

Downtown Houston, 1944

I Fall Out of the Car

By Kay Cook

In 1944, downtown Houston was a dense, fast-paced, and crowded wartime hub. Sidewalks along corridors like Main Street teemed with office workers, shoppers, and military personnel in uniform. The streets buzzed with streetcars, buses, and classic cars, framed by a modest low-to-midrise skyline featuring landmark art deco and brick buildings like the Gulf Building.

I just want to make it clear that when I fell out of the car on Main Street in downtown Houston, when I was just five years old, it was a horrifying scene for all the bystanders who saw me tumbling out onto the street buzzing with “streetcars, buses, and classic cars,” like the Ford Coupe my mother was driving. Especially since she didn’t stop.

Or at least that’s how I remember it. But that’s not the worst of it. I’ll explain that in a bit.

I can’t for the life of me recall how exactly I fell out of that car. I know that we were heading toward Daddy’s office in the Gulf Building, maybe to have lunch with him. It would’ve been Mother, me, and Patsy, my big sister, who was 8. Mother was pregnant with Karol. I was completely oblivious to her condition, but I think it could explain why she was distracted and hadn’t fully closed the car door when we left that morning.

I can imagine that I was fidgety and possibly punching Patsy in the leg or her ribs. Sitting still was not a gift I had, and I think the trip into Houston from Spring Branch took about 30 minutes. I probably had on a dotted swiss dress that was itchy and little patent leather Mary Jane shoes that were too tight. In other words, I fully take the blame for leaning up against that car door that sprung open, sending me barreling down onto the pavement of Main Street.

But this I remember clearly. I’m sprawled on the pavement, all scratched up, watching my mother drive away. I’m frantically trying to remember my last name so I would be able to tell somebody who I was. I’m sure it was only a matter of seconds before some man scooped me up, and I see all these grownup faces staring at me, and the man is running to my mother. Of course she had

stopped. I just have never, even some 80 years later, been able to erase that image of me lying on the pavement and mother driving away, not even looking back.

I also remember clearly that the man put me in the car and shouted to my mother, "Lady, get her to a hospital. She's hurt bad."

This is where it gets even worse. We rush to St. Joseph Hospital. I'm sitting on a bed. A nurse is cleaning all my scrapes and bruises. The doctor is frowning and checking my arms and legs and ribs. He stops when he gets to my face, placing his hands on either side of my jaw. He thinks I don't hear him when he says to my mother, "I'm worried about her jawbone. It could be broken." Mother nods.

The doctor says to me, "Honey, if I give you a piece of candy, can you show me how you would chew it."

The day is looking up. I grin and nod and present a perfect picture of a little girl chewing candy. He hears the grinding sound, but I'm chewing perfectly. He opens my mouth with that horrible popsicle stick thing, and says, "Ah ha! She got a mouthful of gravel when she fell." And to the nurse, "Clean out her mouth, letting her swirl some fresh water and spit it all out." And to my mother, "She's fine. Just be sure to come back if anything changes."

He leaves the room. I get cleaned up. Mother, Patsy, and I leave the hospital and drive home.

I am outraged. Nobody, and I mean Nobody, even so much as gave me a small piece of candy after I had shown perfectly how I would chew it.

We get home, and I am fuming, and Patsy is bored with the whole day. Mother calls Daddy to let him know what happened, and she bursts into tears. I'm shocked. I've never seen her cry. And she is sobbing.

That will happen again in just a few months, when my hand gets caught in a door that the wind has slammed shut, and my middle finger is cut off. Mother calmly lifts the part of my finger that is dangling by the skin, places a towel over it, and rushes me, once again, to St. Joseph's. After several hours, Mother graciously thanks everyone at the hospital, and we return home. Once more, no one has offered me candy. My finger is stitched back on and I have a heavy cast over my whole hand that I will have to wear for the next six months.

Mother calls Daddy and bursts into tears.

