

To Josephine Ellen, my Baby sister,

Jo, you were not yet born when I received my Mary Poppins doll. There's no way you knew how special that doll was to me. One of my most cherished childhood memories is that moment when I found her under our tree on Christmas morning, 1966. Her face looked like china, with laughing blue eyes and a lovely red smile. I loved her instantly.

That was a rather lean year for Mom and Dad, who were struggling to raise six children on a nearly non-existent salary. I was 6; I didn't know we were poor, and I had every confidence that Santa would come through with the perfect gift. I know now that Mary Poppins came from Nana, who was at the time the director of public relations at Rhode Island Hospital, and who knew many talented people through the volunteer network there. One of those friends made the doll for me with cloth, yarn, and, obviously, a lot of love.

Mary Poppins (I never called her just Mary, as I imagined her namesake would not approve) was elegant and perfect, from her black-yarn hair to her dyed cloth boots. She wore a white lace blouse and an elegant, blue, ankle-length skirt over myriad petticoats, and a full-length red coat. It was a proper dress for an English nanny.

She was my constant companion for many years. Susan was in high school and was much too busy to notice me, at that time her only sister. Though I do have recollections of her including me in the occasional choir rehearsal with her friends, we didn't have a really close relationship. Today, I don't blame her at all; she was looking forward. As for our four brothers, well, they were boys and that should say enough. I spent a lot of time alone in my room, talking to Mary Poppins and creating stories in my head. She had a glint in her eye and a knowing smile that made me think I could be like her one day—travel to England and beyond, making children laugh and impressing grownups with my tales.



In 1979, I packed Mary Poppins and most of my possessions into boxes and left them behind to join the Marine Corps. You were about 7 when I left, but I was looking ahead, not behind. I see now that I was Susan to you.

Over the next few years, I watched you grow from afar. Despite two more boys being added to the family, I knew you were lonely. I knew you were hurting. I knew you needed a real Big Sister. In my heart I reached out, but in practice I was woefully absent. I often wonder if I could have changed anything in your life by being there.

When I at last settled into my own place, I came back to sort through my boxes for items to carry into adulthood. I was crushed when I pulled out Mary Poppins. She was covered in grime from head to toe. Her beautiful red coat looked moth-eaten, her petticoats had yellowed, and her once-delicate face was beginning to mold and blacken. I shoved her back into the box and left her behind a second time.

I don't know what possessed you to pull her from that box all these years later, or why you thought to get her restored and mail her to me in Virginia. I only know that, this time, when I pulled her from the box, my joy was uncontainable. It is the most thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me.

Today she is propped up in a place of honor in my home, and she serves a new purpose. She reminds me of you, Jo. You and she are so much alike. Like her, you were knocked around for a few years, and you suffered greatly because the adults in your life made a lot of really awful choices. When you were older you tried to run, but always in the wrong direction, and each time ended up in a box worse than the last. I offered nebulous advice from afar, but even if it had been sound, you had no reason to trust me. Many times I thought you were going to give in and settle for the hand you'd been dealt. But as I watched, I saw the Lord lift you from that box and wipe off the dirt and grime. He removed all the tattered clothing and replaced them with clean robes, and he sent you to a safe place. He gave you a new name: Victorious.

Today you are a wonderful wife and mother. You lavish love on your children in a way that you never experienced at their age. And you're in school again, so close to achieving a goal that has eluded you for years. And you're happy. I can tell.

I am incredibly proud of you. I've learned a lot about strength and determination from you. So I wrote this to tell you that you are my inspiration when life gets tough.

Mary Poppins has a small smudge across her face, a scar that testifies to her abandonment. But her eyes still sparkle with a knowing smile that says, "I made it through and I will be ok."

Jo, you made it through and you will be ok. In your life I can see that God truly does repay what the locusts have eaten, (Joel 2:25). It gives me great hope for anyone who is broken, and for this world that is becoming darker. No box can contain what God wants to display. Thank you, for a small kindness that made a big difference in this little girl's life. May your life be richly blessed with all that really matters.

*With much love,
Rosemarie*