

PHYLLIS LANGTON

'MOTHER' LADY



In October 1946, at age thirteen, I was discharged from the Natick, Massachusetts orphanage I had lived in for seven years. While waiting for the house mother, Mrs. Florence Kahn, whom I loved and trusted, to drive me downtown to the bus which I would take to Logan Airport to catch my airplane, I sat on the front steps of Wilber Home, looking at the flagpole for the last time. Every morning at 6:00 a.m., we stood at attention with our right hand over our heart, and said the Pledge of Allegiance as two children raised the flag. At 6:00 p.m., every evening, we sang, “Day is done, gone the sun...” while two children lowered, folded, and placed the flag in a frame, ready for the next day. These rituals brought order and security to my life. I said a mental farewell to the flag and waved. It was time to go.

I was headed for California to join my sixteen-year-old sister, Audrey, whom I hadn’t seen in seven years, and our mother, whom I didn’t remember ever knowing. I knew I would miss my school friends and longtime friends at the orphanage. We were a noisy bunch of girls, with great zeal for life. We were happy.

I clasped the envelope that held my airplane ticket and school records. I had little else to carry with me since we didn’t own our clothes, and I had no pictures. My only treasures were a copy of Silas Marner, and a book of Mark Twain stories.

We climbed into the station wagon, chatting about my adventure. It was the first time I sat in the front seat. It felt hard, and looked like new. I noticed large circles of lights on the dashboard. As children, we sat in the back seats every Sunday on our way to the Congregational Church. Once, we rode to the movie to see Bambi, our only social outing. During the summer, we rode to the lake to swim. We used to sing camp songs and hang our heads out the window, waving to every car that passed.

Mrs. Kahn was not a fast driver, but this day she was especially deliberate as we approached downtown Natick. She slowed down on Main