh, he is! They have one of his paintings in the front hall, it's an ocean scene, if I remember correctly. Oh! And the baby, isn't she adorable!"

"Yes! a real beauty she'll grow up to be! And don't they have another one? A girl, I think. Haven't heard much about her!"

"Well, I reckon the poor things rather plain, but she does well in school, according to Martha. She was in Martha's social studies class last year..."

I didn't even want to hear the rest! Now do you see what I mean? Normal. That's me. Not only normal, but boring as well!

Ever since I heard this conversation, I guess I've just had it! I'm going to the bus station tomorrow, and ride until I can find someplace great! I've already gotten my things packed and my money all saved up, one hundred dollars! Tomorrow.

I've only been on a bus once, and that was when our old Chevrolet had broken down, and so Mom had to take me to a doctor's appointment by bus... I ended up getting two shots and no lollipop, then we had to stand up all the way home. I was only five, and it didn't make a good impression.

Remembering this, I felt a little nervous, and kind of freaked out by all the hissing brakes and roaring engines.

I goose-stepped through the doors and ran to a seat, one of those hard wooden seat that are supposed to be hard and wooden. I guess that's so all the bums won't be able to get comfortable enough to sleep. I'm sitting there now, and thinking about my situation.

I told Mom I was going to look for bottles and cans. She's a fierce conservationist, and doesn't like litter, but she also likes for me to get the deposit money too! She'll expect me to be gone for awhile, and by the time they know I'm gone, they'll never find me. Since I've been here, I've seen every kind of person imaginable, from bag ladies to executives, to muggers to bums, and all over again. I feel like the Statue of Liberty, you know, "Give me your tired, your poor, etc."
I’ve been watching this little old man, a bum, I guess, and I think he’s been watching me. Everytime I look up, he’s a little closer, always staring. Remember that obsession with the normal I was talking about? He’s probably got it bad. Poor guy, he’s practically dressed in rags. He has one of those puke-green jackets on, with “21st Street Mission” in block letters stenciled on the back. His pants are plaid, and they look about two sizes too big, kind of like when you run out of lunch bags, and have to put your lunch in one of those bigger ones, he’s all swallowed up.

I looked up, just now, and he’s coming, he’s coming this way! Oh Great! Murdered by the station bum!

It’s funny now, but it wasn’t then. You hear all these stories, you know, and you wonder. Well, anyway, he shuffled up to me, then paused for a minute indecisively; he shook his head in that way old men have and sat next to me.

“Missy,” he said. His voice surprised me. It was exotic; rich and foreign, but clear and good, like a grandfather, is supposed to sound. “Missy, what’s a little thing like you doing here? This place is for people who are all washed up and goin’ nowhere or somewhere, dependin’ pon if you have someone waitin’ for you at the end of a bus line, but you, you’ve been sitting here all day, and I can’t tell if you’s one way or the other. Now, tell me, does your mamma know you’s here?”

With this, he’d put his hand on my arm, very gently, almost imploring. For some reason, that simple little touch broke the mainline. All the years of being the ugly-duckling, and putting up with the snide remarks came pouring out. I told my life story to that dirty little bum in the Southside bus station, and he listened quietly, with an occasional comforting pat on the arm. He handed me a spotted white handkerchief, and despite my mother-hen’s warning to never put anything dirty near my face, I wiped my eyes and blew my nose.

“There now, Missy,” he said grinning widely, “There now! my sakes!”

He delivered that last statement, and then just sat there with that silly grin on his face. I’d started to feel a little uncomfortable, when he begin his story.

“Missy, there was a time in my life when I wasn’t like what you see now. I was rich and famous, and respected as well. “Once upon a time, I was the head master of the most famous circus in all of Germany. We had eighteen dancing bears. Eighteen. Missy, have you ever seen even one?”

Not waiting for my answer, which I hadn’t planned on giving (although I really had never seen one), he continued. “We had those eighteen dancing bears, fifty trapeze artists and ropewalkers, five eaters, acrobats, dancers, ponies, elephants, and of course, clowns.

“There was a young dancer we had, Nina, she was beautiful! Oh, was she beautiful! She moved, always, as the wind moves among the flowers.”

“My heart would grow, and I would be weak when she was near. I was handsome then, and I was respected. We fell in love, madly in love, and were never apart, but I don’t think I ever loved her more than when she danced. I had given her beautiful white slippers beaded with pearls and little shinie for her birthday. She would put those on and whirl across the floor, a gazelle. Her feet would glide above the ground; and to me she was a Venus or Helen, everything a woman could be. I loved her so much.” He stopped, and was silent for a very long time. I felt an ache in my heart, and I could see
the beautiful young Nina, flowing across the moonlit circus lawn, while this poor old man, so young and handsome watched with a busting heart.

"She was killed when our train derailed on the way to our summer location" he said abruptly. "She had wanted to sit by the window, but I wouldn't let her. She was frail, and the windows were thin, with cold drafts. I was afraid she'd get sick. When the train derailed she was thrown into the aisle. A crate that had been stashed at the back of the car came unfastened and it ... it crushed her." His voice trailed off and he lowered his head. But when I touched his arm, he looked up, and I saw in his face the agony he must have felt.

"If she had been sitting... if only I would have..." he sighed deeply. "I tell myself I can't be sure. Perhaps God had already decided.

"I tell you all this because I see you sitting here and I think, she looks like my Nina, so I come closer, and I see."

He reached into his 21st Street Mission coat and pulled out a good sized velvet bag. The colors were faded, but I could tell they had once been bright and cheerful, and the velvet was patchy having more bare spots than plush ones.

The old bum rubbed the bag lovingly, thoughtfully.

"After Nina died, the respected man I had been died too. I took to drinking, and the circus soon asked me to leave. So, I left Bavaria, and Germany altogether and came to America. When I came, I cannot find a job - I have no education, no respect, and I end up just around with no money. But, I have my memories. Would... would you like to see my Nina? I have photos, here."

He handed me the bag so precious to him and opened it. My mouth was dry, so I licked my lips and as I pulled open the draw strings. My finger found a small pack of tiny types, held together by a thinning rubber band.

The first was of a young couple, arms entwined. The picture was blurry, and I couldn't make out any of their features, but I knew it was Nina and my friend.

I slid this photo to the back of the stack and gaped at the one proceeding it.

Nina had light hair, I couldn't tell exactly what color, because the photo was black and white, but it was long and straight, and hung wispily about her face. She was beautiful! Her eyes were round with long, curled eyelashes, and her smile, which seemed so perfect, was reflected in them. She had a long, slender neck and face and white, straight teeth.

I flipped the picture over and read the message there, written in small, curved letters spaced closely together.

My Dearest Clarence--
may we never be parted

Ironic huh?

"She always did love to go on about my name, she did." Clarence smiled fondly. "Saw it was the name you'd give to a mule -- and I was stubborn as one, so it fit."

The next photo was color, but it looked like it had been painted on, or done with crayons, but my grandmother told me once that's how color pictures used to be. Anyway, this one showed Nina in a powder blue leotard and tutu, with Clarence's white slippers on. Her hair was brown, or an indistinct blond, but it seemed to shimmer in spite of it. I realized with a start that my hair was that color. I grinned, and went on through the rest of the
photos, some showing Clarence, (and he was handsome!), while others had only Nina in her dancing costumes.

My biggest surprise came from the very last photo. It was of a girl about twelve, in one of those ballet positions. She was skinny with stick straight hair and too big feet. Straight-forwardly—she was normal. Her name could have been Norma, for when I looked at the photo I saw myself.

I flipped the picture over and read the words—Nina Berniece Conklin, 13.

"Now do you see why I saw my Nina in you? Someday I know you, too, will dance your way into some handsome boy's heart." I thanked him and turned to go. I had almost reached the revolving doors when I heard a voice calling.

"Now, Missy, why don't you run on home."

"Missy! Nina!"

I turned and saw the old bum following me. He still carried his tattered bag, and his eyes glinted. Out of the bottom of the bag he drew two shining white slippers with trailing white ribbons. They had been treated with love, and looked almost new. He grabbed my hand, and softly placed them in it.

"Now you dance." He said in that beautiful, clear voice, with tears in his eyes. I hugged him heartfedly, and slowly walked out.

That was last spring, and people have already noticed the difference in me. I'm known as "The Dancing Monroe," among the "Handsome Monroe" the "Beautiful" and the "cute" Monroe, the "Artist" and the "Football" Monroe.

Rebecca Spafford