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Joanna Thurston Roper

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A Time to Wait

Not all education occurs within the walls of a classroom!

by Joanna Thurston Roper

How long have I known Andy Collier? Why, I worked for him from the time I was thirteen 'till I was out of high school. My brother always worked down at the Co-Op while he was in high school, but not me. As soon as I was old enough to do something besides run errands for Mom, I worked for Andy.

That whole time coincides pretty well with the time Dad was so durned dumb and backward--at that time he hadn't learned all he knows now!

Andy had a cleaning shop called the Keep-U-Neet. But people usually just called it Colliers' Cleaners. He really gave me a job before I was old enough to be of much real help--I guess it was because our families were such good friends--and partly that I was a Sweetwood kid. But whatever his reasons were then, I have to say that outside my own family, Andy Collier did more for me than almost anyone I know.

We talked a lot. I've got volumes stored up in me from the hours Andy and I spent talking--even the special rhythm of it. In a cleaning shop you tend to space your conversation around the swoosh and whistle of the steam press.

Speaking of Dad being so backward--I'm about that age now to my boys. I sure wish they could work for someone like Andy. I had it so much better, growing up

in a little town like Sweetwood. In the city every job is fast and automated--no Andy to talk to on long afternoons. Down at MacDonald's the most exciting thing my oldest boy has to talk about is whether or not the bun has sesame seeds.

And then Andy and I got to know each other slow, too. At first I was just a go-fer. Monty, get this, Monty, get that. Then when I got my license, I made the afternoon deliveries. That old Dodge van with Collier Cleaners on the side made many a mile with me. But it was Andy that I really looked up to. "Norma was a great gal, but you sure learned to step lively or tread softly around the shop--depending on the mood Norma was in."

During those years I learned a lot about the Colliers that wasn't generally known. Even as little a place as Sweetwood is, not many people really knew as much as they

thought they did about Andy and Norma.

They got married in 1938--seemed kind of funny to me to have such a good friend who got married the same year I was born. Norma wasn't but sixteen when they were married, and Andy was nineteen. Norma's dad, Old Man Lloyd Russell had a little hamburger joint that he let them run for awhile, and they lived in a one-bedroom apartment over the ice plant. Times were hard for everyone, especially a couple of kids like that.

The hamburger joint didn't last long--or at least they didn't. Andy was ambitious, and he went to work for this guy who had come to Sweetwood from Missouri and put in a cleaning shop. Andy learned the business from top to bottom, and when the guy got tired and wanted to go back to Missouri, Andy got a loan from the bank and bought him out. *cont.*

So it seems like Andy and Norma would have had it made, doesn't it? That's what everyone thought--including me--until I got to know Andy so well. Not many people really knew what kind of marriage they had. Norma was kind and sweet and polite to everyone. She was good natured, and people really *liked* her--I mean she was a *lady*. That's what Mom said one time when I was talking about Norma, and Mom was hard to fool.

One time Andy told me about something that happened not long after they

“Norma was a great gal, but you sure learned to step lively or tread softly around the shop--depending on the mood Norma was in.”

got married. Of course, he didn't tell me about it until after I had worked at the Cleaners for several years. He wouldn't have told me about it right off the bat--I wouldn't have believed it if he had. We'd been talking about an argument I'd had with my girl friend, and I'd made some stupid remark about how I wouldn't allow my wife to do something or other. Andy laughed.

“Did I ever tell you about the time I spanked Norma?”

I was astonished. “You actually spanked her?” I even remember I was holding the pants to the banker's blue serge suit.

“Yeah. We closed up the cafe one night and stopped by the grocery store on the way home. While we were walking home, we got to teasing each other--acting silly--running part of the way--it was late, and almost no one was on Main Street. The stairway up the back of the ice house was long and steep, and I was going up first to unlock the door. While I was bent over getting the key in the lock, I made some smart-aleck remark. I raised up, and a can of tomato soup went by my head--just grazed my ear. It went through that oval glass in the door like a--seemed like glass fell for ten minutes.

“I grabbed her by the arm and jerked her inside--she was twisting and fighting to get away, and of course, she dropped the rest of the groceries. Eggs were dripping off every step. I thought I never would find that light string in the middle of the room. When I did, I jerked out a chair and flipped Norma over my knees. I spanked her bottom like she was an ugly stepchild.”

Andy put down the press, and there was a long whistle of steam. I looked at him--a strong, handsome, gentle man--

and marveled that he, Andy Collier, had actually paddled the polished, elegant Norma. Of course, they were kids at the time, and kids do crazy things. But I'd seen pictures of Norma when she was young, and she sure didn't look like the kind of girl a guy would paddle--young and sweet, her hair in those blonde waves and all.

“What happened then?” I asked when the steam went off.

“I slept on the kitchen floor.” Andy didn't seem inclined to go on with the story. But just before the steam went on again, he added, “That was the first time.”

It was also the first time I even suspected that their marriage was anything but perfect--or ever had been. Looking back now, I realize that I was about the only person in Sweetwood who did. But at the time--when I was just a brash high school kid myself--I disregarded the signs. Maybe it went deeper than that. Maybe I knew the signs were there--I just didn't want to recognize them.

Norma and Andy had one kid, a girl named Suzanne. Her full name was Norma Suzanne, but they called her Susie. She was a sort of shy kid--but cute as a button. It seemed to me that Norma was too protective of her, especially after she got to junior high and high school. I don't mean she should have been allowed to run loose or anything like that.

But--well, like the cheerleading deal when she was in the eighth grade. Susie came to the shop one day after school, and she was just bubbling over with some news. The student body had elected her to be one of the cheerleaders. It was her first attempt at that sort of thing, so it was pretty important to her.

Andy cut down the steam, and the three of us sat around drinking Cokes and talking about it. Norma came in, and Susie told her. Norma didn't say much--she didn't even react very much. I remember thinking that if I had a sister and she made cheerleader, Mom would have made a big deal over it, too--especially if the kid were as excited as Susie. But Norma just looked kind of tight around the lips. Then she looked at the racks and asked me, “Monty, have you made today's deliveries yet?”

“I was fixing to go,” I told her. There aren't many.”

She looked at the Coke bottle in my hand and said, “Well, aren't you about fixed?”

“Sure, sure,” I said. I could see this was one of Norma's huffy days. In that case I figured I'd manage to make the route a long one. Norma and Susie were gone when I got back, and Andy left me to close up. That wasn't unusual, so I didn't think anything about it.

When I got to work the next day, the steam was off, and Andy was sitting in the back office with his feet propped up on

the old roll top desk.

“Monty, get a Coke and come on back.”

Wonder what broke down I thought. There were clothes piled on the work table, so it was obvious Andy hadn't kept up. Then I saw he hadn't even shaved. He had a five o'clock shadow by noon every day anyway, and if he skipped shaving, his beard was really dark.

“What broke loose this time?” I asked.

“All hell.” He didn't even look at me when he said it. I waited, thinking that this must be a breakdown that would be unusually expensive. I was on the right track, in a way--but totally off in another. Finally Andy turned the squeaky chair around. He looked haggard.

“I spent the night down here.”

“Why?” I had closed up the night before. Nothing was wrong then, so why would he come back.

“It beat the hell out of the kitchen floor.”

Realization dawned on me. Things had been pretty tense the night before. But to spend the night here and then do nothing during the day--I still couldn't grasp that.

“Well,” I began, “was there a fight about Susie being a cheerleader?”

“I would have to say this one began about sixteen years ago.”

“Oh.” Obviously this one was more than the junior high cheerleaders. “I see.” I was trying to sound noncommittal because I didn't “see” anything.

“But Susie was a good starting place last night. Norma told Susie she could stay on the squad but only for in-town games. She can't go out of town for any game. And she has to be home by nine o'clock whether the game is over or not.”

I whistled. The junior high games didn't last much longer than that, but the kids always went to Sam's for a malt after the game and waited for the team to show up. I remembered when Mom used to park outside Sam's--lined up with all the other moms picking up their kids. I usually had two or three friends with me for Mom to take home. Andy broke into my thoughts.

“I've spent the day down here thinking about the situation--trying to figure out what to do.”

“About the ball games--the curfew?”

“That's pretty well cut and dried. I'm to pick her up at the gym at nine. That is unless Susie quits. That wouldn't surprise me, either. It's embarrassing to a kid to be that different. Oh, she's also barred from going to Sam's.”

“Why--that's the best place in town for a kid to go.”

“The only place, you mean.” Then a sarcastic expression came over his face. “Maybe we could encourage her to go down to Mutt's Bar.”

That was just barely funny, but I laughed. “Well,” I asked, “What else are you going to do?”

“Get a divorce.”

My shock and disbelief must have

shown on my face.

"Not right now," he said. "I'll give her exactly four more years. Four more. Then Susie will be out of high school, and she'll go to college or get married--or whatever Norma decides for her to do."

"Well--gosh, Andy, that's too bad. I never realized--I never even thought..." I was almost reduced to babbling.

"Now listen here, Montgomery Riley, I don't want a word of this breathed anywhere. I mean *anywhere*." Andy looked fierce.

"No--no. Why, no, of course no."

"And in the meantime--in those four years--" The front door opened. "Oh, hell. Go tell them we're broke down today."

I started to the front and met Norma. I was, in a word, astonished. Norma was always pretty, but that day she was extraordinary--a pink and white suit, a frilly blouse, perfect makeup and hair do.

"Well, hello! Good Looking!" I said. I was trying frantically to think of a way to keep her out of the back room. Knowing how Andy looked, her angelic appearance could evaporate like fog.

"Hi, Monty. I brought you all some cake and punch I had left over from Garden Club today. Would you run out to the car and bring it in? We'll have a little party."

I rushed out, not wanting to hear the explosion when she learned there had been no cleaning done all day. But when I returned, Norma wasn't upset, and Andy was just looking at her. She said as I came in, "Andy doesn't look well, does he, Monty?"

"Well, no," I said. "In fact, he looks rotten." Andy didn't say anything to either of us. He just sat there looking glum while Norma bustled around fixing the punch and cake. Norma did this sort of thing quite often because she entertained a lot. And it was usually fun, but today things seemed awfully tense. In fact, I decided not to wait around long. I was confused--Andy swearing "four more years" just minutes before Norma came sashaying in with refreshments. Of course, there had been other days similar to this one, but the difference hadn't been so obvious to me. As it turned out, that was the day I pegged as the one when I saw Andy's and Norma's marriage finished.

After that things definitely changed. Andy talked a lot to me about his upcoming freedom, and he talked about their fights at home. Most of them were turning into arguments over Susie and her social activities. One of those was a big on-going one that eventually involved me and Paula Hampton.

Paula and I went together--off and on--from the time we were in the seventh grade. We were perfect for each other--neither one of us ever got much on the other. Like the time of the Junior-Senior prom the year I was a junior. The theme of the thing was the Stork Club, and we'd

gone all out to make it a ritzy affair. Well, just for a lark, I borrowed Buddy Guthrie's old '41 Dodge pickup and went to get Paula. That pickup was rusty green and absolutely falling apart; it sounded like every rod and bearing in it was fixing to fly loose. It had belonged to Dutch Clayton down at the Shamrock, and it used to have SHAMROCK SERVICE STATION on the side. All the lettering was gone except SHAM VICE, and somebody had scratched TRUCK in the paint.

Well, I pulled up in the Hampton drive--I left the truck running--and Mrs. Hampton met me at the door. Paula must have heard it, but she didn't say anything while I was getting her corsage pinned on. Paula's mom kept glancing out, but she didn't say anything, either. Paula and I got out on the front porch, and she stopped and, just cool as a cucumber, said, "Wait a minute, Monty."

I sat on the porch swing thinking how funny it was going to be to go to the prom in Buddy's old Vice Truck with Paula in all that lace and chiffon and stuff. I had put a quilt over the springs that were busting through the upholstery.

Then Paula came out, and durned if she wasn't wearing an old pair of striped overalls with one strap hanging loose and my corsage stuck on the end of it. We had a good laugh. Then we rode by the cafeteria and waved at everyone--me in a tux and Paula in overalls. She whooped and hollered and beat on the side of the truck. Then I took her back, and while she changed clothes again, I rushed home to borrow Dad's Chrysler. Dad would let me have the Chrysler if I was dating a girl he liked, and Paula was one he definitely liked.

Well, anyway, when Susie started dating, Norma made a rule that if Susie had a date with anyone older than she was, they couldn't go out of town unless they went with Paula and me. Of course, there wasn't anything to do in Sweetwood but go to the show or go skating. So when Susie and Benny Morris started dating, Paula and I were stuck. And on top of that, Susie's curfew was 10:30. We couldn't get any further away than Allis and make it back.

But I felt too sorry for Andy to put up much resistance. I never will forget the look in his eyes when he watched Norma give me orders on Saturday night--pain, shame, anger--I guess he was feeling more desperate than anything. He started that day giving me an extra ten bucks because he knew Paula and I would go on somewhere else after we brought Susie and Benny home.

By then his four years were down to two. And he still talked about it to me. It seemed so strange--he was making plans to leave, and Norma was going right on--no change. She even still threw things. One day I got to work after school, and his car was parked in front of the shop with

the back window busted out. I stopped and looked in. There was a hand mirror lying on the back seat, and broken glass and mirror were scattered all over the inside.

"What happened to the car, Andy?"

"Norma did it."

"Oh."

"The van wouldn't start, so I took the car. Norma got mad because she wanted to go to Allis today. She just happened to be holding a mirror when I left."

"Well, lucky it wasn't a skillet," I said.

Andy laughed. "I was figuring today. It's a year and ten months now. That's the short end of the sentence."

As it turned out, that was the last time I heard an actual countdown. In the spring of '56 I graduated and went to college, but at the end of the first semester I decided to join the Marines and went off to Camp Le Junne, North Carolina. By the time I was out, so much had happened, it took me awhile to grasp it. Of course, Mom had written me about it, but you need to be in town and hear it all, too.

Susie had graduated in 1958 and got married in June to Benny Morris. Seems almost as soon as Andy escorted her to the altar, he went over to Allis and filed for divorce. Norma was so surprised and shocked that she went into the hospital for awhile.

Andy sold the Cleaners and gave her the house and moved to Livingston. Then Norma did the worst possible thing--and probably the most out of character. As soon as the divorce was final, she got married. Mom said she wanted it to look like the divorce was her idea. I don't know.

Of all people in Sweetwood, she married Conrad Newton. Conrad had enough trouble of his own without taking on Norma. His wife Gloria had been an alcoholic, and she had died about a year before. He also had two married daughters and two younger ones at home. It was common knowledge that the Newton girls fought a lot--one younger one and one older one always ganged up against Conrad and the other two. Mom told me that Norma had told her she believed she could help them all get together. What rot!

They stayed married just about long enough for Sweetwood to simmer down again. Then Norma divorced Conrad, got his house, sold it and her own and moved to California. Never been back. I wonder if she knows about Andy--surely Susie's let her know. I talked to Susie at the funeral home this morning, but I didn't want to ask about Norma since all kinds of kinfolks were there.

Just before I got out of the Marines, Andy got married again. He married a widow in Livingston--in fact, it was Jack Price's mother. Jack used to preach here in Sweetwood--great guy, but he got too modern for Sweetwood when he introduced that teen center. Anyway, when Mr.

Price died, Jack's mother Bobbie Jean moved to Livingston. I don't know exactly how Andy and Bobbie Jean met, but I do know they've had a good marriage. Twenty years--think of it--married to her the same number of years he was married to Norma. But the quality of those years must have made it seem twice as long--or half--who knows?

Actually there was about a nine-year gap when I wasn't around Andy a lot--to talk to him every day, you know. We kept in touch, of course, and Mom was good at keeping me posted. After I got out of the Marines, I went to college down at SSU. That's where I met Connie--no, she wasn't from Sweetwood. You'd never know the difference, though. We got married while we were in college. Man! Talk about lean years--I was making better money in Andy's cleaning shop!

Anyway, I graduated in '65, and Connie and I moved to Livingston--been there fifteen years now working for the Re-gency Advertising Corporation. Having

Andy and Bobbie Jean there was the next best thing to having my own parents in town.

Connie and I went over there a lot with the boys. But what I really liked to do was stop by his Cleaners in the afternoon and talk. This one's bigger and fancier than the one here in Sweetwood was, but there's some things about a cleaning shop that don't change. The quiet and the noics--the rhythm. While the steam's whistling out, a fellow has time to think. Then when that old press thunks up, you know whether it's worth saying--or whether to keep your mouth shut.

Yes. It's a fact--my life's been influenced pretty much by Andy Collier--the first half when I was just a punk kid not really paying much attention to anything that wasn't directly related to me having a good time or plenty of money to spend on girls--Paula Hampton mostly. After high school we all drifted apart--even Paula and me--everyone thought we'd get married--everybody but us, I guess. Andy in

his quiet way was showing me something about marriage--about living and accepting and waiting.

Then there was the second half--Connie and me and then the boys. And who was still there? You durned right! Andy. And Bobbie Jean the second time around. That doesn't in any way discredit Mom and Dad, of course. Maybe they saw to it a long time ago I'd have his influence--I wouldn't have believed back then they were so smart! I hope I'm doing something smart for my boys now--something they'll recognize in about twenty years. That'd make me about sixty--like Andy. I'd like to think I could do as much good in sixty years as Andy did in his sixty. Yep, I've known Andy a long time, and in my book, he was a great man.

Well, fellows, it's time to go the the church--looks like they're getting the family in the cars now. I think we pallbearers are supposed to ride in the cars in front of the hearse. I guess you might say this is my last delivery for Andy.

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