

## Mildred

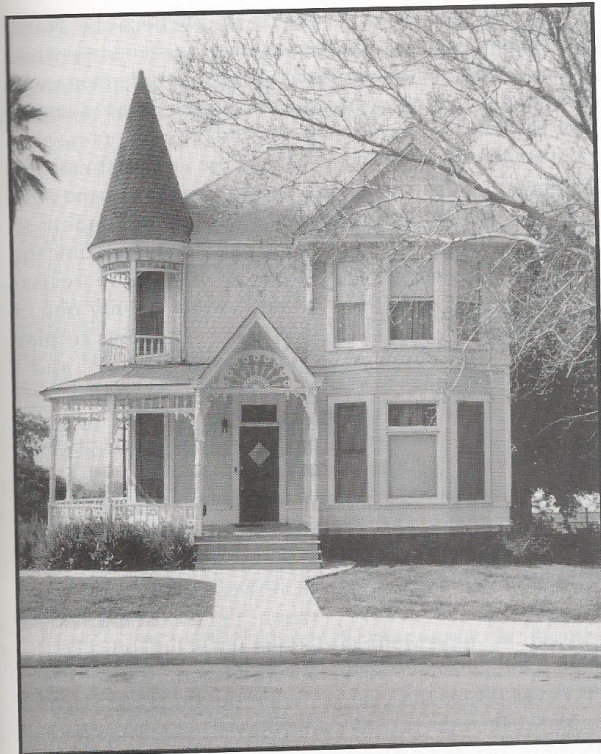
MY NAME IS MILLY, WHICH IS SHORT FOR MILDRED, which is short for "Mil-dred." To my way of thinking *nobody* should be named Mildred except that my father's mother was and I guess he thought it was a good idea to name me after her. I never knew her, though, because she died before I was born. There's *another* name that's big in our family: Susan—which isn't terrific but it is better than Mildred. Anyway, it's my maternal grandmother's name . . . my mother's name . . . and of course my sister's name. Susan Marie Phelps. Susie. A name you can live with . . . be proud of . . . make proud of *you*. Which Susie hasn't exactly done. But that may be a prejudiced opinion.

Susie's always been a thorn in my side which my mother likes to believe is "perfectly normal sibling rivalry" except that I have friends who experience "perfectly normal sibling rivalry" almost daily and they don't have to put up with what I've put up with from Susie through the years.

Susie was thirteen when I was born and in some ways it was as though we were in two different families except that we had the same mother and father and both grew up in the same rambling house with the big wraparound front porch. One would think that having only one sister, and her that much older, would be sort of like being an only child except that even when Susie wasn't there, she was. I mean we could never stop thinking about her.



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The one time I referred to her as a "bad seed," my mother cried and my father stared moodily out the window and the air in the room got heavy with unsaid things. Susie didn't do anything because as usual Susie was gone. Her "goneness" was a fact of life. Hers, mostly, but mine, too, because whatever Susie did seemed to spread over to me like milk spilled on a tabletop.

For example. The first birthday party I remember—the one where Amanda Shultz brought me the goldfish in

the bowl—Susie was gone. I know because Nana (Grandmother Susan) came over and ran the party while Mom and Dad huddled upstairs next to the telephone, and then later on a policeman came and even a little kid knows that you can have a clown at a birthday party but never a policeman. Susie came back that time at Christmas and Mom and Dad pretended nothing had happened and I got a pain in my stomach on account of their pretending so

#### Words to Know

**boomerang** (p. 16) a curved piece of wood that, when thrown, returns to the thrower

**defense mechanism** (p. 17) a self-protective reaction

**Zen** (p. 17) a Japanese form of Buddhism that emphasizes meditation and intuition as a means of achieving spiritual enlightenment

**est** (p. 17) Erhard Seminar Training, a program of psychological therapy developed by Werner Erhard that stresses self-fulfillment

hard. She left another time the night of my piano recital when I was the only one of Mrs. Cole's students to play "The Skater's Waltz" and I lost my place twice just looking at the door to see if my parents'd gotten there yet (and afterward they told me how good I was and tried to pretend they'd been there all along. And I let them.) Then there was my sixth birthday when she disappeared

between the time Mom left to take seven little girls to the movies and when we got back for cake and ice cream. And I'll never forget the year we were finally going to New England for our vacation and Susie turned up on the doorstep just as Dad and I were loading the car and we had to unload it and carry everything back inside and wait three days while Mom and Dad and Susie had long and heartfelt talks.

We repeated this boomerang pattern forever: Susie leaving, Susie coming back, and, in between, me leading some average everyday kind of life. It's not that Susie deliberately set out to ruin all the great occasions of my life—it just worked out that way. Anyhow, this isn't an exercise in feeling sorry for myself (the way Great-Aunt

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Hilda used to do and which we all found grossly unattractive) but rather a statement of fact. And also to explain what happened later, along with what Nana refers to as my smart-aleck attitude toward life and what Mom calls my defense mechanism.

THE LAST TIME SUSIE LEFT, WHEN SHE WAS TWENTY-three and I was ten (the day of my class trip to Mount Vernon, naturally, when Mom was supposed to chaperone but couldn't) Mom and Dad confronted her at the breakfast table and said that enough was enough; that Susie was certainly old enough to be on her own; to live her life as she saw fit; that it was better, since she obviously couldn't live by their standards, that she live somewhere else; but that they'd always be there for her. I don't think any of us knew how *there* they were going to have to be. The thing is that when someone leaves the way Susie left (with her clothes in a plastic leaf bag thrown into the back of a friend's Volkswagen) and slamming the door behind her, she's sometimes more *there* than if she'd never left in the first place.

I mean it's hard to tell which were worse: the months when we didn't hear *anything*, or the frantic phone calls, usually asking for money, that came late at night or early in the morning because Susie somehow never managed to handle the difference in time zones. In between there were occasional postcards or letters telling how she was experiencing life to the fullest; that she was into Zen, or est; was working as a waitress, a puppeteer, a ticket taker at a wildlife preserve, a deckhand on a fishing boat. The letters themselves were short and somehow skimpy looking but Mom saved them all, storing them away in the top drawer of the desk in the living room. Sometimes when no one else was home I'd take them out and reread them, as if trying to piece together my sister.

THEN, EVEN FOR SUSIE, SHE OUTDID HERSELF. AND I WAS the one who got the message. On the answering machine.

Since Mom and Dad both work, I usually beat them home in the afternoon and the first thing I do (after getting something to eat) is to check the answering machine. I mean, even though I've just left practically everyone I know at school, there's something about that glowing red light that makes me have to "rewind" and "replay." The weird thing was that with *that* particular message all set to uncurl one would definitely think the red light would've given off an ominous sort of glow. Which it didn't.

"Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad." The tape sounded garbled because it was worn and nobody'd thought to get a new one. "I'm living the ultimate experience. I'm pregnant and I'm heading home. See you soon."

My first thought was to "erase." My second was that there was no way I was going to give *that* message to my parents. And my third was to escape. So I rewound the tape, retraced my steps out of the house, and headed for the library, where I slumped down in a chair and started into *Rebecca* for about the seventeenth time except that the whole time I was trying to read Susie's voice kept sounding inside my head: . . . ultimate experience . . . pregnant . . . coming home . . .

I stayed at the library so long, I was afraid my parents would begin to worry, but when I got home I saw I needn't have bothered. I mean, they were worrying, all right, but not about me. "Do you know what she's done now?" my mother said.

"Who's *she*?" I said. "Princess Di? Fergie?" My voice sounded wooden, the way thinking about Susie sometimes made me feel.

"Your sis-ter," said Mom.

I wanted to say, "I don't have a sister," but when I looked at my mother's face something pinched inside of me like a too-tight shoe.

"What?" I said instead, turning away and trying to act

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"She's pregnant."

"Pregnant?" The surprise in my voice sounded fake, but Mom didn't seem to notice.

"Don't say that word in front of the child," my father said. And since my father prides himself on being an open and forthright kind of person (and since I'm fifteen and definitely not a child), that gives some idea how deep he was into denial.

"That's what she said," my mother went on. "Pregnant." And it was as if she had trouble getting her mouth around the shape of the word. "Maybe she's married. Maybe she just wants to surprise us."

"Mar-ried?" said my father, his voice cracking somewhere between the two *r*'s. "Did she say anything about a husband? Did she say anything about a father? No, she did not. I'll tell you what she said—she said she was experiencing a—the—"

"She said she was living the ultimate experience," said Mom, going to stand by the window and looking out into the dark.

SUSIE CAME HOME BY BUS AND WALKED UP FROM the station with a canvas tote bag slung on her shoulder. She looked pale and haggard and older than the twenty-eight years I knew her to be. For a minute I almost felt sorry for her—until I looked at my mother and father and *they* looked paler and even more haggard.

"Well, Susan," my father began. But whatever speech he had planned fizzled out and after a minute he wrapped Susie in an enormous bear hug.

"Yes, well, Susie," my mother began. "It's not the way we planned it—I mean the way we thought it would be," she said, dabbing at her eyes.

"But that's just the point," the old Susie said, extricating herself from my father's arms. "It's the way *I* planned it. I mean, I'm not getting any younger and I've



always felt that giving birth is life's ultimate experience. And I want it all."

"But—but—but—" My father was fairly sputtering. "What about the father?"

"What do you see as his role in all this?" my mother said.

"I don't see him as having a role. In fact, I plain don't see him at all anymore," my sister answered in a voice that clearly said that that was all the explanation we were going to get.

And it was all the explanation we *did* get.

IT WAS THEN THAT I ENTERED MY LIFE-ON-THE-OTHER-SIDE-of-the-door phase. The door was any door, with Mom, Dad, and Susie on one side and me crouched, head against the wood, on the other. I got used to hearing in phrases: "... stay here until ..." "... up for adoption ..." "... best for the child ..." "... sense of responsibility ..."

And always, after a while, Susie shouting out, "I want this baby. I'm going to keep it."

Then there would be another door and another set of phrases: "... mother's raised *her* children ..." "... a job, and day care ..." "... here till you get on your feet ..." "... give you all the help we can but ..."

And again, Susie: "... leave if you don't want me here ..." "I've changed ..." and "I want this baby."

THE THING IS, SUSIE DID GET A JOB (JUST AS SOON AS she stopped throwing up). It was a job in an office and you could tell she didn't think it could compare to being a waitress, a puppeteer, a ticket taker at a wildlife preserve, or a deckhand on a fishing boat. And she didn't leave. Though the truth is that there were times, in the middle of the night, or even in Latin class, when I wished she would. I mean (and I have to say this in a whisper, even to myself) there were times when my sister Susie seemed like more

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"Is she going to *stay* here?" I asked my mother one night when we were doing the dishes.

"Of course she is," said Mom. "This is her home the same as it's yours."

"What about the kid? It won't even have a name."

"Of course it will," snapped Mom. "Its name will be Phelps."

"But that's *my* name," I heard myself whine (just like Great-Aunt Hilda used to do).

"It's our *family* name," my mother said, scrubbing at the broiler pan. And then, after a minute, "Mil-dred, I'd hate to think you were embarrassed about your own sister."

Which is exactly what I was. I mean, there we were in the midst of the sexual revolution and I was embarrassed. Besides that, all of a sudden Susie was looking like Lucille Ball when she was pregnant on the *Lucy* show. She waddled. She lumbered. And when my friends came over they'd all sneak little glances at her from the side and then pretend not to notice.

It seemed like my whole family was into being what Mom called "supportive." She bought Susie a new robe to take to the hospital, a bunch of baby clothes, and a stuffed bear. Dad got the old crib out of the attic and scrubbed it down. Nana made curtains for the nursery.

Correction: My whole family except me was into being supportive. When Susie and I were alone in a room together there still didn't seem to be anything to say, and the night she told me she was dying of boredom and could we please go the movies I told her I had a headache. And then hated the way I felt afterward.

WHEN SUSIE WENT TO CHILDBIRTH CLASSES MOM WENT with her. A couple of times my mother tried to get me to go, saying that it would help me to be a part of things



(which I definitely didn't want to be a part of), but I always managed to get out of it until one night after dinner when Mom tried again and I said no again and Dad said, "Mil-dred . . . it would be a help to your mother," in that no-nonsense voice of his. And all of a sudden there I was in this big room with pregnant women all over the floor, along with husbands, significant others, and *my mother*. While Mom helped Susie breathe (helped her breathe?) I sat in the corner and tried to pretend I'd just stopped in to get out of the rain. Which is what I did for all the rest of the classes, though I guess my mother didn't notice, because when they were finished Mom sighed a big sigh and said, "Well, now, I certainly feel better that there're two of us prepared to help Susie."

Prepared? To help her do what? I mean, I wasn't the one having a baby. In fact, I wasn't even sure I *liked* babies all that much.

AND THEN MOM GOT A TOOTHACHE. NOT A LITTLE TWINGY run-of-the-mill toothache but a huge, throbbing kind that needed a root canal and kept her up all night and sent her out to an emergency dentist appointment early the next morning.

"Wow," said Susie, waddling into the kitchen just as Dad and Mom pulled out of the driveway.

"Wow what?" I said, trying not to look at her standing there in her pink pajamas with the pants scooping down under her enormous belly.

"Another one," said Susie.

"Another what?"

"Pain. Another pain," said Susie.

"What do you mean another pain?" I shrieked at her. "Has there been one before?"

"All night," my sister said, turning a funny gray color and hanging on to the door frame.

"Why didn't you tell Mom? Call her," I said running to

the kitchen window as if I thought the car might still be in the driveway. "We'll call her at the dentist . . . we'll—"

"No," said Susie. "There isn't time. And besides, she has to get that tooth taken care of. We'll take a taxi."

"A taxi?" I said. "We can't take a taxi. I only have a dollar."

"In Mom's top dresser drawer," said Susie turning and heading for the stairs, walking as though she were stepping on eggs, and calling back over her shoulder, "There's money there. Mom told me. In case I was ever here alone and needed a cab."

IN THE HOSPITAL THERE WERE PEOPLE WHO TOOK information and blood and who examined Susie to see how things were going and then said that they were going fine. And quickly. Then Susie and I were alone in a room together, except for the people coming in and out, and she rocked and sang and rested some. She groaned and grunted and moaned. She laughed a lot and showed me how to rub her back and when she looked tense I told her to relax and when she said she couldn't stand it anymore I said she could and that she was.

Then it was as if everything went into fast forward and there was someone handing me a funky green gown and all of a sudden we were in another room with bright lights and tile on the walls. A nurse told me to stay out of the way and if I felt faint to sit down, but Susie called for me and I went to stand by her head. Her face was sweaty and twisted and smiling all at the same time and suddenly there was a thin watery cry as if from far away and someone plunked this ugly, slimy, beautiful baby across Susie's chest and said, "It's a girl . . . a girl . . . a girl . . ." in a voice that seemed to sing out loud.

I wiped my sister's face and after she had looked the baby all over she said, "We'll call Mom and Dad and tell them now. About the baby, and the name."

"Name?" I said, as if it were news to me that babies

had them.

And then she said it. Susie, my sister, said that this baby—this niece—was going to be named Mildred.

For a minute I started to tell her that that was a rotten thing to do to some unsuspecting kid. Then I caught myself. I mean, I stood there looking at the baby with its funny spiky hair, stark naked with its screwed-up face and its fists flailing, and thought how already she looked tough and precocious and incredibly smart, and definitely ready for the challenge. Because if there's one thing that makes life interesting it's the challenge.

If you don't believe it, ask Susie; ask me; or wait a few years and ask Mildred Marie Phelps.

### About Colby Rodowsky

Like fifteen-year-old Mildred, many of the characters in Colby Rodowsky's books face difficult family situations involving challenges such as



loneliness, teenage pregnancy, illness, and death. Yet her characters find ways to grow and express themselves in spite of, or perhaps because of, their problems.

Rodowsky knew she wanted to be a writer at an early age. As an only child, she was alone much of the time reading and writing. After college, she married

and spent many busy years teaching and raising her six children. It wasn't until she was in her forties that she found time to start writing again and publish her first book.

Rodowsky's advice to young people interested in writing is "Read, read, read. And read some more." Her award-winning books include *What About Me?*; *A Summer's Worth of Shame*; *H, My Name is Henley*; *Julie's Daughter*, *Sydney*, *Herself*; and *Lucy Peale*.

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