

# *Characters*

*by*

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no evil, hear no evil, see no evil, and think no evil.

The stories in this book are based on the author's real life experiences  
with the named characters.

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*These stories are a tribute to those  
Who were part of them!*

*My gratitude goes to my daughter Nancy and my  
friend Diana McLeod for their valued corrections of  
my typos and faulty construction.*

*As always, all mistakes that remain are mine.*

## *Preface*



Our own characters and lives are influenced and shaped by the characters we meet and with whom we associate. This is true whether or not the traits of the characters we meet are good. Think about it. Bad traits of other characters may well have shaped our characters in the opposite direction. Therefore, we owe a gratitude to all characters that have influenced our lives.

In this book, I picked ten characters that have centrally inspired my life. I could have easily picked many more characters of influence in my life, but the ten characters that I have chosen were the ones who were most influential in my life. Nevertheless, I will briefly mention a few characters in this preface that I have omitted.

Fritz Bruno Thormann, my father, and I have had a relatively brief relationship, but, for me, a very memorable one. In my second year of school, I came down with the whooping cough, and the school quarantined me. My father insisted that I should not lose a school year, so he decided to give me private lessons. Every day after we finished our supper, he spent three hours drilling me in the various school subjects. Then, he gave me a load of homework to do for the next day, until he came home to continue his drillings. When finally I returned to school, my teachers gave me some tests, and then reinstated me without any time lost. Soon after that, my father was

drafted into the German army, and I only saw him on two more occasions, during his leaves. He died prematurely at age sixty-one.

Henry Butti was like a father to me. In 1934, the year when I was born, he co-founded the Progress Electric and Refrigeration Company. After Henry's partner died, he sold the company to Victor Webb, who renamed it, "Progress Electric Ltd." and stopped servicing refrigeration equipment. Henry started another company in the 1940s called Modern Electric.

In August 1953, I began my apprenticeship as an electrician with Progress Electric. When I completed my apprenticeship, Vic Webb promoted me to become his assistant manager and, eventually, his manager. After Henry sold his interest in Modern Electric and retired, I engaged him occasionally as a good-will ambassador on Progress Electric's projects. During this period, I really got to know Henry and his special qualities. Having spent many years in the field himself, Henry could empathize with the workers, and, at the same time, he also knew what was required in a business. Thus, Henry was able to give both me and our field workers good advice. Eventually, Henry and I developed a close and lasting friendship.

Henry was always a realistic critic. Whenever he felt strongly about some issue, he would not hesitate to write a letter to The Edmonton Journal, or to some offending authority, to make his views known in no uncertain terms. To my knowledge, the editor of The Edmonton Journal never refused to publish Henry's letters. Henry's perception and streetwise approach to issues always seemed to be welcome. I learned much

from his criticisms.

However, what I'm most grateful for to Henry is that he taught me a deeper appreciation of operas. I went to see these stage shows before I knew Henry, to be sure, but I had no real grasp of them until Henry introduced me to some finer points behind the dramas and the music.

Walter Lawrence was the second president of the Electrical Contractors Association of Alberta. During his term, I was the president of the Edmonton Chapter and, thus, a director of the Association. Walter wasted no time to appoint me chairman of the Business and Public Relations Committee. He handed me a thick envelope full of instructions. The instructions covered everything from chairing meetings to various tasks that he wanted the committee to take on and complete during his presidency. I was ready and willing to accommodate him, and reported our progress at every directors' meeting.

I must say that I was very impressed with Walter's organizational ability, and I adopted some of his methods. Walter was also a critic, but in a helpful way. Whenever my committee was stuck on a task, Walter would offer some useful ways to proceed. Eventually, Walter and I became fast friends.

One of my committee's tasks was to convince our government to grant professional status for electrical contractors. We made an application to the government and received a favorable hearing. Then, Walter suddenly had second thoughts. As a professional electrical engineer himself, he had serious doubts about the electrical contractors' ability to handle

professional status. I had a different opinion and continued my efforts to convince the government. Ultimately, our committee was successful, and Walter was very annoyed with me.

Don McKay was the secretary of the Edmonton Electrical Contractors Association when I was its president. He was extremely helpful to me. I also learned a thing or two from him about keeping proper minutes. When I reached the end of my term, he wrote a speech for me that I was to deliver at the President's Ball in the MacDonald Hotel. I read the speech several times and still couldn't get my mind around it. Uneasy, I finally went to Don and asked him if he minded if I wrote my own speech. He said he didn't mind, of course, but I could see that he was a little disappointed. Nevertheless, we stayed friends over the years. He phoned me many times for information on the various events in the association. After he retired, I met him occasionally at West Edmonton Mall, taking a walk. The last time I saw him, he proudly told me, "I'm eighty years old, you know." However, he only lived a short time after that and after his wife passed away.

Gerry Woods was a salesman of electrical materials. He worked for Northern Electric. As a salesman, Gerry never impressed me much. He was always crying the blues when I didn't favor him with orders. However, Gerry was a great fly fisherman. I'm still glad that he taught me the skill. Fishing the deep holes of the Wildhay River, I can still hear him say, "Your forearm must be an extension of the rod, Art. Never use your wrist. Let your elbow and your shoulder do the work!"

After a day or two of his instructions, I could usually land a fly within five feet of my target. Of course, he easily out-fished me. I was always amazed to watch him make a fly dance over the ripples of the river; some trout jumped visibly out of the water to catch it. Gerry was considerably overweight, and I was very sad when he died prematurely of a heart attack.

Gordon Michie was an electrical engineer. He worked for Progress Electric Ltd. as an estimator when I served my apprenticeship there. He taught me how to estimate electrical work, and we spent many an evening together discussing solutions to complex mathematical problems. We soon became firm friends. He even invited me to his home for Christmas dinner. His wife, Kay, usually spent all day roasting a big turkey. Gordon did the carving. When Kay saw me looking longingly at the carved-up bird, she laughed and said, "Gordon usually gets the parson's nose, but," she looked at Gordon with a hint in her eyes, "since you are our guest, I'm sure he'll offer it to you." Embarrassed, I asked her what she meant by the parson's nose. She laughed again and explained, "That juicy tail end you've been eyeing." Red in the face, I accepted it from Gordon, who smiled regretfully.

James Allan (Bud) Cameron and I were active on some Alberta Construction Association committees even prior to 1978, when we formed a partnership company to do some joint-venture work with a Saudi Arabian company. Three Alberta companies sponsored the partnership company: Fuller & Knowles Inc., represented by Jake Thygesen, J.K. Campbell & Associates Limited, represented by Bud Cameron, and



Progress Electric Ltd., represented by me. The plan had the support of the Alberta government. In September 1978, Bud, Jake and I had a few meetings in Edmonton to plan a trip to Saudi Arabia and discuss a few details regarding our approach with the Saudis.

In October, we left Edmonton at different times, but we agreed to meet in London, England, and, from there, take a Saudi airline to Jeddah.

In Jeddah, we met up with two Alberta government representatives, who had made the arrangements to meet with a sheikh and his manager to discuss a potential joint venture. We had two meetings with the sheikh and two meetings with his manager. At our second meeting with the sheikh, he seemed more interested in watching his imported video tapes than spending any more time with us.

However, we made good use of our time in Jeddah. We explored the city and took many construction-site pictures. We also spent an interesting evening with the sheikh's manager over dinner.

Before our final day in Jeddah, Jake had to leave, and Bud and I spent the last day visiting various construction sites and talking to construction managers and engineers. After we had had our supper on that last day, Bud and I summed up our findings in Jeddah. We agreed that doing business in Saudi Arabia may be riskier than we had anticipated. Inflation was rampant in the country, and the productivity of imported labor was down to a twenty-five percent level. Furthermore, a Saudi partnership appeared to be one-sided: Profits would be equally shared, but losses would belong to the off-shore partners.

Instead of heading back to Alberta immediately, I decided to stop in Frankfurt and visit some suppliers. I wanted to assure myself that the supply lines were in place in case we proceeded with the joint-venture.

This trip to Saudi Arabia and my time together with Bud brought me much closer to him, and I appreciated the insights he showed with respect to the underlying risks of doing business in a foreign country. He was a few years older than I, and I always respected his wisdom.

Dr. Robert MacGill took over from Dr. M.T. Richards, our first family doctor, when Dr. Richards moved to Vancouver, BC. I immediately liked Dr. MacGill and considered him to be as much of a friend as a doctor to me. Of course, I paid him visits only when necessary, but I always looked forward to these visits. We usually spent a few minutes talking of some private things. He told me, for example, that his mother believed in herbal remedies. He liked red wine, and he liked vacationing in Oregon. Dr. MacGill usually squeezed me in on the same day I phoned him for an appointment. He knew that I wouldn't ask for an appointment unless I had a serious ailment. When he retired, I should have been glad for him, but I was also sad to lose such a personable, understanding doctor.

And so on. I could expand the list of characters for a long time, with more names such as Sigrid Glimski, Edna Li, and Garth Myers. I could also include some early boyhood friends in a few more chapters, such as Klaus Frese, Helmut Hoffmann, and Manfred Betka, who were part of a salvage gang that extracted copper, zinc, lead, cast iron, and wood from

the ruins of Berlin, and used the cash received for these treasures on the black market to obtain essential food and supplies for their families. Furthermore, I could also have written some chapters about the chaps with whom I apprenticed at Zeiss Ikon, such as Klaus Groth, Guenther Warmbier, and Lutz Brachold, and I could have added friends like Peter Roeckenwagner, to whom I owed my first inklings of electronics.

As it is, I limited myself to the ten following character chapters, starting with my mother, who was a major influence in my life. Additionally, I added an appendix with a list of strange assertions by some well-known characters. I have also included my comments on them. These assertions have provided me with food for thought, and I hope that they will also provide you with similar stimulations.

One last comment: Regarding The Four Wise Monkeys on the front cover, some folks believe that the fourth monkey depicts *do no evil*; it actually depicts *think no evil*.

Arthur O.R. Thormann  
January 2009

## *Contents*

|    |                                    |     |
|----|------------------------------------|-----|
|    | Preface.....                       | vii |
| 1  | Angelika Jeske.....                | 1   |
| 2  | Herr Mueller.....                  | 13  |
| 3  | Alphonse Piffner .....             | 23  |
| 4  | Gottlieb Hoffmann.....             | 29  |
| 5  | Anton Sowa.....                    | 51  |
| 6  | Edward Kriik .....                 | 65  |
| 7  | Gordon Hammond.....                | 79  |
| 8  | Carl Leviston .....                | 93  |
| 9  | Floyd Brackett .....               | 103 |
| 10 | Paul Black .....                   | 109 |
|    | Appendix: Strange Assertions ..... | 125 |

*Angelika Jeske*

Angelika was a perpetual fountain of wisdom. She was also what is commonly known as streetwise. She was a witty and entertaining woman, who saw some humor in every situation and a silver lining in every dark cloud. Whenever one of her humorous, witty remarks offended someone, she would laugh and quickly declare, “I’ll take it all back and assert the opposite!”

Angelika was born in a small German colony near Novograd Wolynsk in the Ukraine. Before she was two years old, her parents immigrated to Germany with her and her half-brother. In her Ukrainian birth certificate, she was named Agathe,<sup>1</sup> the German version of Agatha, but all her life she was only known by the names of Angelita or Angelika.<sup>2</sup> I shall henceforth refer to her as Angelika, the official name she used during her life in Canada.

Angelika has had a relatively hard life in Germany, and, come to think of it, in Canada as well. Nevertheless, it never seemed to dampen her spirits except, perhaps, during the last year of her life, when her sickness sapped some energy out of her. Her parents were poor, and they placed much demand on their children after WWI, during the inflationary 1920s in Germany. In 1930, her father decided to leave

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<sup>1</sup> The last syllable of this name is pronounced “teh” as in Tehran.

<sup>2</sup> This name is pronounced Angeleeeka as opposed to Angelica.

Arthur O.R. Thormann



Germany and reestablish himself in Canada, but he only scraped enough money together for his and his youngest son's fares. Angelika had to fend for herself until she married Fritz Thormann in 1933.



*Angelika: She was elegant, composed, and beautiful.*

My conscious focus on Angelika's qualities started in 1942. After the German army drafted my father, Angelika assumed the role of sole leadership, and she lived up to it admirably. We lived in Berlin, and Berlin seemed to be the focal point of WWII at the time. I still remember the sirens going off at night to alert us to an imminent air attack, which meant getting up quickly and running down from the fourth floor to the basement for shelter. Sometimes Angelika would stop on the main floor for a peek outside. Usually, all we saw were crisscrossing light beams in the dark sky

Angelika Jeske



that tried to identify aircraft, and all we heard were antiaircraft flaks. However, when Angelika heard bombs dropping nearby, she would quickly rush us down into the basement shelter. In the shelter, most of the apartment dwellers looked tired and scared, but, for my sisters and me, the true reality and seriousness of war had not yet registered. We still viewed these events with a childish excitement. We also had fun during the morning after the air attacks gathering shrapnel, which we used to trade with each other, until the government decided to collect the shrapnel to build more bombs.

Angelika and her women friends were undeterred by the wartime conditions and found plenty of time to get together and enjoy themselves. Berlin seemed to be the transit station for many soldiers on the way to the front lines. They, too, were unnaturally joyful – almost too joyful in light of the terrible bombings every day. I still remember one jolly soldier by the name of Joseph Rommel, who said that there was nothing to worry about and assured the women that the war wouldn't last much longer. His easy-going, carefree nature charmed Angelika, who had befriended him, but he was soon moved to the Russian Front, and we never heard from him again.

In August of 1943, Angelika gave birth to a third daughter. By then, bombings had become critical in Berlin, and women and children were evacuated. The government sent me temporarily to foster parents near Poznan, and as soon as Angelika had recovered sufficiently to travel, the government sent her and my



sisters to a farmyard near Finsterwalde. I joined them there a few months later.

As a rule, Angelika made friends easily, both male and female, but she had problems with the farmer, a gruff, old man, who hated urbanites. Eventually, we moved to a house owned by a couple in a small village called Groebitz, who reluctantly made their second floor available to us. The owners provided these facilities on government orders instead of renting them. Angelika's half-brother's wife, Anni, and her two children joined us there as well, and since the second floor consisted of barely 800 square feet, the two women with their six children were very crowded, but they coexisted in good spirits until the end of the war.

In April 1945, when some retreating German soldiers came through Groebitz, Angelika and Anni met a homeopathic practitioner who gave them a herbal powder made from an African plant that was supposed to trigger abortions. He said it might be useful if the advancing Russians raped them. However, neither Angelika nor Anni had to use it. When the Russians did arrive in Groebitz, Angelika and Anni befriended a German-speaking Russian officer who provided them with badly needed food, and, under his envisaged protection, other Russian soldiers did not dare to bother the two women – they were even friendly and helpful.

Nevertheless, soon after the war ended in Germany, Angelika became restless. She decided to head back to Berlin with her children, and the two



Angelika Jeske



women parted tearfully. Fearing worse conditions in Berlin, Anni had decided to stay in Groebitz for a while longer.

Berlin was plainly a disaster area in 1945. The apartment building where we had lived had also been destroyed, and accommodations in the city were at a premium and barely inhabitable. Fortunately, Angelika's Aunt Ottilie made her small apartment in the urban area available to Angelika and her children, because she and her daughter, Edith, had taken up "safer" residence in their garden-colony cabin, which also gave them more immediate access to their garden products and the rabbits they raised out there. As it turned out, the garden-colony cabin was not so safe, after all – barely a year later, Aunt Ottilie, Edith, and Edith's fiancé were murdered in it.

Accommodations were one thing, and potable water, adequate food, and heating fuel were another. The city's water supply system was inoperative, and the river and canal were badly contaminated. Fortunately, the city had quite a number of water hand pumps, but the wait time in lineups was fairly long, just to fill a couple of pails. Under these conditions, typhoid fever and cholera were widespread in the city.

Food was rationed, and Angelika had quite a time managing these rations. Rations were based on the daily need for calories – physical workers were rated at the highest level, of course, and all others got barely enough to survive. Whenever Angelika failed to manage the rations, we went hungry for a few days, unless the grocer took pity on us and advanced us



some food on future rations – which meant, of course, that Angelika had to start managing more strictly. However, she was also a resourceful woman. She would liberally use items that were not rationed, like cod-liver oil, castor oil,<sup>3</sup> sorrel, and such. Most of these items didn't appeal to our taste buds but were very effective to keep us alive and healthy.

Heating fuel, consisting mainly of coal and wood, was made available only to life-supporting industries, such as bakeries. The population at large had to beg, borrow, or steal their fuel to keep warm during the winter. After scrounging the remaining wood from the ruins around them, most folks burned their furniture next. The weakest of the elderly people just died.

All these shortages created a thriving black market, but a person had to have the required money or other means to trade in it. Fortunately, the scrap-metal business was also flourishing. This enabled people to gather from the ruins lead pipes, copper pipes, and cast-iron radiators, and sell these to scrap dealers for some extra money to buy other necessities on the black market. Additionally, those who were fortunate enough to get the occasional parcel from relatives in the USA or Canada usually traded their acquired cigarettes and coffee for more useful or edible products. All the same, for most people supplies remained short.

On the other hand, divorces, as another casualty of war, were on the increase. Angelika and Fritz were no exception. Fritz never did return to Berlin, he found another woman in Schleswig Holstein, and Angelika's

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<sup>3</sup> Castor oil loses its effect after it is heated up over 80°C.



lawyer and friend, Willi Kuenzel, took care of the legal formalities of the divorce. Willi Kuenzel was quite a humorist. He described the world, mainly himself, in funny poems, where he used the nickname Kuelli Winzel. Eventually, Angelika came across a chap called Hans Hammel. Hans had been a paratrooper during the war. He was good looking, tall, and blond, but slightly balding, and he didn't mind marrying a woman with four children, who was getting parcels from Canada. But the marriage didn't last long. Besides being good looking, Hans turned out to be gay. One day, he came home with gonorrhoea, and that ended the marriage as far as Angelika was concerned.

During the depression of the 1930s, Angelika's father, Reinhold, and his youngest son, Rudolph, worked a homestead in Alberta, Canada. After three years of hard work, in 1933, they had saved enough money to bring over Reinhold's second son, Albert. It took another two years for Reinhold to bring his wife, Henriette, to Canada. Angelika was next in line, but Reinhold couldn't scrape enough money together to bring her, her husband and her children to Canada before WWII broke out. In addition, after WWII, immigration laws were stiffer. It took six more years to satisfy the authorities and make the necessary arrangements to bring Angelika and her four children to Canada, the land where milk and honey flows.

As it turned out, milk and honey did not flow for Angelika and her children for a while. To start with, living conditions on her father's farm were still primitive. Things got even worse after her half-brother,



Alex, and his family arrived on the farm from Germany. Then there were religious clashes. Angelika was a Baptist, her father was a Lutheran, her youngest brother belonged to the main group of the Pentecostal Church, and her mother and second brother belonged to a splinter group of the Pentecostal Church, which they had formed in Barrhead, Alberta. All were vying for Angelika's support, but, ignoring the gratitude she owed them, she refused to abandon her own religious beliefs in favor of one of theirs.

To get away from the conflict, Angelika took a farm job with a nearby Polish family, who were almost hostile towards her. While she worked there, she met a visiting chap by the name of John Skolimoski, who tried to talk her into coming to work at his place. He owned a sheep farm about twenty kilometers further north of Barrhead. She accepted his invitation on the condition that she could bring her three daughters along. After all, she reasoned, she had to look after her children, which she had been doing most of her adult life. He was only too happy to oblige her, and she eventually married him six years later. The marriage was more one of convenience than of passionate love. In any case, moving to John's farm did not improve Angelika's living conditions, which remained primitive for many years. He eventually did build a new house for her, including electric lights, a gas furnace, indoor toilet facilities, and running water, all of which were missing in his old shack of a house.

John tried his best to make Angelika happy. He took her to town for shopping whenever she felt like it.

Angelika Jeske



He bought her and her daughters everything they needed. He took her visiting to his friends. He entertained her friends and family members, whenever they came to his farm. He taught her how to drive his car. He built her a new house. And he tried to humor her when she appeared unhappy. Yet, a deep sadness lingered with Angelika. She was like a fish out of water. Although she had picked up the English language sufficiently to get by, she was never as fluent in it as she was in the German language. This may have been the reason why some of her Berliner wittiness had also disappeared.

Eventually, John turned bitter. He resentfully complained about his lot in life to his friends and anyone else who cared to listen to him. He felt nobody appreciated him enough. His health was failing him, too. He struggled for a while with various ailments and finally succumbed to pneumonia in November of 1974. Angelika remained on the farm for another nineteen years. During this time, she befriended a retired farmer named Manuel Bilau, who offered to help her manage John's farm, but it was soon apparent that with Manuel's help they mismanaged more than managed the farm. Angelika had rented the farm to another farmer on a percentage-crop-share basis, which yielded her around \$3,600 per year. Come harvest time, Manuel and Angelika counted the truckloads of grain the renter removed, and Manuel concluded that the renter shortchanged her. Angelika was upset about this and asked me to help her find another renter.

This task was clearly not part of my expertise, and



I set out to inform myself properly. I bought a book on farm rentals and spent quite a bit of time getting familiar with the necessary farm-rental conditions – seeding and fertilizing requirements, summer fallow obligation, fence and building maintenance, and such. I even met with our lawyer, Carl Leviston, who was a landowner and had a good knowledge of farm-rental details. Next, I bought a farm-rental-agreement form and drove to Angelika’s farm to make the necessary arrangements for a new renter.

I explained my preparations to Angelika, and she told me sheepishly that Manuel and she had already engaged another renter. I was dumbfounded.

“You mean I’ve done all this work for nothing?” I demanded to know.

“We hadn’t heard anything from you for a while,” she answered, “and we thought we should take advantage of the opportunity that came along to get a new renter.” Manuel just sat there giving me his perpetual smirk. He had obviously exercised a lot of influence over Angelika.

“What kind of an agreement did you sign?” I wanted to know.

Angelika got up to get a shoebox, where she kept her papers. She took out a piece of paper with some scribbles on it and showed it to me. “I made notes of what we’d agreed on,” she explained.

I couldn’t believe my eyes. “There’s nothing here about summer fallow or building and fence maintenance, or any other obligations of the renter,” I said. “It just says he’ll pay you \$2,000 per year.”

Angelika Jeske



“He’s a farmer,” Manuel, contemptuously, piped up, “and he knows what needs to be done to a farm.”

“I know he is a farmer, but does he know that he is obligated to do what needs to be done? Has he signed an agreement to that effect? And what about the rental term: When does it start and end?”

“It starts in spring, and it ends when Angelika wants it to end,” said Manuel, smirking at me.

“We trust him,” said Angelika, plaintively. “At least he won’t cheat me. I won’t have to count the truckloads of grain he removes, and I’ll get a steady \$2,000 every year.”

“That figure tells me he’s already cheating you,” I said dejectedly. Manuel shook his head as if to say, you don’t know what you’re talking about. Angelika just shrugged her shoulders.

After Manuel died in 1993, Angelika put the farm up for sale. This must have upset her new renter, because he refused to pay her for the last year’s rent. She issued a statement of claim against him, of course, but, in the end, she settled for a reduced amount of \$1,500 rather than proceeding to trial against him.

While her farm was up for sale, Angelika moved to an apartment in Barrhead. She seemed to be happier there, at least not as lonely. Eventually, she met another retired farmer named Oscar Shier. They decided to share her apartment to keep the costs down. Angelika and Oscar had a few good years together. Both in their eighties, they supported each other well. Then, Angelika had a mild stroke, and when Oscar slipped in the bathtub and hurt his hip, she was



powerless to help him get out. Oscar had to have an operation. The operation itself was successful, yet, he died a few days later. Soon afterward, Angelika ended up in the Barrhead hospital for various treatments. The hospital eventually transferred her to a nursing home. The staff at the nursing home looked after her well, but one day she had a bad fall and broke her hip. This seemed to rob her of her remaining energy. A few weeks after this mishap, Angelika died peacefully, on March 12<sup>th</sup> 2004.

The relatively primitive conditions during Angelika's first twenty years in Canada, and the unhappy family relationship that had met her when she arrived at her father's farm, were quite a culture shock for her – in her mind, even the postwar conditions of the bombed city of Berlin had been better. During those first years in Canada, she regretted many times leaving Germany. Nevertheless, setting personal considerations aside, Angelika's life was a definite success just looking after the interests of her children: first during the terrible times of WWII, then during the postwar years, and finally during her adverse circumstances in Canada. Angelika never wavered when it came to deciding between her welfare and the welfare of her children.



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