

**Painted Red:
Growing up in an
age of witch hunts**

Penney

Kome

MOLL WATCHED HIS WIFE reading out loud, her hair spread out over her pillow, in the glow of the bedside light. He closed his eyes and rode on the rhythms of her voice, rising with mirth, sinking with sympathy, as she poured out the news from their friends' letter. She finished the letter, folded it, and said, in their intimate Quaker speech, "Thy turn." 111

So Moll picked up a book he had left on his night table and turned to where they had left off the night before. Adjusting his reading glasses, he leaned into his reading, giving her the same full expression that she had put into the letter. She listened appreciatively, blinking as she dozed and woke again.

When he finished, she picked up a magazine and started to read an article to him. After twenty years of this nightly ritual, the pattern was set. They traded off smoothly. He read last, watching her head nod, and droop, until he heard a soft snore. He reached across and snapped off her light, then he lay beside her in the semidarkness reviewing his plans.

When he was sure she was fully asleep, he sat up and stuck his feet into his slippers. Padding across the dim apartment to his study, he picked up a stack of stuffed envelopes and clicked on the lamp to make sure all five were there. He slid them around in his hands, one for each child, Peter, Ellen, Jane, Steven, and one marked "To my

beloved wife, Sally.” As an afterthought, he picked up the chequebook and added it to the pile.

There was another envelope on his desk, addressed to him. He picked it up for a moment and weighed it in his hand. Without his glasses, he could just make out the university’s name in the top left corner. His finger ducked into the open slit on the top and he almost drew out the sheet, but then he stopped. Rereading it wouldn’t help, wouldn’t make the news any different. He opened a side drawer and dropped the envelope in among a dozen other envelopes.

Then he opened the secret drawer in his massive rolltop desk and took out a bottle of pills. He stopped in the kitchen for a glass, and he almost filled it with water, but then he thought better. Instead, he carried it through to the dining room, and pulled a bottle of whisky from the liquor cabinet. He poured some whisky into the glass and washed down a pill with it, shuddering as the alcohol burned his throat. He sat at the dining table, tapping out pills and swallowing them with the whisky. When the pill bottle was empty, he picked up the envelopes and chequebook and carried them to the bedroom.

Sally stirred slightly as he climbed back into bed, leaving his paper pile on his night table. He leaned over and kissed her. “I do love thee,” he groaned, “but I can’t live with this.” He lay down in the darkness, offered a silent prayer to God, and waited to drift into his final sleep.

That’s how I reconstruct a night that was a turning point in many lives, including mine, although I was only nine years old. Behind the whispers that echoed through the following weeks and years swirled issues that the grown-ups judged too large for children to understand, issues of national security and loyalty hearings, of personal commitment and betrayal. We all woke the next morning to drama and confusion—confusion that reverberates in our lives to this day.

As a child, as a teen, and intermittently as an adult, I was caught up in the legend of Moll and Sally, and how Moll’s work on the Manhattan Project and their friendship with Alger Hiss affected their lives. But there was no agreement about what the legend meant.

“He was a brilliant, principled man,” said Mother, who still displayed a picture of Moll and Sally in her home decades later.

Dad, in his home, had a different view. "Moll was a wimp," he said, using his favourite tough guy's phrase: "a real pussy."

"He was trapped," said family friend Nick Rosenmeier succinctly, when I caught up with him in Copenhagen in 1981. "In a way, we all were." As a Danish exchange student in the 1950s, Nick had been bemused by American loyalty hearings. But all he had to do to escape was to return home.

For the rest of us, escaping was not so easy. Worse, for years, all my questions about what happened to Moll and Sally met with stony, embarrassed silence. The topic was taboo, mentioned rarely, and then in whispers. Over the years, I gently peeled away layer upon layer of excuses, such as: there was a stigma to suicide; Moll and Sally had broken the conditions of his security clearance; the memory was simply too painful. But I always sensed that there was some other unspeakable reason involved. The mystery remained a huge cloud of anxiety that still hung over all our heads.

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Even now that I am well into middle age, the cloud has not dissipated. In fact, it's spread. My disillusionment with the American government, which began with the Flanders case, was exacerbated by the Vietnam war—to the point where I moved to Canada. (In fact, the majority of Americans who moved to Canada at that time were women, but that's another story.) Good luck and determination won me a journalism career, writing books and periodical articles. And yet, and yet . . . on regular visits home and through the news, I see the very elements that destroyed my dear friends, on the rise once again.

I was born in Chicago on November 2, 1948, the night that Harry Truman was elected president of the United States. As Mother lay in the recovery room after the delivery, an orderly handed her a bulldog edition of the next day's *Chicago Tribune*, with the wrongest headline in newspaper history: DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN! The family joke is that I've been trying to set the record straight ever since.

After my birth, family life quickly grew complicated. Friends and casual acquaintances sometimes ask why I don't talk about my family much. Then, when I do try to describe how I grew up, they look bewildered. "Everybody seems to have been married at least twice," one friend remarked. Four parents, six siblings, seven grandparents.

Before our wedding, my husband-to-be asked me to create a chart that showed how my family branches all over the place. Every fork, every branch, started traumatically.

Still, of all the catastrophes that beset my childhood, only one branch abruptly ended with two sudden deaths. I blamed myself for most of the turmoil around me, as children often do. We create our own worlds, and the world I thought I had created was full of adultery, abandonment, angst, anxiety and unfocused rage. Somehow, in the midst of all the upheavals, two of my favourite people disappeared, and I never understood why.

The question haunted me way into adulthood. On visits home, it would pop into my head unbidden: What happened to Moll and Sally? As a writer, as a journalist, I keep trying to make sense of their fate. Mother still doesn't want to talk about it much. On occasion, I'll hazard a guess, and she will either agree or correct me. So I've gone searching elsewhere. But interviews, books, and oral histories have revealed only a Rashomon-like complex of conflicting explanations.

Their real names, I learned recently, were Sarah and Donald. I knew them simply as Sally and Moll. I thought that they were Quakers, because they used "thee" and "thou" with family and close friends. It turns out that Sally was a Quaker, and Moll was raised in the Massachusetts Congregationalist tradition—which traced a direct lineage to the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. But Moll adopted some aspects of Quakerism. As he explained at an Atomic Energy Commission inquiry: "The Friends use among themselves the so-called 'Friendly' speech which has degenerated by this time into using 'Thee' as the nominative case in addressing a Friend. My wife and I, when we became engaged, adopted this as a form of *tutoyer*, and have kept it ever since. In that sense we use it among the family."

"Is thee hungry?" Sally would ask, when I clumped up the stairs to their apartment, across the street from my school. "How is thy mother feeling today?"

"Better, thanks," I'd say some days. On others: "Not so well. She called the doctor and he told her to stay in bed." And as Sally headed

towards her kitchen, I would call out, "I'm not hungry, thanks. I've just eaten," with my fingers crossed behind my back.

If I wasn't quick enough, she would duck into the kitchen and return with a plate bearing crackers covered with grown-up goodies—pickled herring, maybe, or blue cheese. I'd hop from foot to foot, trying not to wrinkle my nose, insisting that I really wasn't hungry. One time I darted into the kitchen with her and grabbed a plain cracker, before she covered it. What a breakthrough! "She likes *crackers!*" the adults cried. "The child likes *crackers.*"

Their apartment was different from ours. We had a typical Chicago railroad flat. Room followed room like railroad cars in a row, all parallel to and opening onto one long hall. Windows overlooked air shafts which got sunlight only at high noon, or faced into canyons formed by apartment buildings next door. In contrast, their apartment seemed to sprawl out in all directions from the central entrance. We mostly visited in the living room. I never saw the bedrooms.

Of their four children, only Steve still lived at home when I knew them. Peter and Ellen lived elsewhere. Jane was married to Morty Ziff, and they lived in the neighbourhood. Jane Flanders and my mother were also close friends. Two or three times a week, Jane would walk down Fifty-seventh Street from her apartment to ours, carrying her cup of coffee. Then, every week or two, she would phone my mother, who would send me running down the street with the mugs she'd left at our house. A journalist, Morty rose through the ranks at the *Chicago Daily News*. I knew him best from community theatre. I remember a great big man with a bushy beard. When our theatre company presented the Passion play, I was an angel in the choir. Morty, his black curly beard and hair spray-painted gold, played God.

Sally and Moll Flanders's apartment was as dishevelled as ours, and decorated in similar spartan Early Intellectual: floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, dim lighting, and a few sticks of furniture. Take my bedroom: I had a complete forty-year-old set of the *Book of Knowledge* in my room, but no top sheet on my bed. The thick brown embossed leather volumes served as toys until I grew old enough to read them. Sometimes I stacked them like building blocks; other

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times, I strewed them around the floor and imagined they were stepping stones across a raging river filled with alligators. When I could, at first I read only the fiction in each volume. Later, I read the natural science articles as well, which muddled my understanding until high school. I thought there were eighty elements in the periodic table and was baffled to learn they'd discovered twenty more.

Sally, like Mother, always had a book in one hand. They read while they talked on the phone, while they walked around their apartments, while they stirred soup or coffee, while they bathed. One time, while she was putting laundry in the washer, Mother accidentally threw her book in as well. Her bare left hand looked almost indecently naked. She stared at it in shock.

Reading and literature were huge topics of conversation for them and for most of the people we knew. Reading was also Mother's escape, of course, from the constant pain in her knees, and her sense of failure at being divorced. After he moved out, Dad finished his master's in American literature, as she had pushed him to do, but Mother never returned to school to finish her own English degree. Nor did she look for a full-time job. She believed that a mother of two children should stay home and look after them—no matter what the cost, or to whom.

Housework was not a top priority for either woman. To be fair, Mother's mobility was limited. However, Sally and Moll always had food in the house. Our food supply was erratic. When Mother had a cheque, and her legs were feeling all right, she hiked from our house on Fifty-seventh Street over to the A&P on Fifty-third Street near the lake. Sometimes she went with a friend. Often, she took me. We sang and talked as we walked block after block past apartment buildings and townhouses, under the boughs of the elms and oaks planted on the boulevards between the sidewalk and the street.

Mother stocked up with as much as she could pull in our little red wagon, which also held my little brother, Dylan. She bought staples, fresh produce, meat for freezing, cigarettes and Scotch, and sometimes a spice cake. Then she (or usually we) hauled it home and made many trips from the sidewalk to the second floor, getting the bags up the stairs to our kitchen.

Dad sometimes picked us up on Sunday afternoons. He usually took us on long walks. Sometimes weeks went by when we didn't see him. I have vague recollections of Nick Rosenmeier acting as go-between, taking us kids back and forth, during the times that my parents couldn't stand to be in the same room together. Dad's new girlfriend (who became my first stepmother) prepared grown-up food like veal shoulder stuffed with sorrel, or boeuf bourguignon. I stuck to the buttered egg noodles.

At home, there were also long stretches when Dad's cheques were late, or Mother couldn't walk. Then we lived on peanut butter sandwiches and chocolate milk, which was all I knew how to prepare. The child who sat behind me at William H. Ray School used to complain and kick my chair furiously because my stomach growled so loudly.

As freethinkers, Moll and especially Sally overlooked some of the factors that made other families shy away from us. Never mind that we weren't scientists of any kind. They didn't care that my parents had a "mixed" marriage—Methodist and Jewish—or that both parents had renounced their religions. They didn't even care that my folks were divorced. Other parents did. One classmate's mother shooed me out of her big two-storey house and told her daughter loudly, "Don't bring that girl home again. Her parents are divorced."

We, in turn, overlooked some drawbacks in the Flanderses' lives: the whispers about their loyalty, the strange car that sat outside their apartment sometimes, Moll's deepening silence and sadness. Even when the other atomic scientists started keeping their distance, Mother's affection for the couple remained strong. In the self-consciously liberal and nonconformist neighbourhood of Hyde Park, surrounding the brilliant but eccentric post-war University of Chicago, the Flanderses were Mother's surrogate parents and Dylan's and my surrogate grandparents.

One afternoon, Sally buzzed me in at the front entrance, and I came upstairs to find her and my mother in her living room. Mother was red-faced and breathless with laughter. "Well, what did you expect?" she sputtered.

Sally would have cocked her hat if she'd had one. "All I said was . . ." she started, and Mother howled with laughter. "All I said was that I think we should all vote for Len Després." She shrugged. "We're supposed to say what's in our hearts, at meetings."

"Did the Spirit move you to talk politics?" teased Mother. "Has anybody else ever talked about politics at a Friends' meeting?" Sally retorted quickly, "It's about time that someone did!" She turned to me and offered a plate. "Cracker?"

I took a cracker and sat down in a corner. Dylan, still a toddler, was sleeping on a pillow in a cardboard box nearby. Mother and Sally returned to their conversation while I pulled a book out of my bookbag and settled in to read. As I sank into the story, sounds around me became muted. I heard ice cubes tinkling in glasses, chattering and chuckling, as the two women relaxed in the warmth of their friendship.

Sudden silence made me look up. Mother and Sally were staring up at the doorway to a section of the apartment where I'd never been. A shadow shambled and shuffled in the doorway, a figure in a bathrobe with his whiskers all awry. Moll stood there silently. He opened his mouth, but no words came.

"Does thee want something?" Sally asked, rising. She stepped around the coffee table and hurried to his side. "Moll, does thee need something?" I couldn't hear his muttered reply. Mother was gathering up her purse, putting glasses and saucers on a tray. I closed my book and stuffed it back in my bookbag. Mother picked up Dylan and jerked her head towards the door.

Sobbing came from the doorway. Moll started to slump inside his bathrobe, shrinking against Sally's shoulder. She glanced over at us and asked, "Could thee knock next door, and ask the neighbour to come over?" Mother nodded. I took the tray to the kitchen and we left.

As we started down the stairs, after alerting the neighbour, I couldn't help asking, "What's wrong with Mr. Flanders?" Mother's mouth grew grim. "He's very sad," she answered. I didn't understand.

"Why is he sad?" I asked.

"About something he did. He helped build a weapon." We reached the bottom landing and the big, heavy glass door to the out-

side. "It was wartime, for Christ's sake!" Mother snapped at no one in particular.

We turned at the corner of Fifty-seventh Street, to walk three blocks east and south under the trees to our own apartment. Two blocks west of the Flanderses' building was Stagg Field, which was still a sports stadium then. The University of Chicago stuck to its pledge never to have a football team, but field hockey, lacrosse, and track-and-field teams used the sports field daily.

In winter, when the weather was much too cold for track and field, the university flooded the area underneath the stands for skating. I skated there a few times. I guess there was some admission fee, or maybe the area was for U of C gym members only, because usually I skated on the Midway, which was much colder, and farther away, but didn't cost anything.

Under the stands was a plaque half hidden by ivy that proclaimed:

ON DECEMBER 2, 1942
MAN ACHIEVED HERE
THE FIRST SELF-SUSTAINING CHAIN REACTION
AND THEREBY INITIATED THE
CONTROLLED RELEASE OF NUCLEAR ENERGY

It was there that Enrico Fermi and his crew conducted the first controlled nuclear reaction in the world. In a time when most people would not have recognized the term "atomic scientist," we lived in a neighbourhood full of them. The Fermi family were important friends to my mother. The Flanderses, of course, were too. Moll's work at Argonne Labs had segued to working on the very first computers, but he and Sally maintained their ties to the scientists he'd worked with at Los Alamos, on the Manhattan Project. Sally often talked about "Oppie"—Robert J. Oppenheimer, who headed up the team that built the first atomic bombs.

Although I don't recall ever having seen him, Albert Einstein roamed the Hyde Park neighbourhood as well as the U of C campus. Our family was inclined to pay more attention to the neighbourhood novelists, such as Philip Roth (whose back porch adjoined ours),

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Saul Bellow, and J. P. Donahue. But we mingled with the scientists too. Years later, when I visited the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* office for research on a book, I already knew where the nearest water fountain was. I must have been there before.

Even as a schoolgirl, I knew in a general way what had happened under the stands. Our teachers warned us about the atomic bomb. We had "Duck and Cover" drills where we had to grab our jackets and dive under our desks with our jackets over our heads to protect us from fallout. We were reminded every Tuesday evening by the blare of the city testing its air raid sirens. When I cycled up Fifty-seventh Street to splash in Botany Pond under the gingko tree, I shuddered as I passed the Stagg Field gate. Something extraordinary happened there, something that changed the world, and something that directly affected many of our family friends.

Mother was always so graceful when she fainted. All her concerns about looking ungainly because of her height vanished as she crumpled gently to the ground or (if I was lucky) the floor. She would wrench one of her fragile knees, cry out softly, and down she'd go. I was a tiny child, thin and frail looking, although precocious. No way in the world could I pick her up. So I just stood beside her and howled.

I entered the world as my parents' first-born—and as the only baby in married students' housing, a factor that attracted adoration even for a wretchedly colicky newborn. Although, as Dad said to Mother in the taxi taking me home, "The hospital should be sued for malpractice, turning over an infant to rank amateurs such as we." He was partly right. They knew more about grammar than about infants.

My status was rather more like a pet than a person. Mother and Dad loved playing with their peer group, who happened to include actors at Compass Theatre and (subsequently) Second City: Mike Nichols and Elaine May, Paul Sills, Shelley Berman. Mother always swore that Mike Nichols dandled me on his knee and sang, to a tune from *HMS Pinafore*, "I'm called little Penney Kome, dear little Penney Kome, though I shall never know why. I scream and I holler, I ain't worth a dollar, but still, little Penney Kome, I . . ."

By the time Dylan came along, everything had changed. Mother always said that she eagerly wanted the baby who emerged as Dylan. As soon became clear, Dad felt differently. When she finally got pregnant the second time, everything went wrong, not just with her marriage, but with the world around her. My parents had advance tickets to see Dylan Thomas read his poetry. "We saw him before, and oh! he was riveting," she said. Thomas was due in Chicago after the holidays, but he died on November 9, 1953, in New York. Mother resolved to name the baby Dylan. Then, midwinter, Dad's father, Sam Kome, died. Mother broached the idea of naming the baby Sam, but the marriage was already in serious trouble, and Dad reacted badly. So Mother named him Stephen. Stephen Dylan. We always called him Dylan at home.

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Dylan didn't talk to an adult until he was six. Nor did he show much interest in walking. He was a big, passive baby. An early photo shows us side by side on the sofa when he was six months and I was six years old. He looks almost as large as me. Yet I carried him everywhere. Mother was afraid to pick him up, in case her legs failed. She didn't really want him to be mobile. She used to leave him in his crib for hours at a time. Once, I left a chair next to his crib and he climbed out. She was furious.

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There's an old joke about a boy who never talked until he was six. Then he spoke up at dinner to complain that the soup was too salty. When asked why he'd never said anything before that, he replied, "Everything was all right until now."

Dylan's story was similar. Day after day, Mother would sit him on her lap and ask, "Dylan, can you say 'clock'?" And he would just suck his thumb. She didn't send him to nursery school or kindergarten until he was five and a half. He was a March baby, so there was no hurry. The summer he was five, she walked into her bedroom and found him cuddled around our marmalade tabby cat. "Tawny," he was asking, "can you say 'clock'?"

If Dylan enjoyed (endured?) a prolonged babyhood, my childhood ended abruptly about the time he was born. Dad and Mother were divorced. Dylan was an infant, and Mother was on crutches awaiting knee surgery. I learned how to prepare the peanut butter sandwiches and chocolate milk, and carry them in to Mother's

bedroom on a tray. She cried a lot. She cried for two or three years.

She stopped crying on special occasions, such as a visit with Sally or Jane Flanders. I thought of the Flanderses as lifesavers. If Mother had a problem, Sally told her what to do. Sally always knew what to do.

In retrospect, I have come to believe that surgery ruined Mother's knees—that if she had had physiotherapy at the very beginning, she could have avoided a lifetime of grief. But surgery was all that medicine had to offer in the 1940s and '50s. And as Mother's knees grew more and more painful, the orthopaedist recommended more surgery. This time, he simply removed both her kneecaps. Afterwards, she was in a wheelchair for a while, and then on crutches again. The surgery alleviated some of the constant aching, but did little to strengthen or stabilize her knees. Only elastic bandages supported them. One twist, one wrench, and she would faint from the pain.

In the midst of all this confusion, or shortly afterwards, Dad finally earned his M.A. in American literature. After Dad died in 1996, I asked Mother what his thesis was about. "Sin and redemption," she laughed ironically, "in Nathaniel Hawthorne's writing." *The Scarlet Letter*? At his memorial service, his second family swore up and down that his thesis was about Dylan Thomas. "Do not go gentle into that good night," they recited. "Rage, rage, against the dying of the light. . . ."

Well, Dad showed plenty of rage when he left Mother, pregnant and on crutches, and moved into Brenda's apartment. But his thesis was about sin.

Like many American families, we got our very first television set in 1954, in order to watch the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, headed by Senator Joe McCarthy. I remember people calling it HUAC, the House Un-American Activities Committee, which was the predecessor committee that investigated the loyalty of people who were accused of sympathizing with Communism.

Looking over the history of Senate committees, I was struck by the continuous efforts to investigate American citizens. Inventing enemies seems to generate a lot of political capital. HUAC was the first committee, the one that pursued unionists and accused-

Communists in Hollywood, resulting in the blacklisting of the Hollywood Ten. HUAC was where playwright Lillian Hellman famously snapped that “I cannot cut my conscience to suit the fashion of the times.” Although HUAC’s style of asking loaded questions that people refused to answer, and then charging them with contempt of Congress, came to be known as McCarthyism, McCarthy actually arrived on the scene later, to head up the Senate Subcommittee on Investigations.

As far as we knew then, the Flanderses’ political problems began when their friend and Sally’s sort-of cousin-in-law, Alger Hiss, voluntarily appeared before HUAC to answer accusations brought by Whittaker Chambers, editor of *Time* magazine. Among other duties in a long and distinguished career, Hiss had served as Secretary-General of the United Nations Charter Conference, which laid the groundwork for the UN we know today. At HUAC, Senator Richard Nixon charged Hiss with being a Communist and a spy for the Soviet Union.

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The hearings were hugely controversial, and Hiss’s subsequent two trials for perjury (which happened in 1949 and 1950) dragged the debate on and on for months. It was a *cause célèbre*. Every thinking person had an opinion on the Hiss case. As Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan said in his 1998 book, *Secrecy: The American Experience*, “Belief in the guilt or innocence of Alger Hiss became a defining issue in American intellectual life.” In the end, the second jury did convict Hiss on two counts of perjury, and sentenced him to five years in prison, of which he served forty-four months.

My folks were independent small-l liberals, intellectuals and existentialists, not Communists, but they cheered for witnesses like folksinger Pete Seeger, playwright Arthur Miller, jazz vocalist Lena Horne, and journalist Ring Lardner Jr. They spat at names like Senators Joe McCarthy and Richard Nixon. I was already in Canada when Nixon became president. My folks stopped urging me to return to the States—at least, while Nixon was in the White House.

Until recently, I’d always thought that Donald Flanders (1900–1958) testified before HUAC. I remember Mother coming home from a doctor’s appointment upset because she was delayed so long she missed Moll’s appearance. But when I went searching (as an

adult), I couldn't find any records under HUAC. Since the topic was still taboo in her house—although I eventually won her over to the idea of me writing about it—I had to search for information in other ways.

Finding the information was both harder and easier than I expected. The hard part was figuring out that Moll's real name was Donald, not Malcolm. My earliest searches for "Moll Flanders" were confounded by references to Daniel Dafoe's 1722 moralistic novel about a lower-class girl who wants to better herself. "Malcolm Flanders" netted nothing relevant. Searching on "Moll and Sally," I finally found a cross-reference to Donald and Sara Flanders. A search on those names brought me to a Web site signed by someone named Jon Flanders, titled "The Ernest Flanders Family History Project." Although (as he told me in an e-mail) Jon Flanders regards the story as tangential to the family history that interests him most, he has posted both Moll's and Sally's testimony before the Atomic Energy Commission—yet another set of investigative hearings.

In 1946, Congress created a civilian Atomic Energy Commission that was intended to replace laboratories run by private industry—under military control—with a national network of university laboratories under civilian control. Argonne Labs, where Moll worked, was one of the first labs authorized under the new National Laboratory system. (After the war, he dropped the task of calculating fission, and moved on with building the first computers.) The military fought back, by impugning the loyalty of the AEC board members and university scientists. AEC management instigated a particularly heavy-handed investigation of about 400,000 personnel. They cast a very wide net, running routine checks on everybody who might be privy to atomic secrets. But in Moll and Sally's case, the investigation was personal, as shown by this AEC letter dated September 15, 1952.

Dear Mr. Flanders:

In accordance with Section 10 of the Atomic Energy Act, an investigation was conducted concerning your character, associations, and loyalty. Additional information reported subsequent to this investigation, when considered along with information

obtained during the course of it, has created a question concerning your eligibility for continued security clearance and employment in Atomic Commission work.

Donald Flanders

It was reported that you and your wife have been close personal friends of Alger and Priscilla Hiss for many years, and that Hiss and his wife have visited in your house many times. It was also reported that your wife solicited funds for Alger Hiss. Alger Hiss was convicted in 1950 on charges of perjury, and was reported to have been involved in Communist and espionage activities in behalf of Soviet Russia.

It was reported that you received announcements of meetings of the Socialist Youth League weekly "Labor Action." Both organizations are cited by the Attorney General.

It was reported that you and your daughter, Ellen, have associated with Fred Meyer, reported to have been President of the Socialist Youth League.

On your Personnel Security Questionnaire, you listed membership in the Progressive Citizens of America, which is reportedly supported by the Communist Party.

It was reported that in 1948, your daughter, Ellen, was a member of the Young Progressives of America, the Youth division of the Progressive Party, and that the Progressive Party was Communist controlled.

It was reported that your daughter Ellen, attended night classes conducted by Peggy Kraft. It was also reported that Peggy Kraft was a member of the Executive Committee of the Communist Party, and had other Communist associations.

It was reported that in 1947 your wife wrote a letter to a government official in which she referred to the government's loyalty program as a Communist witch hunt.

You are requested to make a written response to the above.

That last attack illustrates the tenor of the times, insinuating that Sally transgressed by complaining to her congressional representatives about government activities. I can hear echoes of the same

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complaint in modern responses to complaints about the Patriot Act and other surveillance legislation: "If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear." Apart from Sally's temerity in questioning government authority, every charge on that list amounts to guilt by association.

Moll handled the "witch hunt" question well, I thought, in his testimony. He dryly observed that,

The phrase she used was rather a current one at that time, as illustrated by the fact that in 1947 Mr. Sumner Pike wrote an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled "Witch Hunting Then and Now." That referred specifically to this sort of thing. It seems to me that no inferences should be drawn from the use of this particular phrase. What the origin of it was, neither of us has any clear idea. I am sure that an examination of current newspapers, and so on, will establish the fact that it was a current phrase, not the property of any one organization.

Moll also testified that he was much less politically active than Sally. Although he was a person of conscience, Moll's passions were pure math and music. Mother said he was the kind of person who could do calculations in his head while carrying on regular conversations—in the same way that most of us may hear a tune running through our minds while we talk.

Richard Courant, head of the New York University Mathematics Institute, testified at the AEC that he had recommended Moll to the Manhattan Project. He did so, he said, because Moll was too conscientious to function well as a professor. "Flanders is a prototype of a Puritan," he said.

"He is upstanding, Puritanical." By that, Courant meant that if Moll made a commitment, he exerted every effort to fulfill it. When Moll committed to grading student papers, he applied himself fully to the task. "It took him seventeen minutes for each miserable little paper," Courant said. "He thought it was his duty." And he was falling further and further behind in his grading. He began to feel he should stick to research and give up teaching. So in an effort to help this gentle soul find a job with limited, defined, manageable moral

and ethical obligations, his friend Richard Courant recommended Moll to the Manhattan Project.

Dad moved in with Brenda Handforth, who was barely twenty-two at the time, as soon as he left our home. They lived together until Dad and Mother's divorce was final. One day—one of Mother's good days—an envelope arrived in the mail with a stiff ivory-coloured card formally announcing the marriage of Hal Kome and Brenda Handforth. Mother put the card on the mantel, where it stayed for several months. She then flung herself across her bed and burst into tears.

When I was twelve, Mother married George Victor Mather, a direct descendant of the Massachusetts Bay Colony "Mather Dynasty" that included Richard and Cotton Mather. They were clergy, not judiciary, but they oversaw the witch trials at Salem, where some women were hanged. "Hanged, not burned at the stake," as George emphasized whenever the subject arose.

I was thirteen before the two couples who were my parents (and stepparents) started having more children. Dad and Brenda had four: Jessie, Sonia, Hunter and Sam Kome. Mother and George produced one daughter, Christine Mather, when I was fifteen. I left home at eighteen and moved to Canada at nineteen, but I tried to maintain ties with all my parents and siblings.

Every time I travelled home as a young adult, I visited both sets of parents. At Dad's house, the routine was always the same. My stepmother, Brenda, would sit up drinking and talking with me late into the night. Eventually, she would work herself into tears.

"The first time Hal brought you to our apartment, you were friendly," she would say. "You let me hug you. The following week, when Hal brought you over, I reached out to touch you, and you flinched away from me. You flinched from me! You'd told your mother about me, and after that you didn't want me to hug you at all."

Little did she realize that I flinched from everything then. Walking between school and home, I imagined swirling vortexes rising from the sidewalk at every step, trapping me, keeping me from reaching either uncomfortable destination. Most days I tried to trick

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those whirlpools, by twirling myself, travelling in a long series of turns, opening and closing my arms as if I was fastening the turns together like a paper chain. I spun down the street whirling like a dervish, trying to escape other people's demons.

My school career began inauspiciously. The first time Mother tried to register me for kindergarten, the school staff said, "She's too small." Pointing to my November birthday, they declined to enrol me. Mother trembled and wept. All my excitement dissolved into tears. On the way home, I deliberately dropped my shiny new pencil case in the middle of the street and ran back for it as a car was coming, hoping it would hit me, but someone stopped me. She finally did manage to register me that year, by reminding the school that the cut-off was November 30, not November 1.

After the first two weeks in kindergarten, I asked Mother to braid my hair. She said I'd have to grow it, so I did. Only decades later, looking at the kindergarten photo, did the reason for my request jump out at me. Most of the other little girls were African-American, and wore tiny braids all over their heads, signalling that their families aspired to "good hair" and middle-class status. Even when my hair grew long enough for braids, I didn't look like them. Nobody invited me home. But I wore my hair in braids for the rest of my childhood.

At school, I spent days under my desk, or covering my face with my hair, or even hiding in the cupboards. A classmate named Arthur, a tall excitable boy with a high-pitched voice, shrieked and nearly fainted when he opened a cupboard door and reached in for a textbook, and I slid out from the shelf. I was so little, I could hide anywhere. And there was a lot to hide from.

By 2005, Mother was finally starting to come around to the idea that I might have the skill, the integrity, and the right to delve into the mystery surrounding the Flanderses' deaths. Her assent gave me permission to contact neighbours and long-lost friends. Clues were scattered all over her apartment, from Helen Bevington's *A Book and a Love Story* on the bookshelves (with a chapter about the Bevingtons' lengthy friendship with the Flanderses), to Leon Després' phone number in her address book, to a thank-you note from

Morty and Jane (Flanders) Ziff on her mantelpiece, asking, "Do you think Penney and her family could come visit us?"

I lost track of Jane and Morty sometime in the 1960s. I moved away, and Jane no longer walked up Fifty-seventh Street with her coffee mug. Morty landed a job with the University of Illinois in 1968, and then they moved back East, to Massachusetts, where Morty lost weight and gained gravitas as Professor Howard M. Ziff of the University of Massachusetts journalism program. (It suits him, but I still think he looked better as God.) More to the point, Mother lost contact with them too, for more than twenty years. Then suddenly, in the early 1990s, Jane made contact again, and they've been visiting Chicago occasionally ever since. For me to visit *them*, however, involved a journey of 2500 miles.

Finally, a Writers' Union meeting took me to Montreal. On a rainy May Tuesday, I rented a car and drove five hours through a torrential downpour to Amherst, Massachusetts, making regular cell-phone calls to Jane to keep her apprised of my progress. Morty met me at an abandoned gas station and guided me the last few miles to their home, surrounded by riotous gardens, in a small rural-looking subdivision tucked away very close to the U Mass campus. We spent four days catching up before I dared raise my request to write about Jane's parents.

By then, we had shifted locale to the Ziffs' country home, near Springfield, New York. Jane walked me through the lush green countryside where her parents (Sally and Moll Flanders) had been most at home, along the hard-packed dirt road that connects family summer homes sprawled across what was once a rye farm. She pointed to the tall trees swaying in the wind and talked about how her parents organized their friends to plant one thousand seedlings in one weekend. We visited the stream where she and her siblings and cousins spent countless hours in a futile effort to build a fieldstone dam and create a swimming pool. Then we turned left, uphill, and climbed to the house that was Aunt Bobby's. Aunt Bobby was Sally's sister, Roberta, who married Tommy Fansler. Tommy Fansler's sister was Priscilla (Fansler) Hiss.

This was Sally and Moll's real family, the extended family that gave their lives meaning. Every summer that they possibly could, her

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parents returned to that land. And most summers—before, during, and after her marriage to Alger Hiss—so did Priscilla Hiss, who was an integral part of the Flanders-Fansler clan.

Moll explained in his written response to the AEC charges that,

My wife and I have always been very fond of Priscilla, and we liked Alger from the start. We had always felt at complete ease with them, and have discussed a wide range of topics with the complete freedom. In particular we discussed many social problems. All of us—Thomas and Roberta Fansler, Alger and Priscilla Hiss, Donald and Sara Flanders would properly be described as liberals. . . .

The six of us found our companionship mutually very sympathetic and we discussed things with great freedom[.] This does not mean that we agreed on all topics, political or otherwise. There were certainly sharp disagreements and hot arguments. Under those circumstances, I think it would have been pretty difficult for Alger to obscure a passionate devotion to Marxist principles if he had one, (he displayed none), particularly if that devotion were so passionate that it would cause a man to behave in a manner completely contradictory to his everyday character as revealed rather intimately in the circumstances in which I have had opportunity to observe him. As I have known him, Alger showed himself to be morally and intellectually honest, highly intelligent, and a man of goodwill. Take the matter of intellectual honesty; for example. In all of our discussions I cannot remember that he ever intentionally used a specious argument, a fault of which I think I can fairly accuse every other one of the six of us. . . .

Our friend and neighbour Helen Bevington (who died in 1995) wrote about this place that “The two farms and their families [the Flanderses and the Fanslers] made a company that in good time I loved more than any other I have known. They became my family, closer than blood kin, the friends of a lifetime . . . [for twelve magic summers] it was a time of immense pleasure among life-loving,

life-enhancing people, and then it was over. None of us could have guessed in those days the horror that lay ahead."

I was ten when I heard my first sonic boom. We were visiting my grandfather Mac, who was chaplain at an airforce base outside Amarillo, Texas. I was walking down the street with Mac, when the most horrendous KA-BLAM blasted the sky and lifted me off my feet. I knew exactly what to do. I threw myself under the nearest parked car and waited for the mushroom cloud. It was almost an hour before my embarrassed grandfather could coax me out. I was sure that the atom bomb and the Cold War, which had overshadowed my entire life, were finally eclipsing us all.

But, despite what I'd learned as a child, the Cold War wasn't an eternal concept. It came to a sudden end in 1991. Although it had always been part of my world, the generation before me remembers a sudden precipitous beginning.

"I was totally confused about Russia, growing up," said Peggy Bevington, Helen Bevington's daughter-in-law. A contemporary of Moll and Sally's children, she still lives up the street from Mother. Like others of her generation, she had thought the Russian Revolution exhilarating at first. And throughout the Second World War, said Peggy, "We'd all been contributing to the Russian war relief. There was all this pro-Russian propaganda. Then, to have the Cold War reverse the propaganda so quickly—it was stunning."

Sally Flanders said something similar at the AEC. "At the time of the original Russian Revolution, I read the new constitution, and thought it was probably the most superb document that I had ever read, ever been written," she said. "And then as time went on, it seemed to me that they were, that it was a pretty piece of paper, and for a long time, I guess probably to the time of the purges, I felt they had demonstrated and done great things in Russia. At the time of the purges, I could not see how they could be justified, and from that time on, I lost more and more sympathy with them."

All the same, she noted, after the 1929 stock-market crash, she did volunteer time with a socialist league. "I would say that it was in the winter of 1930 or 1931 that people were starving in New York

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City," she recalled, "and the socialists were definitely doing something about it. I think it was Priscilla that came and asked me if I wouldn't help collect old clothes in my building, and help serve refreshments in the socialist headquarters. . . ."

Who, facing the Great Depression, could be unmoved by the plight of so many destitute people? Not Sally. As a person of conscience, she sought volunteer opportunities and political campaigns that would improve life for the people who were suffering. And that was another bond with the Hisses. "I felt that the Hisses were always very much concerned about the general welfare," Sally said. "Priscilla and I, being somewhat more sentimental than our husbands, thought the small amount we could do was sufficiently valuable to put an awful lot of work in it."

Jane Flanders Ziff thought that her mother had only the best motives. "These were people who were concerned with world peace," she said, "and who wanted to have good relations with the Russians."

Leon Després acted as Moll's advocate at the AEC hearings. Després is a Chicago legend, for twenty years the only alderman to stand up to Mayor Richard J. Daley. In 2005, at the age of ninety-six, Després published *Challenging the Daley Machine: A Chicago Alderman's Memoir*. The city now officially recognizes the importance of Després' work. When I walked a few short blocks from Mother's apartment to interview him in the spring of 2006, there were two authorized street signs on the corner lamppost outside his apartment building. The top one says, "Stony Island Blvd." Underneath that, an identical green rectangle says Leon M. Després Way.

Després was a lawyer and managed to maintain his law practice in addition to his civic duties. "There were so many people that had loyalty cases against them, it hardly attracted attention," he recalled. "I handled a dozen cases. Alex Ellson must have handled a hundred.

"It wasn't difficult to defend the scientists," he said. "[Although] an ordinary lawyer might not be willing or able to do it effectively. In one case, one of the charges against my client was knowing *me* . . ."

Després and his wife Marion lived near the Flanderses' home, and often saw Moll debark from the Argonne Labs bus on his way home from work. "He was a small man with a big black bushy beard," he recalled. "My son called him, 'the mad scientist'."

For Moll's defence, Després took the high road. "We had wonderful witnesses," he was proud to say. "They gave the impression of a man with a supremely fine character. The agency [AEC] recognized that if he said he wouldn't see Alger Hiss again, he would keep his word." The problem was, as Després acknowledged, that Moll "thought that [condition] was unacceptable." Moll—straitlaced Moll, widely regarded as "a living saint," to use Helen Bevington's term—could hardly bear to imagine that anyone would lie, much less someone whom he regarded as a close friend.

By 1952, Després was "no longer an admirer of Alger Hiss," who remains a controversial figure to this day. Amazon.com lists more than 1700 books with "Alger Hiss" in the title. Declassified files in the United States and former USSR seem to confirm that Hiss *was* a Soviet agent, although the cryptographic evidence is murky. Hiss himself proclaimed his innocence and fought to clear his name until his death in 1996. His son, Tony Hiss, carries on.

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Even if he was guilty, huge questions remain about the political ends which Senators Richard Nixon and Joe McCarthy pursued by making a circus of Hiss's prosecution. "The Hiss case helped launch the 1950s McCarthy period, a decade of fear and distrust," states "The Alger Hiss Story" Web site. "Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's anti-communist crusade, during which 10,000 Americans lost their jobs, began less than three weeks after Alger Hiss's conviction in 1950." Hundreds of thousands more Americans were forced to sign loyalty oaths or face loyalty hearings. Wild accusations abounded, to the extent that "McCarthyism" entered the language as a pejorative. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines it as:

1. The practice of publicizing accusations of political disloyalty or subversion with insufficient regard to evidence.
2. The use of unfair investigatory or accusatory methods in order to suppress opposition.

When I was a child, FBI agents in trench coats and fedoras stood in my schoolyard in order to watch Moll and Sally's apartment, across the street. If Leon Després were alive today (he died on May 6, 2009), he would probably be advising clients facing similar hearings today.

Some of them would be the same clients—the American Civil Liberties Union and the American Friends Service Committee are both suing the federal government for surreptitious surveillance—while others might include people charged with illegal immigration, refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan, or the families of detainees at Guantanamo Bay.

Out of curiosity, I sent Tony Hiss an e-mail asking, “Do you hear any echoes of the 1950s in what is happening in the U.S. today?” He replied, “My basic sense is not that current events echo what happened then but are a continuation of the same event which, back then, was visible only to a few and now can be sensed by many.”

Settled around the kitchen table on our last morning together, I finally worked up the courage to ask Jane and Morty for their perspective on her parents’ deaths. They laid out for me some of the reasons that Moll was depressed. He felt terrible guilt about the Manhattan Project; the tragedy of the Hiss case touched him deeply; he was dragged down by Sally’s depression at being displaced from her beloved community in New York State when they moved to Chicago in 1946; his work on the earliest computers was not going well.

“He wasn’t a big glorious success, which was a burden to him,” said Howard (Morty). “But he always did solid work.”

“The terrible blow about the AEC hearings was that Len’s [Leon Després] case depended on the argument that Moll didn’t know Hiss very well,” said Jane. “My father, being so honest and transparent, couldn’t believe that anyone else could be dishonest.” Sally “was always a person who could handle everything,” Jane recalled, “while Moll just had to be intellectual and mysterious.” But the move to Chicago undermined Sally’s role. “She liked to be in the community. In the summer, she was always organizing people, telling people what to do, running square dances in Bobby’s [Roberta Fansler’s] barn. When we moved to Chicago, she had a lot of trouble recreating that community, and fell into a depression.” And then Jane said something that floored me, as it reversed all my childhood perceptions. She said, “Your mother was very helpful to my mother. She

was extremely important to her.” Here I had thought that Sally’s intervention was Mother’s mainstay in recovering from her own depression.

Did Sally maintain contact with Priscilla despite the AEC tribunal decision that Moll could keep his security clearance on condition that he never have contact with the Hisses again? “Of course she did,” said Jane with a warm laugh. It was simply inconceivable not to.

Also, I may have another piece of the puzzle that Moll didn’t share with his children. In 1981, I talked with a go-between. Nick Rosenmeier, an American literature professor at the University of Copenhagen, was an exchange student at the University of Chicago in the 1950s. He took me and my brother to Dad for Sunday visits during those dark times when my parents couldn’t stand to be in the same room together. And, he told me, he took messages between Sally and Priscilla, in order to evade the FBI surveillance.

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Nick said that Moll repeatedly tried to find another job so that he could leave Argonne Labs, where he felt stymied by security issues. He said that Moll applied for university-faculty jobs all over the United States. Usually the university’s first response was enthusiastic, he said. There were even interviews and job offers. But then, a few weeks later, the universities would send embarrassed letters saying that they had decided to hire someone younger, or someone cheaper, or not to hire anyone at all. “He was blacklisted.” Nick was sure. “He was at a dead end at Argonne Labs, and the government wasn’t going to let him work anywhere else. He was trapped.”

When I told Jane and Morty what Nick said, they just shook their heads. They had never heard anything about job applications before.

My parents were divorced in 1954. Mother had almost recovered her physical and emotional health when Moll’s death sent her into shock. She managed to rally, and supported Sally and her family through the funeral and the subsequent public curiosity.

One month later, Sally was moving furniture in her station wagon. She was always the “get-it-done” type, more interested in results than process. She loaded the car in slapdash fashion and was racing along

the country road when she took a wrong turn. A mail truck slammed into her car. The furniture behind shot forward and crushed her to death against the steering wheel and the dashboard.

When Mother heard what had happened, she dissolved into tears and went back to bed.

Dylan was four years old at the time. He still hadn't spoken a word in front of adults. Two or three years later, we were all in the living room after school. Dylan and I were watching the first *Superman* TV series, with George Reeves. In this episode, Superman rescued a small child by throwing himself in front of and stopping a truck that was about to run over her. Dylan looked up from the screen. "If I was Superman," he said, "I could have stopped that mail truck."