

Story Circle Network

True Words from Real Women

Special Story Issue January 2002

The organization for women with stories to tell...

Welcome to *True Words from Real Women*, the annual publication of stories from Story Circle Network. Each January we put together a collection of stories written in the previous year by women who have participated in various activities of the Story Circle Network—stories from “Writing from Life” workshops, stories from local Story Circles, stories from our Internet Chapter’s e-circles, and stories that have been submitted for publication in the Journal. This year, we have dedicated a section to writings from our web site about the disaster of September 11, *Give Sorrow Words*. We hope that you will enjoy reading the life writing presented here, and that also you might consider submitting your own stories to Story Circle.

—Carolyn Blankenship, Editor, 2002 Issue



In the Voice of Angels

By Judy Fettman
Ann Arbor MI

It had been sixteen years since I had sung anything besides children’s songs—“The Wheels on the Bus” and “The Teddy Bears’ Picnic.” But I yearned to sing again those large works of the soul that I had long loved: Bach, Haydn, and Beethoven. So in January of 1997 I joined the University Choral Union and began singing seriously again. But while I had been accepted by the esteemed Choral Union, I felt it was only by the skin of my teeth that I had passed the audition, and by promising that now at age 50, I would begin voice lessons. And while I felt privileged to be singing with this group, I was frightfully out of practice.

By March we had already performed our first major piece of the season, and with some effort I had managed to learn it and sing it. Now we were beginning to rehearse the next piece, Brahms’ “German Requiem.” It was not altogether unfamiliar to me. Often I had enjoyed listening to the recording, and thirty years ago I had sung it—once. Now at the first rehearsal, as I stood in the front row of the alto section, the music looked strange and unfamiliar. I began to struggle through it, sight-reading. Suddenly I heard an alto voice, deep and resonant, “rich, like whipped cream” my old director used to say. The voice sounded effortless, blending with the others, “*Denn alles Fleisch es ist wie Gras...*” “Behold, all flesh is as the grass....” Who was making that glorious sound? I turned to see who might be sitting behind me, and the rich voice also turned. My God, it was ME! It was as though this soulful music about death and the fragility of life, had its source somewhere beyond myself, and was being sung perfectly—channeled through me, in my voice. This music seemed unfamiliar and strange, and yet at the same time my brain knew, and my voice anticipated, every nuance.

Looking back, there are likely explanations for this experience. Perhaps with a few voice lessons, I heard qualities

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in my own voice that I had not known were there. Or maybe I heard my own voice blended with those better voices standing behind me. And even more likely, from somewhere deep in my subconscious, I remembered that alto line I had sung thirty years before, the memory circumventing my consciousness and appearing to come out of nowhere. And all these may be true. But this convergence of circumstances does not diminish my experience that night—the experience of mystery. It was a mystical experience of becoming the instrument of some higher power, of an ethereal, otherworldly angelic voice singing through me. Looking back, I name this an encounter with the unknowable, the sacred. For the length of that beautiful movement, I was no longer just a single ordinary singer, but connected with all the other singers in that room by a mutual reverence, connected with our conductor in perfect empathy, connected to all the choirs in the past 140 years that have ever sung this requiem, connected back to the soul of Brahms himself. I was singing in the voice of angels.



Hunter's Moon
by Sharon Wildwind
Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Hunter's moon: the first full moon, following the harvest moon, in late September or early October. I know the lore.

Deer, elk, bison, and caribou rut in September and early October. If hunting starts too early and bucks are killed before they impregnated does, there will be too few baby animals in the spring. When the hunter's moon appears, it is safe to hunt. I understand the physics.

1) The fall moon looks bigger at moon rise because it is closer to the horizon where it can be visually compared with familiar objects like trees and apartment buildings. It's not really any bigger than it is when it is higher in the sky. It's just that when it is higher in the sky, there are no reference points.

2) The fall moon looks orange because light is refracted off the Earth's atmosphere to the moon. Different parts of the visible spectrum are refracted at different angles. The red and yellow light are refracted at the best angle to reach the moon, which reflects back this part of the visible spectrum.

Knowledge is a poor mediator.

I am never prepared for the hunter's moon rising huge and blood orange over the senior's apartment building next door. The sight stops me dead every year. I am afraid that the moon has slipped its moorings and is coming straight at me.

"When it is higher in the sky, there are no reference points," I say to myself, then, "*the rider of the moon goes by and the bright star falls behind,*" which is a line from *The Witch of the Westmoreland*.

*"And wet she rose from the lake, and fast and fleet went she
One half the form of a maiden fair with a jet black mare's body"*

Forget paying the bills. Who cares if we have bread and milk for breakfast? How long will it be before they miss me if I don't show up for work? I want to run with the wolves, or at least get around to reading that book. I want expensive white wine and a banquet of exotic foods served to me while I lie on a blanket under the moon. I want to make love to my husband; more important, I want to make love to one of my characters—Dan, the tall, bearded one—the one who's been with me the longest. Problem is, Dan is very reserved, Scottish. He'll never go for a moon-lit tryst on a blanket, no matter how good the food. His style is porridge and hot milk. Just why is it I created him?

The moon fades to the color of a wheel of new cheese. It shrinks, rising like a balloon. I am cold and jiggle my key impatiently in the cantankerous door lock.

Story Circle

True Words from Real Women is an anthology, published each January. It is written by and for women who want to share their experiences. Its purpose is to encourage readers to become writers, guide women to set down their true stories, and encourage the sharing of women's lives. It is not intended to replace qualified therapeutic assistance.

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the editor for this issue, is a grandmother, gardener, and desktop publisher. She serves on the Board of Story Circle Network and facilitates a monthly Writing Circle and Older Women's Legacy groups. She is the author of *From the Heart: A Manual for Facilitators*, and loves sharing and hearing women's stories.

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Change of address: If you move, please tell us. Unless you send us your new address, we can't guarantee that you'll receive your journal!

One Hot Day
by **Mary Jo Doig**
Glasgow VA

It is August 29, 2001 in Glasgow, Virginia, nearing the end of a very hot, humid day that howls out for rain to break through the mugginess. When the phone rings, I hear my mother's eighty-five-year-old voice say, "Mary Jo?" It is not a greeting. It's a question. A completely unnecessary question since she knows full well it's me. But what grips and squeezes my gut is the sound of her voice. I've heard it only a few times in my life, that mixture of fear, apprehension, maybe even terror.

I inhale deeply and prepare myself for something disastrous. Someone has been terribly injured or died. My sister, Jackie's face, comes into my mind, followed by my sister Bonnie. Mom's next words immediately halt the parade of faces.

"Do you remember Tommy Carson? He just called me." My knees instantly lose all their muscle strength and I feel the color drain from my face. I drop down onto my computer chair and suddenly find I cannot inhale enough of the hot, heavy air in my cabin.

"Yes," I say, in a weak voice that I don't recognize. How could I ever forget Tommy Carson? It has been... how many years? My spinning mind cannot connect with logical figures right now but it's been since 1973, however long that is.

"He's been trying to find you for several months now." I knot my brow. How could this be? "Mom, Tommy Carson was Keith's best friend. Was it that Tommy Carson?"

"Yes." Silence.

It is so damn hot in this cabin. I reach over and pull the floor fan right in front of me and turn it on, while my thoughts whirl around like the fan blades.

"What did he say?" I ask, while a million more questions tumble through my mind.

"He wanted to know where you were and if you were okay, if you were still alive. How Chip is. He was so filled with emotion. He sobbed when he talked about Keith. He told me Keith was his best friend, starting in kindergarten, and that he has never forgotten him."

I am stunned. We are talking about the same Tommy Carson.

The last time I saw Tommy Carson was at my son Keith's funeral. The image returns quickly—a little dark-haired, second-grade boy holding his mother's hand. I see them when they slowly enter the funeral home and my heart fills as I force one foot to move in front of the other as I go toward them. I bend down in front of Tommy, my thighs on the back of my ankles and struggle to think what I can say to comfort this child, so fragile in the face of death. What do I say to a seven-year-old boy whose best friend, my son, has just died? I can not remember the words I said to him, but I can still deeply feel my heartache and compassion for this little boy.

My Mom is feeling protective. "I told him you've had a difficult life. I told him you were in Virginia doing a lot of writing. He said he's been doing a lot of writing, too."

She pauses. "I didn't want to give him your phone number because I wasn't sure if you would want me to, but I told him

I'd call you and give you his number... Was that the right thing to do?" she asks, anxiously.

I smile, relieved. "Yes. You did exactly the right thing. Thanks, Mom. I want to talk to him. What's his number?" I reach for my pencil, moved beyond words that, after all these years, Tommy has reached out to me.

I stare down at the phone number I have written at the top of my open journal. Tommy still lives in Oneonta, where Keith and Chip and I lived for nearly all of Keith's life. Memories flood back. Suddenly I am a thirty-year-old single mom again with two little boys. My former husband comes home one night and says he has fallen in love with a girl from the telephone company, packs up and leaves, then a few weeks later, completely disappears. Chip is three, Keith is one when our world shatters.

Six months after my husband's disappearance, I pull myself together enough to make a plan so I can provide for my sons. We move from Long Island, NY back upstate to Oneonta where I'd started college before my marriage so I can finish my degree in English education.

One snowy afternoon in early December, 1973 I have taken Keith to his pediatrician and on our way home, a young girl loses control of her car and slides across the road, hitting us head-on. My son is gravely injured, and four heartbreaking months later, after it is so clear that he can never heal from his brain injury, his beautiful spirit is freed.

Now I dial Tommy's number. The phone rings once. After the second ring, a deep voice says, "Mary Jo." It is a statement. His voice trembles, filled with emotion.

So does mine. "Yes," I reply softly. "Tommy." It feels so good to say his name again. "How did you ever find me?"

Many months ago, Tommy says, he started his search for us by contacting the funeral home. With their information and then a search in the local newspaper for the articles about Keith, he'd gotten my mother's name and then her phone number.

He describes the deep sorrow of losing Keith when he was a child. And how he felt, as a child, he had lost not only his best friend, but a second family when, some months later, Chip and I move away. He tells me how he'd looked up to Chip as the "big brother" that he'd never had and viewed me as a second mother. And, through the years, how he'd wondered where we were, how we were, and if we were okay.

And then he is telling me things that are bringing back memories that are so richly filled—of a time when my son was still alive. I answer Tommy's questions, too, and when I slowly lay this unfamiliar phone back on the base an hour and a half later, Tommy and I have planned to meet before snow flies in the Catskills.

It's dark outside now and the heat has lessened. Still no rain though. The breeze from the fan has cooled me even while I have been completely unaware it was doing so. I turn it off and think about sleep. My thoughts, like the fan, have now stopped spinning.

I so look forward to our visit, knowing that we will share some memories and feelings that will be painful and difficult, yet others that will bring us laughter and re-connect with happy moments. Above all, there will be healing for us both. My gratitude that Tommy persevered and then reached out is infinite.

Give Sorrow Words. . .

On September 12, 2001, the Story Circle Board of Directors convened a special e-mail meeting to explore what we might do to help ourselves and others deal with our grief and loss after the disaster of September 11. A day later, we posted our new web page where women—and men, too—were invited to share their stories, to express their anguish and begin to heal. These three pages contain a sampling of these healing stories. To read more go to <http://www.storycircle.org/sorrow.html>.

River of Joy

by Leslea Smith

Hillsboro OR

(With thanks to Leah Smith
for permission to tell this story)

September 15, 2001. I wake up on the couch in Mom and Dad's apartment in Seattle. I have spent the night with my nieces, Leah and Abby. Mom and dad are away. The girls are asleep in beds we have made on the living room floor, so we can all sleep in the same room. This was supposed to be a happy time, but it's hard to be happy. It's only four days After. The wounds to our national and individual selves are deep and raw. The girls, ages 6 and 5, feel the wounds too.

Yesterday, we went to a park to play after dinner. We found ourselves invited to join a candlelight vigil some neighbors were having. We joined hands with the neighbors, of many races and ages, in a circle around the candles they had brought. We prayed and sang songs. We said the word "peace" in as many languages as we knew. We shared silence.

When we got back to the apartment, the girls wanted to have our own circle. We borrowed one of Grandma's candles, placed in on the back patio, lit it, and formed a circle around it. We sang songs. Leah said a prayer. Abby didn't want to say anything, which was fine. We had, as Leah called it, a silent moment.

This morning, Leah wakes up first. She's the morning person among us. When I wake up, she climbs up on the couch with me. I turn on the television. I just want to make sure no new terrible event has happened while we were asleep. The only thing on TV is news, for the fourth day in a row. They're still talking about the same terrible things, not new ones. I raise the remote control to turn the TV off.

"No, let's watch it for a while," Leah says. I look at her serious face. Something is going on. I leave the TV on and hold her close. After a while, she says, "Aunt Leslea, I have a question for you."

"What is it, Leah?"

"Aunt Leslea, my daddy said if there's a war, he's going to fight in it. That scares me. I don't want my daddy to get killed."

"Oh, honey, that is scary. I really don't think your daddy would fight in a war. But I wasn't there. I didn't hear what he said that scared you. I think you should talk to him about it directly. Are you comfortable doing that?"

"Yeah. I'll say, 'Daddy, you said you were going to fight in a war. I don't want you to.'"

"That would be a good thing to say, Leah."

We watch the news reports for a couple minutes.

"Aunt Leslea?"

"Yes, Leah."

"Are soldiers—I can't say that word right."

"Soldiers?"

"Yeah. Are they going to march down my street?"

I pause, trying to work out how to answer such a question. "Leah, I can't think of any reason why soldiers would ever march down your street."

We talk a little longer about what we've seen and heard the last few days. Then I turn off the TV so we can get breakfast, wake up Abby, and get to the girls' soccer games on time.

It's an unhappy time. All of us are anxious, grieving not only the events of September 11, but our loss of security.

And yet, beneath the unhappiness, I feel something deeper, a current of joy. Neighbors come together in a park to join hands, reflect, and pray for peace. Children, even children who don't go to church, crave silent moments. My beloved niece Leah trusts me enough to ask me her hardest questions. Faith, hope and love are strongly, vigorously alive. A river of joy flows through these unhappy times.



Dark Tuesday

by Melanie Alberts

Austin TX

Up early as always. I spent the first couple of hours getting my husband off to work, myself showered and dressed, and I made my son Zane's breakfast. I tidied the living room before Emily's visit. Zane, who is two, was diagnosed with expressive language delay and Emily is the therapist who visits on Tuesday mornings to help him form words through play. When the phone rang it was Emily, saying she'd be running late, she was watching TV. I thought, what could be so important that she'd be so transfixed by something on TV but I said, no problem, get here when you can.

I checked for new email on my laptop in the kitchen. A single sentence, all caps message sent by the owner of a political website announced breaking news so I turned to the TV and flicked it on. ABC news showed the World Trade Center with smoke clouds rising into a light blue sky. In an instant it switched cameras to another familiar building that was also emitting smoke. Two freak plane crashes in one morning?

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My first reaction was disbelief, as I listened to the disbelief in the voices of the commentators.

Emily arrived and got busy playing with Zane but I had to listen some more. I had many questions and as more news filtered through, felt stirrings of anger. I tried to get the New York Times site online with no luck. I turned off the TV and tried to concentrate on Zane's therapy. My husband called to suggest that I cancel my afternoon meeting near the State Capitol building. Very distracted, I returned to Zane and Emily and their Play-Doh dinosaurs. As I rolled out a hot pink snake, my thoughts were in New York and northern Virginia. My brother Christopher lives in the city! I'll call my parents later. What other destruction was waiting for us? If they hit the Pentagon, does that mean a nuclear missile is on the way? Zane smooched the snake I gave him with one hand and said "broke!" in a loud, triumphant voice.

Emily applauded his progress and I was happy that he was using his new words. One of which, when I told her he had been saying it a lot recently, struck me as being appropriate for this day. Dark. Zane exclaims this word in excitement when I flick the lights on and off in his room at night. But I was beginning to see the eerie meanings of darkness. The darkness a thousand souls must have felt while trapped a smoke filled, crumbling skyscraper. The empty, dark places in the lives of those who lost family and friends. The evil darkness of a terrorist's heart. The dark threat of what other disasters may lie ahead. Once Emily left I just took Zane onto my lap and hugged him. I gave him a hug for his Nanna who called from England just to hear our voices. And for my parents who called to say that Christopher was sleeping and had to be told what was going on a few miles away from his own apartment. My husband came home at lunchtime just to be with us.

Three days later I often think of the suffocating darkness of that morning. My husband and I shiver to think we were in Fort Lauderdale last week where the terrorists took flight lessons. This morning I batted back tears as the national anthem played on the car radio. Every conversation I overheard in the café was about Tuesday. It is a good thing. We are talking about our anger, sadness, and incomprehension. We are slowly overcoming the darkness using our words.



September Song
by Linda Wisniewski
Doylestown PA

There were so many. Over six thousand people died on September 11, 2001 in terrorist attacks on my country. I would be willing to bet that every one of them sang at some time in their lives. "Happy Birthday," "Havah Nagilah," "The Star-Spangled Banner," "The Barney Song" ("I love you, you love me..."), "God Bless America." In a couple of hours on one awful morning, their voices all were stilled. Suddenly, this September, it's so very hard to sing.

Last night I had a dream. The maintenance man at an apartment complex where I'd lived thirty years ago stood outside the front door of my parents' little house where I grew

up. My husband and I were inside, in the bed where my parents had slept all those years ago. Steve, my husband, was asleep. I lay awake, waiting and wondering what this man was about to do. I was afraid of him. He knocked on the door, but I stayed in bed. He knocked again, loudly, a few times. After awhile, it was quiet. I got out of bed and peered out the window. The street was empty and the neighborhood was asleep. I thought he was gone. Suddenly, a sound woke Steve up—the man was inside! We saw him standing by my old upright piano, his hands on the keys. I started to scream in fear and frustration but couldn't make a sound. Terrified, I tried with all my will to scream until I did and woke up Steve, for real, in our own bed here in Pennsylvania, in September, 2001. He shook my shoulder gently, saying, "Wake up, wake up. You had a nightmare." "Thanks," I said, and lay awake for awhile, trying hard to separate the real nightmare from the one in my dream.

My safety, my home, my country has been violated, invaded, touched in a personal way by men who looked ordinary, like they belonged here. They were men who lived and studied here. I couldn't keep them out, and my fear threatened to cut off my voice. My fear paralyzed me.

Finally, last night, my subconscious was able to get my attention. It told me I am afraid, but if I try hard, my voice will break through the fear.

So how do I live now, with this fear? It helps to share it. It helps that my minister is afraid, that my coworkers and friends and family are afraid. We are all afraid together, and can help each other through. We want to protect our children from the bad feelings, and so we look for ways to go on, though afraid.

We sing "God Bless America," over and over, because it feels so right. "Amazing Grace." "Let There Be Peace On Earth." At a church service, two days after the attacks, my tears finally came when I tried to sing "One More Step." They poured from my eyes in a flood of despair and I let them come and listened as others took up the song I could not sing.

When I finally was able to scream in my nightmare, I ended it. I was awake, in a world that has been a waking nightmare, but awake nonetheless. Still here, as the victims of September 11th are not. And now I see it: the message of my dream. My voice cannot be still, or what am I living for? So many good people, so many ordinary people, so many heroes have been silenced. We, the living, are stunned and shaken, but we are still here. We can still speak—speak our minds, speak for peace and justice, speak our prayers. Speak for them. We can still write—love letters, petitions for peace, encouraging notes, condolence cards, stories that witness the terror, the loss, and the heroism. And even though it's hard, so hard, we can still sing. For ourselves, taking comfort in the familiar words and music. For them, gone from the earth but alive in the hearts of those who remember. For the children, in whom hope lives. We can still sing.



September 11, 2001

by Nancy Rigg
Los Angeles CA

It has been really hard to watch coverage of the terrorist events that have shattered all illusions of safety and well being that this country has clung to for so long. I was on the phone with Mom and Dad when video footage of the second airplane being slammed into the World Trade Center was replayed. I burst into tears. "Oh, my God, oh, my God," I wept while watching each of the 110 stories of that magnificent building pancake down, like some twisted scene in an action movie. All those people! All those people. All those people. Dying.

Destiny turned on a dime today and my little world came to an immediate halt even as the rest of the world gasped. I found myself catapulted into a time warp of sudden death. People missing. An impossible search. Not knowing. Not knowing. Not knowing.

When you've lost a loved one tragically and abruptly, seeing new tragedy unfold before your eyes sends you spinning. It isn't that I'm suffering flashbacks. More like flash-forwards. Knowing what the families, friends, and colleagues of those who are dear or still missing are experiencing now and will have to endure in the near future. My God. The horror. The heartache. Pain beyond all imagining. Even my physical body remembers how it is to suffer this kind of emotional trauma.

My mouth has a sick metallic taste in it. I walk around distractedly trying to keep busy and then I stop suddenly to weep. I watch television for a moment and turn it off. On and off. On and off. I get the chills, followed by a feverish flush, followed by acute nausea. Just like when Earl disappeared in the flood.

The phone rings. It's Karen. Her son, who was a firefighter, died suddenly in the line of duty in 1993. We cry together, knowing that the sorrow of the families is inconsolable. This is sorrow beyond imagining. On a massive scale not seen in this country since the Civil War, when we inflicted this kind of pain on ourselves.

Who is the enemy here? There are no uniforms. No swastikas. And the soldiers dying in the line of duty today are not just military. Those on the front lines of this new battlefield are cops and firefighters and paramedics. The latest news reports indicate that more than 300 of New York's finest, including the Fire Chief and many members of the New York Urban Search and Rescue Task Force, may have died as they entered the World Trade Center to do what they do every day of their lives—rescue people. The building shuddered and collapsed around them.

So much death. So much destruction. And all those families not knowing. Clinging to hope even as despair shoves its way into their consciousness with each passing hour and no one recovered alive...

I watch news reports as three FDNY firefighters at Ground Zero raise a flag on top of the rubble pile, and Arlington, Virginia firefighters on the roof of the Pentagon drape the flag of the United States of America over the edge of the blast-devastated building. Modern day Iwo Jima.



Another Day
by Kymberli Ward
Sayre OK

I sat in my car, listening in disbelief to the breaking news stories, waiting for the punch line; paralyzed, I cannot move. New York, Washington, Pennsylvania ... we are at war, say those in power. I do not doubt it.

At my isolated temporary "home." My long distance beloved is in upstate New York. "All circuits are busy." In my heart, my mind, all circuits are dead, stunned, numb.

A co-worker of my sister's was a passenger on the first plane to strike the first tower. My loved ones are safe, far enough away from the carnage. This time.

I listen over the past two days to the anger, the horror, the disbelief. "I keep expecting Bruce Willis or Jean-Claude Van Damme to show up and the movie to end," said my friend. I watch the faces about me—young people I attend school with who don't remember the Kennedys, King, Viet Nam, the Gulf, the missiles of Cuba from my childhood.

My belief system is bizarre, eclectic to most. I stop at a Catholic Church to light candles for the dead, the living, the missing. Phone calls to both coasts, to hear the voices I love, my adult child, my parents, my beloved.

And again and again I realize, I do not know how to respond. Nothing in my experience could have prepared me to deal with this. That seems universal and yet, go on with life, I hear and I wonder, to what end? To what point? Deep depression. Longing to run, just to be in the arms of someone who loves me and I am very alone. Yes, I am afraid.

Great Mysteries, bless us all, the human family. This is the face of warfare today, now and forever more. Amen.

Visit the Story Circle Web Site
www.storycircle.org



Snow

by Jean McGroarty
Battle Ground IN

In January, when the first big snowstorm of the new year hits, most people's thoughts turn to evenings by the fireplace, hot chocolate and warm comforters. When I see the first dark clouds of a storm, I can't wait to get out in the thick of it, in the woods watching it happen.

The dire weather prediction, the ominous clouds, the sight of heavy snow—any of these can make me restless, excited, eager to stop what I'm doing and leave the house. I don long underwear, sweat pants, hiking boots, thick gray sweatshirt, hat, scarf and two pairs of gloves. I don't wear a coat. It's too restricting and the intense work of walking in deep snow makes a coat unnecessary.

I step out my front door into a world of white. Heavy snow is falling, the wind causing it to drift in crazy angles and sheets of cascading flakes. Although the hour is early, street lights are on—hazy, haloed and dim. I walk across a street that hasn't been plowed yet, my prints the only ones for blocks around. I start out still feeling the warmth from the house, with just a hint of cold wind on my exposed eyes and upper cheeks. I walk toward the woods, impatient to be in the calm quiet of the forest.

The snow grows deeper as I trudge toward my favorite trail. I walk faster and work harder just to get where I want to be. Despite my increased effort, my hands begin to feel the cold and my fingers become numb, one digit at a time. I continue down a hill, over a narrow footbridge, onto the trail that flirts with a small creek, coming close enough to touch, then drifting away, then touching again. The snowdrifts are pronounced, beautiful, looking like the Sahara in a world of trees. In some places the snow climbs knee deep; in others I can see brown grass. Out on the meadow that borders the woods the tips of prairie grasses struggle to stand above the rising tide of white. A thin layer of snow coats them, like a delicate crocheted pillowcase border.

Into the woods I go, my fingers feeling a relentless pain, a gauge of how far I've gone and what the temperature must be. The trees are black bones with white lace bordering their trunks and branches. There is quiet here, except for the rare car or truck trying to make its way down the nearby snowy road. The snow takes even those sounds and mutes them, makes them seem far away and easy to ignore in favor of the silence of the woods. The wind is broken by the creek valley

and the forest, but the trees groan with discomfort, their tops buffeted by the gusts. The winter light is filmy, streaked with white moisture.

I feel like an explorer, a modern-day Pere Marquette or Meriweather Lewis. I see no other human tracks ahead of me. I am in new territory, never discovered, never touched. I am the first and I love this feeling. This is what I've come to see, the blank slate of the snow on the trail and the lace in the trees. The only signs that others have been here before me are animal signs—graceful little mouse tunnels that make ridged trails on the snow, so the mice can travel safely from here to there without fear of cold or predators. There are other signals—where deer have gathered to share their body warmth and mark their territory with beaten down drifts, urine and scat; or where beavers have dragged their flat tails over webbed footprints to make odd, narrow paths curving across my even odder path. The creek, though covered with snow, still manages to snake black, watery fingers in and out of the ice. I see a flash of red in the black-and-white landscape, a cardinal out where he doesn't belong.

After a mile of walking my body becomes accustomed to the cold. I can feel my hands again—first warmth in my little fingers, then a burning sensation in my index fingers, then all the fingers are hot and flexible. The scarf around my nose and mouth is now warm and moist, and I lower it. I'm ready to continue on the long walk. I head for that one little patch that I love so much in the summer, to see how it looks now, to see what wonders the snow has worked in my familiar forest. I feel as if I could walk like this for days, seeing marvel after marvel, wonder after wonder, the hand of God made visible only to me.

This walk in the snow can't last. There is a meal to cook, dishes to wash, everyday things calling me back home. I turn and retrace my steps, but I stop again and again to breathe it all in, to "watch the woods fill up with snow," as Robert Frost wrote. My pleasure at these sights is limitless. I reluctantly return to the fireplace, the hot chocolate and the comforters that others love so much, but still dream of a white and black wood-land that only I have seen, and no one will ever know as I do.

"The souls of women have their own cycles and seasons, and to be too long away from her soul-self causes a woman to pursue what she thinks she should do, rather than what she truly wishes. We stay away too long from our soul's home because we think we derive more spiritual credit by staying than we think we will gain by going home. We are not used to letting others take the oars. We are afraid those we love will not understand. We are too identified with our compulsion to 'heal everything, fix everything.' It's really, really hard to hand over whatever we've been so busy with, and just go. But return we must—to a place where we feel of one piece, where we feel both safe and free, to a nutritive inner world that has ideas, order and sustenance all of its own."

Clara Pinkola Estes, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*



Aunt Marcella and the Easter Rabbit

by Dora Frost
Austin TX

Aunt Marcella was a wonderfully talented woman. She was always impeccably dressed, she knitted and crocheted beautifully, her house was always immaculate and she was a marvelous cook. She loved to tell stories about living on a farm, when she was a young girl, and how they always had unexpected company dropping in to visit. She and her sister loved cooking and they would put together wonderful meals to feed whoever happened to be visiting.

When she and Uncle Charlie moved to Los Angeles, she decided to open her own catering shop. She did very well, catering all kinds of parties, wedding receptions, and she even had a contract to prepare meals, once a month for the Navy, when they were in port. The only drawback was that she had never learned to drive. She and Uncle Charlie were retired by then and he would drive her everywhere she needed to go.

One day she decided to go downtown to a store that had just opened, to look for some things for display in her catering shop. Uncle Charlie was busy that morning, so she asked him to drop her off at the bus stop and she would call when she was ready to catch the bus home.

She went to the store but didn't see anything that she especially liked, so she called Uncle Charlie to pick her up. On the way to the bus stop, she saw a life-sized inflated rabbit, dressed in a black tuxedo, in a display window, and she went in to ask the price. It was a few weeks before Easter and she thought this would make a wonderful display for the window in her shop. She went in, bought the rabbit and headed for the bus stop.

When the bus came, as she started to get on, the driver looked at her and said, "You can't bring that thing on the bus!" My aunt, being a person who was never intimidated by anyone, replied, "And why not?" He responded, "Because it's too big!" My aunt replied, "I'll pay for him!" The bus driver grudgingly responded, "Okay." So Aunt Marcella got on the bus, paid for herself and her rabbit, found two seats and sat down with the rabbit sitting in the seat next to her.

As the bus made it's way closer to home, it became more and more crowded. Of course, everyone on the bus was staring at the lady with the rabbit in a tuxedo. But no one said a thing. Finally, the bus was completely full and there were no seats left. A woman boarded the bus, and looking around and seeing that all the seats were taken, stopped where my aunt was seated and said, "Well! You could at least put that thing on your lap!" To which my aunt responded, "He paid, and he sits!"

Fleeting: A New Color by L'Oreal by Jessica Norman Austin TX

"Fleeting.?"

"Yeah fleeting..."

As in the fleeting of a starving emaciated species roaming a forgotten wilderness.

As in the fleeting memory of a faceless, nameless touch that thieved a sharp, reluctant breath. Fleeting like that gentle voice that once told you to guard your heart and hold your head high. Like the fleeting of each hour of each minute of every day that slips so fluidly between your fingers that you can scarce look back in reflection.

Fleeting like time.

Fleeting like a raging heart that ached, soared, plummeted, breathed and echoed its beatings of joy and sorrow down a long dark empty hall. It is the fleeting of a wild colt racing against the snares of domesticity with flaring nostrils and fervent hooves.

As in the fleeting of sultry, succulent summers of hope, discovery, and anticipation into the gray, forlorn autumn skies of dizzying uncertainty, seething fear and helpless grasps for a fleeting strength.

Fall.

Fleeting as in those outbound trains that escaped to untamed coasts of green and contagious laughter. The laughter that tickled the very tips of your toes.

Fleeting like the orange and reds of sunsets.

As in the remnants of a forgotten age when love was prefixed as "puppy love," and hurt was a scraped knee.

Fleeting like the dripping of an ice cream cone on a warm summer's eve.

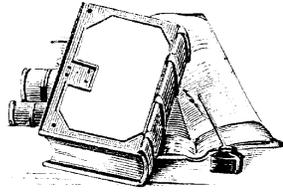
Like the fleeting of passion that you held onto and squeezed so tightly it forgot to breathe. Fleeting like the infantry, cavalry and air brigades that stormed brilliant red across streets and plains of destiny and despair.

Fleeting like the last flame of gentility before it fades into embers and ashes itself to sleep. Fleeting."

"All that just in the name of a nail polish color?"

"It's either that or Berry Berry Paris."





Beaten
by **Melanie Alberts**
Austin TX

Miami Beach, Florida 1968
Age 6

Geraldine asked me to come over to her house after school to play and drink Pepsi's. My sisters make fun of her because she speaks Cuban but I don't care, we don't get to drink Pepsi's at home and she does. I got off at Geraldine's bus stop, the one before ours. I waved bye to Valerie and Karen but I don't think they saw me. They were sitting in the back singing, "Hey, hey we're the Monkees!"

Geraldine lives in a pretty house and we just live in an apartment. Her mom is pretty. My mom looks funny because she's going to have a baby soon so she lies down a lot, but Geraldine's mommy let us sit on tall stools in the kitchen and gave us snacks. We played with Geraldine's Barbies a long time and her mommy drove me home at dinnertime. When I was climbing the stairs to our apartment, Johnny came running down calling my name. His face was red and he grabbed my arm. He said, "You better watch out, Dad is real mad that you didn't come home after school."

When he said that my tummy got tight and I started to cry. I didn't want to go home, now. I was going to get a spanking but I've been a good girl for a long time, ever since we've been in Florida. Before we moved Daddy gave me a big spanking that really hurt because I gave our neighbor his special car washing sponge. Daddy pulls down my panties and puts me on his lap and smacks my butt really hard when I'm bad. He doesn't like it if I don't cry so I make sure to cry fast so he stops sooner. Tonight I'm going to sneak in and if he spansks me I'm going to run away from home, and go back to Geraldine's house. I know where it is and he doesn't.

Hamden, Connecticut 1970
Age 8

My grandparents don't like us living with them but they let us because we don't have a house yet. Grammy says "You people make too much of a mess." But she lets us play down in the cellar where Grampy has his workshop. It smells like wet wood and dirt all the time because it's under ground. Sometimes I like to go there by myself and see what's in all the boxes and on the shelves. On one shelf I found Grampy's crime magazines that give me the creeps, they show pictures of dead little girls that were kidnapped by bad men and killed. Mom and Dad tell me not to talk to strangers so this must be what they mean. I hide the magazines if Grammy comes downstairs because dad says she's a tough lady. He says us kids don't know how good we have it. Grammy used to beat him every day with a belt for no reason at all. He said he used to run away from her and she'd run after him in the street, waving the belt like a cowboy's rope. He used to laugh at her

and she would be even more madder. That's stupid, he should just let her hit him and get it over with. Better yet, he should hit her back, she started it. If I were Dad, I'd rip that belt away from her and smack her really hard like I smack Cathy when she makes me mad, or Valerie and Karen when they hit me. Maybe that's what was wrong with the dead girls in the magazines. They didn't know how to fight back.

West Hartford, Connecticut 1974
Age 12

Dad and Valerie get on each other's nerves all the time. Mom says it's because they're so much alike. That's hard to understand since he hates her clothes, the music she plays and he doesn't want her to burn incense and candles in her room. But she does anyway. He always tells her she has to go put on a bra or to button up her shirts. Sometimes I can see what Mom means, Valerie is real bossy and so is Dad. He always says, "I'm the king and you kids are the peasants." I tell him, "The king is a fink!" And Valerie would say, "No, he's an asshole." Mostly they just argue but one night after school Dad really got on her case about her smelling like cigarette smoke. She swore at him and ran into her room, slamming the door, but he pushed his way inside. I was climbing the stairs after them but was afraid to get too close once he started beating her. Standing on the steps in front of her room I couldn't see anything but a shadow of dad bending over her, his arms flying. Val must've been hurting bad because she stopped screaming after a while. Dad was yelling stuff like "Don't you ever swear at me" at first but soon I just heard him hit her, maybe kick her too. I ran up to the third floor to my bedroom and didn't come down all night. I was crying in bed thinking I hate him, that's not the way you treat your own daughter even if she is a bossy jerk and talks back. That night I made a promise to never hit my kids like my parents hit us. I don't know if I can do it though because when I get angry the first thing I want to do is throw my fist out. Last winter when Dad wouldn't let me do something I punched out a windowpane in my room. But that was just a window, doesn't he know a kid's face isn't glass and you can't just get a new one when it's broken? Instead it gets closed tight and ugly and even harder to fix.

Hamden, Connecticut 1978
Age 15

Great. The top of my right foot has a hole in it. It has a gash two inches long because I was mad at Cathy. Now I'm in the Emergency Room and I need stitches and I feel so dumb. I was washing my dinner dishes and Cathy was being a pain because she wouldn't wash her own plate so I chased her and kicked her 'cause I was so mad. I probably wouldn't have hit her but she put the plate in front of her like a shield and I smashed it with my foot. It was even a Corelle plate; they're supposed to be unbreakable! Valerie drove me to the hospital and now I've got to get stitches because of no good reason. I'm better than that, better than letting my anger make me ugly. I guess that's why I'm going to have a scar across my foot. It's funny how ugly emotions turn into scars so you'll never forget why they're there. If someone asks me how I got this scar I'll just say I broke a dish. And I'll try never, never to hurt anyone again.



Fashion Statement: Not Available
by Peggy Park Talley
Seguin TX

It really didn't matter until I was in High School. It had not occurred to me until then that I was "different." I entered a school in a different town when I started my junior year. THE thing to wear that year, the thing every girl in school started with that year was a pair of white saddle oxfords. I went to town to buy mine.

There were two shoe stores and two department stores in town. All four stores had saddle oxfords in the display windows. I had been with my mother one day while she was buying shoes in one of the shoe stores so I went into the same store and sat down in one of the comfortable chairs. The store wasn't crowded, there was just one other customer and he was being waited on by one of the clerks, sitting far enough away that he couldn't see or hear conversation where I was sitting.

An older man, perhaps the storeowner, came to wait on me. With a welcoming smile, he said, "Getting ready for school to start next week?" "Yes," I replied. "I'll bet you want a new pair of saddle oxfords then." He had already put my right foot on the apparatus to measure the size and width of the foot and at that point, he looked down to adjust the sliding bar that would tell him what size to find. His expression changed immediately. He rechecked his measurements. He looked back up at me and said, "I'm afraid I won't be able to help you. I'm sorry, but we don't have saddle oxfords in your size." I was disappointed but there were other stores to try and I asked him if he would know which of those might carry them in a larger size. He said, "I don't think you are going to be able to find them at the other stores either, they only make them up to a size nine." Looking down at my foot, I said, "That is the size I wear, size nine." "No, I'm afraid you will need a size ten for it to fit comfortably, I really don't think you will be able to wear a size nine in a closed shoe."

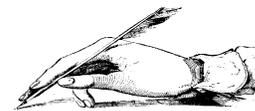
It was the end of August. I had worn sandals or gone barefoot all summer, spent most of my time at the swimming pool. I knew I was taller than I'd been when school was out but I hadn't realized my feet had grown a whole size since I had last bought shoes.

I took a deep breath and asked, "What shoes do you have available in my size?" He looked really uncomfortable and avoided looking into my eyes. "Well, we do have a few pairs in size ten but nothing like a saddle oxford." There was a long pause. "Would you like to see them?" I knew I had to have shoes I could wear to school. If I couldn't have saddle oxfords maybe penny loafers like I wore last year would be a good choice.

"Yes, please, maybe some brown loafers?" Still not looking directly at me, he said, "I'll be happy to show you what we have." He disappeared into the back of the store but wasn't gone very long. He returned carrying only two shoeboxes. Both boxes had the name Enna Jetticks® boldly printed on the top. He opened one box, took out one shoe, extended it toward me. I wanted to disappear. Motioning for him to put it back in the box, I quickly looked at the other customer hoping no one else could see what I saw. It was an old lady shoe, black, laced up the front, round toe, clunky two-inch heel—absolutely horrible! I was fifteen; did he really think I would ever let anyone see me wearing a shoe like that? He had quickly put it back into the box and set both boxes behind him on the floor. He could finally look at me. "I'm sorry, those are the only shoes we have in a size ten. The others are just like them, only in brown. Not many shoe companies make their shoes larger than a size nine but there are some stores in Houston that carry some in the larger sizes. I'll be happy to get the names of those stores for you."

Thus began the "Saga of the Shoes" that has tortured the females in my family since then. Only when Jackie Kennedy became our First Lady did the shoe companies realize that female feet could grow larger than size nine, she wore a narrow *ten and a half*. It became commonplace to find tens and even some elevens in ordinary shoe stores. Now, I wear size twelve but even thirteen's are available. My daughter, my nieces, many of the women in the family have big feet. We are big women, most near six feet tall, a few even taller. I'm sure my aunts wore shoes that were too small for them when they were sixteen. They had no choice.

There are many family stories about our searches for shoes for special occasions and about our big feet. Our family doctor told me about my daughter calling him when she was growing up to ask if it was possible to have your toes removed so your foot wouldn't be so long. He carefully explained to her that she needed her toes for balance and that she might not have a foot as large as mine. He was wrong, she does.



Unsent Letter
by Judy Watkins
Hillsboro OR

Dear Baby Girl,

I was just given a birth certificate form to complete for you and it says you are a baby girl. Until now I did not know that, nobody would tell me. I have walked down to the nursery several times trying to find you but you are being kept behind a screen and out of sight. It is possible you have already gone to your new home even as I write this. I know it is necessary for you and I to part but why wouldn't they let me see that you had ten fingers and toes and that you weren't born with some defect? My Uncle Roy (Dad's brother) and my Aunt Flora

continued on page 11

(Dad's sister) both had Mongoloid babies on their first try and it scares me to death to think that may be the reason they won't talk to me about you.

You don't have a name on your birth certificate, but to me you are Kathleen Ann (Kathy). That is my youngest sister's name, but long before that, when I was just seven I gave that name to my favorite doll, and that is how I will always think of you.

I'm sure you would like to know why I'm not taking you home with me. The adoption papers say words like I am giving you to someone more able to care for you, and in my case that is the whole truth. It is hard for me to explain your birth to you, but it is important to me for you understand that it is not because I don't love you that you are going to have a different set of parents.

From my earliest memories, when I was about three or four, my father sexually abused me. It also gave him great pleasure to beat me with a belt whenever the mood struck him or he had too much to drink. The main thing in my head for many years was the need for me to leave home before I killed him. Sometimes I wondered which would come first.

I was only fifteen when I got pregnant with you. When I told the boy who was your father about it, he said, "Oh?" Just that and nothing more! It was just like I had just told him I thought it would rain tomorrow. He did not discuss it further and I was determined I would not beg anybody for anything. If this was to be my problem alone, I would handle it—alone. I was not sure how, but I would find a way. It was a given that turning to my parents for support was not one of the choices.

I was about 3 ½ months gone when my sister's date showed up one night with a friend of his and they begged me to go to the drive in movie with them. My heart was not in it, but I agreed to go. During the movie the boy I was with wanted to neck. I told him to leave me alone because I was sick and I was pregnant and I didn't feel like making out! He said he loved me anyway and wanted to marry me. Just like that! I hadn't met him more than three hours before, but to me it was the answer to a prayer and I said yes. When we went for a marriage license and blood test the next day I discovered that his name was Jim Byrne and he was twenty-one years old. I had just turned sixteen.

We moved in with Jim's widowed mother in Butte, Montana, and as strange as all this sounds, it is even stranger, in that from the day I married Jim until the day you were born, not one word of our conversation was about the baby I was expecting. After just a few months we moved into a small house just a couple of blocks from Jim's mother's house. Jim was working in the copper mines when I met him but just shortly after that he lost his job because he was "sick" too often. When it was mid-winter in Montana our lights and heat were turned off because the bills weren't being paid. I didn't know what to do so I applied for welfare. Jim wouldn't go with me and I had to lie and say he couldn't work. In the 1950s the welfare system was nothing like it is today. First I was made to feel like a criminal, but they couldn't let an expecting mother freeze or starve. The heat was turned back on, but lights were not considered necessary for life and they were not turned on. I was given food vouchers for a grocery store near where we

lived, but things like shampoo and toothpaste were not considered necessary and could not be purchased.

As if I didn't have enough problems, Jim started hitting me with his fists. I made the mistake of hitting him back and he would beat me until I passed out on the floor. My mother came to visit once when I had a black eye and bruises on my arms, I told her the truth of my circumstances and very humbly asked if I could go back home to live. She said, "At times like this your place is with your husband."

So here we are. I am sixteen years old. I quit high school two years before I graduated. I never even had a summer job. I can't pay the doctor or hospital bills and I can't support a baby. Your adoption is a private adoption handled through my doctor. Your new parents will pay the doctor and the hospital bills. Thank goodness I had an easy pregnancy and I was in the hospital less than three hours before your birth and will stay in the hospital just the required three days.

I'm sorry baby girl that we couldn't stay together, but please try to understand I love you and want you to have a life far removed from anything I could offer you. Try to think kindly of me.

Your Birth Mother,
Judy



My Mask
by Erin Declan Philbin
Pittsburgh PA

For over six years, while I tried to conceive my first child, I hid behind a mask of cheerful indifference. It was extremely important to me that no one knew that I was infertile. I couldn't handle the thought of people being cruel, pitying, or "helpful." I'd practice witty remarks in the bathroom mirror. If someone said, "You're getting pretty old; when are you going to have a kid?" I'd be ready. "You're getting pretty old," I'd reply. "When are you going to break a hip?" Then I'd go home and cry.

As the procedures became more painful, and the drugs made me more labile, it became increasingly important to me that I control other aspects of my life. My work became my obsession. It was critical that I not allow my medical treatments to affect my work.

After several years of treatment, I conceived, only to have a miscarriage at about nine weeks. I was absolutely devastated, and wasn't at all sure I was going to survive it. I needed a d&c. Because of difficulty in scheduling, I had to wait for two days. Out of my mind, I worked. I went through the motions of seeing patients, doing paperwork, attempting small talk.

Just recently, I find myself beginning to be more open with people. Although it's still a new experience for me, I am finding that it can be strangely liberating. Sometimes, I'm not sure who is helped more—the listener or I.



The Hand of Providence

by Carolyn J. Scheider
Austin TX

In 1934, Aunt Vi savored every facet of life. As a 19 year old college freshman, she had it all—beauty, personality, talent, an intelligent, curious mind, and a strong faith.

She had many friends. Or so it seemed. Sometimes her less secure peers envied her. However, while jealous, all except one harnessed their feelings and wished her no ill will. What happened that spring created a family legend when Bess (not her real name) took action on her feelings.

Aunt Vi had taken an education class, and expected an A. But when she received her report card, she discovered a C. Confused by this, she wondered if she had failed the final exam so she asked her teacher, Miss Jepson, about the C. Her teacher told her she hadn't failed the exam and that, indeed, she had received an A. After investigating they found that Bess, who worked in the transcript office, had changed Aunt Vi's grade.

During this same timeframe, a group of ten coeds including Aunt Vi and Bess) continued their plans for a week-long house party at West Okoboji Lake in Iowa. Tension mounted between Aunt Vi and Bess. Rather than apologizing or showing remorse for her actions, Bess became aggressive. She said she would not go on this trip unless Aunt Vi stayed home. So the question remained as to how to resolve this issue.

Aunt Vi, distraught by the circumstances, backed out. She knew the friction would outweigh the fun. While still emotionally bruised, Aunt Vi felt much better once she made the decision.

On Friday, July 13, the nine coeds along with Miss Blackburn, the chaperone, arrived at the Brown Thrush Cottage. They could hardly wait to hit the lakeshore, and the next morning seven of them, along with their chaperone, put on bathing suits and headed for the rocky reef off Pillsbury Point.

After balancing on the rocks for a while, three girls started swimming into the deeper area of the lake while four waded in the shallow rocky area. Suddenly one of the girls in the shallow area slipped off into deep water. Almost immediately two others slipped.

Sounds of laughter turned to frantic pleas for help and hysterics. One of the three swimmers panicked, and swam toward the lake's center instead of the shore and drowned. After vain rescue attempts, two of the swimmers rushed to the shore for help. Miss Blackburn, who continued rescue attempts, never returned. By the time more help arrived, five of the coeds (including Bess) had drowned.

The pleasure trip, now a tragedy, plunged the entire rural Iowa Dutch community of Orange City into sadness. Nearly

five thousand people, including Aunt Vi and her family, attended joint funeral services for the young women.

And how did Aunt Vi feel? Along with other community members, her heart ached—especially since some of her best friends had died. But she, as well as her close friends and family, also felt awed by the hand of Providence in her life.

She went on to finish college, and had a 40-year happy marriage. She experienced brushes with death, including kidney cancer. Nonetheless, because of divine intervention she continued to savor every facet of life until her mid-80's when her health failed.

In the spring of 2001, as she lay dying, her physical beauty had faded. But her smile didn't leave her, nor did her faith and her sharp, curious mind. For example, in our last conversation, she asked me a personal question that I had never answered. I realized she had made up her mind not to pass on without knowing the answer. I laughed to myself as I answered her question. We both knew she had won that last game.

Within minutes after that conversation she suffered a stroke that left her with only garbled speech. But we could all understand her when she said she thought the Lord was calling her home which is what she wanted.

A few days later, at the age of 85, she went to her eternal home where once again she savors every facet of life, and



The World of Cats and Childhood

by Sharon Blumberg
Munster IN

When I was a child, around eight or nine years old, in the summer I used to climb over my metal fishnet fence, from my backyard into the world of my dreams. On the other side of the fence awaited a wooded playland. There were various kinds of flowers, knarled old mysterious trees (including one white Birch which looked like it had an eye on it), and cats. This serene woodland beckoned to me. The cats came in all sizes, shapes, and patterns of fur. One was fat, brown and furry-looking, one was black, one was a striped tabby, and one was multi-colored with tones of creamed coffee, ivory and beige. These cats inhabited an abandoned fort that withstood the test of time.

Almost daily, I used to run after these marvels of nature, but I could almost never catch them. However, on one occasion, I was finally able to grab one, thinking I could tame a non-domesticated cat, and befriend it. With some struggles, I was able to secure a sock around its neck as its collar. I thought that the sock would serve as a symbol, that this cat would belong to me, and become my pet. How foolish could I be?

The next day I made my ritual climb over the fence into my magical tranquil spot, as the cool crisp breeze whistled an invitation. Once again, I spotted the wild cats. But my so-called "pet" with the "collar" was not present. No cat with a sock collar around its neck appeared. Therefore, I learned a life lesson. Friendships need to be natural and mutual or they cannot exist.



Moving House
by Margaret Turner
Austin TX

It had been a strange year. My mother had been in the hospital for several weeks. I was 5 years old, and at that period we lived in my father's family home, sharing the house with my father's siblings, an uncle and two aunts. We each had our own section of the house, and I was warned not to make a nuisance of myself by going into the other part of the house. Looking back, I realize that my mother's obsessive need for privacy, which sometimes bordered on paranoia, allowed her to behave in ways she would not "in front of others."

The farmhouse, Holly Lodge, had three entrances: a front door used only for weddings, funerals, and the vicar's periodic visits; a back door which led to the section of the house occupied by the aunts and uncle; and an entrance at the opposite side of the house which led to our section. During my mother's hospital stay my siblings and I went into the back kitchen and spent time with our aunts and uncle. Those visits were full of warmth, happiness and approval—not things I usually felt.

I remember being told that we were going to move to another farm, Red Castle, not far away. I was excited when we visited Red Castle and looked at all the bedrooms, and I chose the largest for myself. I was crushed to discover that my parents had taken that bedroom and I was to have the smallest and coldest bedroom in the house.

After the visit, I returned to my beloved Holly Lodge, and I somehow sensed that things were going to be different, that our new home was going to be much worse. I went behind the farmhouse to the cherry orchard. I was fascinated by the contraptions my Uncle Ernie built to keep the birds away from the ripe cherries. To my childish eyes their inventiveness and simple mechanics were extremely impressive. Not only that, but we children were encouraged to pull the rope which activated a system of ropes and pulleys and sent rocks, bricks, and scrap metal crashing into sheets of corrugated iron and rusty farm implements, to produce a cacophony of sound designed to scare birds away. The feeling of importance that I had every time I pulled the rope ensured that I did it often. I didn't have the strength to pull the rope hard so I could never make the truly satisfying crashes and clashes that my Uncle Ernie could, but I never gave up trying. (That delight at fanciful and impractical solutions to simple problems stays with me today, and hampers me regularly.)

I was going to leave that. No longer could I escape into the green tunnels of the orchard and the sunny fields beyond. There was no orchard at Red Castle. I was going to leave the aunts and uncle and Mrs. Badham, a friend (although forbidden by my mother) and purveyor of a slice of cake and a glass of squash at moments of need. Retreating to my refuge, the cherry orchard, I just wished that we weren't going. If I stayed in the orchard perhaps we wouldn't go. I heard my mother and father leaving. Holly Lodge went quiet. Gradually I began to understand that my stay in the orchard wasn't going to prevent the move. We *were* going—in fact, most of us had gone, as far as I could tell. Then I had the awful thought that the family didn't want me, something I'd suspected for a while. What other explanation could there be for my mother responding so enthusiastically to my sister's tantrums, and finding my difficulties so easy to ignore?

I became immediately convinced of the truth of my thought, and the feeling of abandonment welled up in my body, forcing itself through my throat to come gushing out of my eyes. I howled with despair. My aunts and uncle were unable to comfort me. When you're abandoned, you know it. No amount of "there, theres," cake, squash, and offers of piggy back rides can comfort you at a time like that. Eventually my tired father came back to Holly Lodge, confused by the depths of my anguish, and gently carried me off to the new house. I was expelled from my Eden, and all I'd done was eat cherries.



Masks
by Rebekah Taylor
Corona CA

There are all kinds of masks that exist on this planet. Some are more tangible than others, ranging from those worn in Africa to socialite balls, from those worn by business people to thieves and actors.

I'm currently housed in a maximum security prison for a sentence of under ten years. I have finished over half of the time I am to serve for my crime. In my years of observation, I've seen anger masked by fear, which results in verbal and physical abuse. Control is another mask. When an inmate loses all control of their lives, they like to control other inmates. Their mask of fear turns into a mask of control, and anger masked by smiles.

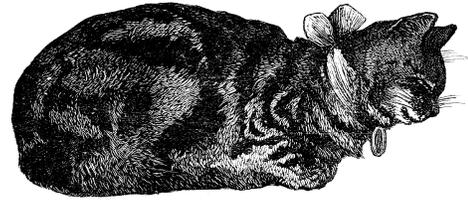
Let's face it: masks in general are not very appealing or productive. They belong on a wall for decoration. So ask yourself—what mask do I wear? Does it show, or am I 'real' and down-to-earth like everyone tells me I am? Or are they wearing masks?

My grandpa always said you can read a person's face; it tells their life story. I believe that.

Night Call

by Carolyn Blankenship
Austin TX

Last night a cat paced beneath my open window,
demanding to be heard.
Not fed, let in, or to be romanced by another of its kind,
but to be heard.
"Come out!" it demanded. "Come out into this night!"
I struggled from the tangled afghan of my restless couch.
I'd hunched and hollowed there because
sometimes the bed is just too smooth—
cool sheets all folded back on soft covers,
color-coordinated ice-cream layers and plumped pillow.
My peaceful, deep-breathing mate
already departed for wherever, not trapped restless here.
I push aside the curtain and stare out at the cat.
It stops pacing and is silent, staring back.
Demanding.
I sigh and let the curtain fall back crooked,
rub my hand across my face, and turn the dead bolt.
Bitterly resenting lack of houseshoes,
vaguely grateful for stale warmth of slept-in clothes,
I step onto the porch.
The cat rubs rhythmically against my legs.
My feet are chunks of ice.
I look around. Demand still hangs in the air,
though its messenger, the cat, is satisfied.
I leave the porch for the wet grass,
discover feet *can* be colder still.
And then I feel it—the thump, thump
underfoot—the earth's insistent pulse.
What beat is this?
Images reel drunkenly across my mind
and the rhythms pound and shudder up my body.
Still something calls, relentless as a 60-cycle hum.
Ground still reverberating through my bones,
I look up at the hunter's moon sweeping through the brittle sky,
trailing clouds and stardust—demanding to be seen.
The stars dazzle themselves in my eyes
and the moon sweeps on, faintly smiling,
acknowledging nothing.
What now?
Earth drumming me, eyes pierced with light,
cat singing in my ear, I open wide my mouth
to call "What now? What do you want?"
and swallow cold and crystal starlit wind
come pushing down my throat, demanding to be tasted.
Ah, what was my body then?
All stars and air and earth—
all bright darkness and a cat's meow.
I cannot tell you where I danced, or how, or even that.
But when I found my black cat Max,
curled, drowsing on the rumpled couch,
his whiskered mouth curved slightly
in that smug, complacent smile,
your could've matched us,
lip to lip.



Morning Song

by Judy Fettman
Ann Arbor MI

It starts with a whisper of a breeze, a rustle sweet and light, a mere promise of more to come. It crescendos into gusts whipping the dark leaves of the old oaks, and big raindrops splat heavily against the sandstone walk. The branches creak, waving this way and that, and twist impossibly and snap backwards. Lightning sparks the dark sky like a flashbulb, and thunder rumbles menacingly, then cracks loud as the storm draws near. All at once the oppressive heat of the last three days blows out the east windows as the cool wind rushes in from the west. It is barely dawn, and the storm is upon us. The rain hammers on the shingles and drums on the tin roof of the bathroom—music to my ears.

As the storm passes and the rain slows to a few pings here and there, I fall back asleep—or doze, half asleep and yet aware in a dreamlike way of the breezes that continue to waft through the room and flow over the sheets. The past days have been unspeakably hot, and there seemed no end to the demands of everyday life—errands, cleaning, entertaining, worrying. As I drowse I try to recall the tasks that lie ahead today, and find that there are none. Blissfully, today there is no schedule to keep.

Now that the rain and the wind have stopped, it is indeed quiet. At 7:30 I heard Mark rattling the coffee filters and filling his cup as he left for work. Near 8:00 Arielle galloped down the stairs and outside to her car to her job at the horse barn. Jordan's room is silent; he's still asleep or spent the night at a friend's. In my drowsy state I can't remember which and I don't care. I close my eyes again as I stroke Annie's belly—heaven!

When I next roll over and look at the clock, I see it is 10:30! I have to get up! I try to muster the will to roll out of bed, but before I do, I look out the window and see that the clouds have cleared and morning sunlight is streaming through the oaks, raising cloudy wisps from between their trunks. The sunlight sparkles on the droplets left on the leaves, and Annie has chosen a spot of sun on the bedspread where she stretches long, front toe to back foot, her back against my stomach and chest. There is an almost imperceptible breeze stirring, and the chatter of birds!

I should get up, I think to myself. I should use this day to . . . to answer those letters, pay that bill, call about having the TV repaired—use this time, do something useful. As if on cue, my little companion, Annie, cuddles closer, purring softly, looking into my half-closed eyes with her wide, dark ones. Gently she places a soft paw on my lips, as if to quiet the demands I am making of myself. "Hush! Just enjoy!"



Please Be Mine
by Tricia Stephens
Southlake TX

I didn't know whether or not I was pregnant for nine long months. Even after Grant was born on Friday, July 1st at 9:38 p.m., I didn't know if he'd go home to be a part of our family. Grant, please be mine.

Not knowing is one bittersweet part of open adoption. If you conceive your child, you have no guarantee they will be healthy, or even what they will look like. But you can look down, see the round of your belly, and know you are pregnant.

Grant's birth parents chose us out of a book of prospective parents at Methodist Family Home in San Antonio. They picked us because in our picture we are happy, our daughter was adopted 13 years ago, and we all love animals.

We kept in touch through the pregnancy. We were at the hospital for delivery and got to see Grant within his first hour of life. Even the grandmother likes us. But still I'm afraid. Who will take Grant home to parent?

Sitting in a hotel room 72 hours, waiting for the daily call from the hospital telling us when we can visit, I pace with my husband, Tad, and daughter, Mauri. I've brought games, books, and papers, but none of us can focus. I stand guard at the window looking toward the hospital.

When I'm at the hospital, I'm happy holding Grant. I touch his full head of fuzzy hair and glimpse his quickly opening eyes. After I allow myself the luxury of the sight and smell of him, I move back emotionally. There are many happy and many sad emotions vying for my attention at the same time.

I'm happy we know Grant's birth family, because I know how much Mauri would like to know hers. Her adoption was international, so little information is available.

I want Grant and Mauri to understand how much I value the truth. I know how secrets call out to those they are hidden from. I remember for years my grandparents would roll their eyes and look hurt when mention was made of my aunt's youth. I wondered why. I asked and no one would tell me. Years later, I found out she had married an extremely handsome man with the family's blessings, only to quickly divorce. Thank goodness today divorce is not a subject that seals the lips of my family. We have expanded our definition of 'just being human.'

For three days we go to the hospital and visit Grant and his birth family. Grant is calm and cuddly in a room full of people that love him. I feel awkward having these new people

in my life. We started out our relationship in high gear, knowing very personal things about each other. I look forward to the time we are comfortable with our familiarity.

Monday, we take the car seat we bought on our way to the hospital for the birth parents to borrow. This afternoon is their time with Grant before we all meet at the adoption agency. There are a minimum of words and facial expressions exchanged.

We get a call from our counselor a couple of hours before our meeting is set, that the parents are upset and want to talk. I have a mixed soup of emotions and expect they do too. I'm scared, so are Tad and Mauri. Grant, whose will you be?

Once together with the birth parents, we all sit in a circle talking about the fears we have about these past days, and about how our future will develop. Within thirty minutes, the masks of the day fall away, and we are ready to sign the papers to take Grant home.

The birth parents hand us Grant at an entrustment ceremony of our design. We stand in a circle and say prayers for each other and share a box of Kleenex.

Walking out to put Grant in the van, we hug and cry more. As we drive away, I know my life has changed forever. Because of the new people in it, I have stretched my definition of love.

Today Grant's been mine—been ours—for 17 1/2 months. Throughout the years I'll still be saying, "Grant, please be mine" from time to time. He will be mine in the sense that I choose to love him no matter what happens. And when our battles and arguments on the way to manhood are over, I pray



Gift of Life
by Lori Swanson
Fountain Hills AZ

My parents gave me the gift of life 43 years ago. Since then they've done everything in their power to try to destroy me. They almost succeeded.

Two and a half years ago I received what I consider to be my second gift of life. I received it from a friend with whom I hadn't kept faithfully in contact. But though the threads of friendship had grown visibly faint, they remained strong. Marilyn provided me with a turning point, and with hope. She talked me out of suicide.

Marilyn is a therapist, by trade. She is invaluable, as a friend. She gave me both a professional view of taking my own life and the perspective of someone who had recently lived through the suicide of a close friend. She figuratively tore apart, sentence by sentence, the suicide note I'd written just days before. I'll never forget what she said.

I had first written to my children that I loved them more than I thought I could ever love anyone or anything, and that my suicide was in no way their fault. Marilyn assured me that being who they were, my sons would, indeed, shoulder the

blame upon themselves. Her words have been painfully reinforced by my own experience that happened just seven months ago.

The more I heard from the police, my friends, and my therapist, that the rape hadn't been my fault, the more I assumed it was. I remember only too vividly the guilt I somehow was unable to voice and thus internalized; how it tore me apart from the inside out and made healing impossible. I'm an adult. My kids are still teenagers, unable to put emotions into words. My suicide may have eaten them alive simply in what they would have been unable to tell. Tragically, I understand that now, years after feeling I couldn't go on.

The rest of my note had been filled with unresolved anger, self-pity, overwhelming grief, and hopelessness. We left nothing undiscussed. As painful as her words were at times, Marilyn left nothing unsaid.

We talked at Mimi's, her favorite restaurant. Soon into our talk, we switched seats; I was unable to face the other patrons with the tears that I couldn't hide. I still have the notes I wrote as she spoke the truth to me. They are the starting point of the journaling and writing I have done since. They were my rebirth.

As we said goodbye and I boarded the plane for home, I had no idea how to thank her. We had talked about so much; words failed me. She needed no thanks but asked one thing of me. Her eyes brimmed with tears as we held each other close.

"Please, just stay alive."

I've kept my promise. I'm still here. At Christmas that year, I sent her a tiny blue box filled with peppermint candies. I fondly refer to her as my lifesaver.



Music to My Ears

by Jackie Onions

Newcastle Under Lyme Staffordshire UK

There is a cacophony of sound, people laughing, the oohs and aaaahs of those who have not seen each other for so long that they appear surprised at their ability to recognize one another. Shouting across the room, "I'll have a top up over here please!" "Where did you say the sandwiches were?" The orchestrated madness of a party in full swing. The house does not seem big enough to hold all this noise, this music created spontaneously by this random choir.

They have no conductor. . . I hold my imaginary baton and take the stand, "SHUT UP!! SHUT UP ALL OF YOU—AND GO HOME!"

A sea of faces stare up at me, and what do they see? A teenager with blazing eyes, cheeks dirty with tears and mascara mingled, her mouth twisted and ugly, shouting with hatred directed at each and every one of them.

I grip the stair rail, looking down into the hallway at the family and friends who are gathered after the funeral of my beloved grandfather. My parents make their way towards me and furiously order me to my room. I sit and stare at the wallpaper of my childish bedroom. The music has gone, the voices of the choir have been silenced, it is now deathly quiet downstairs, "As it should be." I murmur softly to myself, "As it should be."



Botswana Safari

by Judith Helburn

Austin TX

All of those elephants—single bulls, mothers with babies, hundreds at the water holes and rivers—all of those elephants, with nothing between us in our converted land cruiser and tons of muscle. Yet, we never felt threatened even when enjoying snacks and cool drinks at sunset, standing just feet from them.

One time, however, things got exciting. Outside Moremi Game Reserve, on an island, we were walking along a grassy trail. We saw a bull, but he didn't see us. The wind changed, he caught our scent, and he turned, heading right towards us. We wasted no time in heading back to our small boats, heeding the urgent whispered instructions of our guides, "Walk fast and if we say go, dive into the boats."

We saw many of the big cats, giraffes, birds galore, a dozen types of antelope, and much more on our tented safari. Most memorable was during lunch in our camp. Hundreds of elephants streamed towards us, coming so close that they split into two groups and passed by us as we scrambled for cameras.

We drove into Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe after our safari and arrived at our turn-of-the-century hotel overlooking the famous falls. Lunch, served by white-coated waiters, was on the veranda. Luscious food, luscious view. Afterwards, into the tub to soak off two weeks of grime and dust previously attacked only with bucket showers. And then, after our first gourmet meal in two weeks, my tummy started acting up. What nerve! After a nap in a Victorian bed (but with modern mattresses) I felt even worse, and worse, and worse. Tea and toast for me, instead of the closing banquet to which I sent my worried spouse.

When he returned that night, we checked with the two doctors on our trip and we all agreed that it was probably appendicitis. So at midnight, we called our evacuation insurance company in the US and arrangements were made to fly me to Johannesburg, South Africa, the next day. It was a good thing, because I spent a couple of hours in a local hospital with tiles missing from the floor and rust on the bottom of my glucose drip. The med tech did point out, however, that my glucose was not out-of-date. All's well that ends well. My treatment and surgery was excellent, and six days later, I was back home.

Sisters
by **Flossie Wilson**
Austin TX

My friend Karen told me about a Writing Circle where her friend Carolyn was the facilitator. I met Carolyn and she also encouraged me to think about it, but I made some silly excuse about being too busy—hogwash! The truth is, I was afraid of the unknown and putting my thoughts down on paper for someone else to hear. Besides that, I could not write. That was reserved for people with the training and talent for doing that sort of thing.

Karen kept encouraging me to come with her to class. She was excited about what it was doing in her life, and my curiosity was piqued. Maybe I could do it—after all, I did make an A in speech 101.

In April 2001, I joined the writers at the library and embarked on a journey of story telling, sharing with this group their stories and mine. I introduce my new sisters:

Dora Teresa is petite and very pretty, and I imagine her home is always neat, warm, cozy and inviting because Dora is this kind of person. Her family adores her. Dora wrote a wonderful story about her mother and I got lost in the goodness of her mother as she read the story. Her notebook is filled with neat pages that reflect her life. I look forward to getting better acquainted with Dora through her stories.

Judith Marie is jolly and full of fun, and she hails from Vermont. Judy had a wonderful childhood, always with exciting events going on around her family. Her stories have pictures to complete the vision that she wants to express to us. “The Robin” was an important story because this bird had his own drawing. Now that makes him a very special bird, and we expect great things to come from the robin story. Judy actually had pictures of the cars that had played an important role of her travels throughout her life. We expect to hear more fun stories about Vermont.

Cheryl Ann seemed to be shy and full of surprises. Her daughter fills up most of her life as children are in the habit of doing. Cheryl is proud to be a Texas girl, and she is the perfect “show and tell” for Texas—maybe we need to take her to the State Fair. When she takes time to write a story, they are entertaining and interesting. Cheryl has many stories to tell and we look forward to more of her poetry in the future.

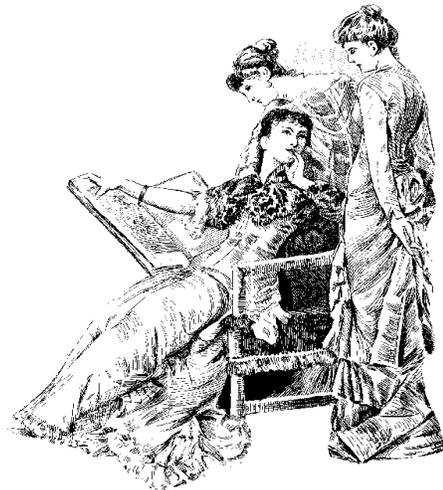
Karen Sue lives in my neighborhood, and from the very first time we met, I knew she was my kind of gal, and you know what? She liked me as much as I liked her. Karen is always concerned about others—their happiness, loneliness, sickness, or just their general well being. Karen has wonderful memories about her mother and has the ability to present her to us so we can share the fun and humor that is an imprint on their life together.

Now it is *Carolyn’s* time! She is so full of ideas, encouragement, and inspiration on how to write our stories to the best advantage. Carolyn, you are so good! I appreciated your telling me that your mother was a paradox, as my mother was, so we have a something in common. How wonderful it is to have Carolyn to put us all together and in such order. Her notebook is full of jewels that she shares with us. We are a

great bunch of gals. Thanks to Carolyn for her hard work

Our newest member is *Suzanne Jill* and we can expect more interesting stories from Suzanne. It was a privilege to hear about her mother’s experience on September 11, scrambling out of her building after the jets crashed into the World Trade Center. How timely her story was, because we were all in shock and disbelief, trying to deal with the tragedy along with the rest of the world. It was meant for Suzanne to meet with us this day and share the story of a black man being a companion and protector to a Jewish woman fleeing the unknown terror, walking together in the streets of New York City to her home. This is a real life experience that Suzanne shared with us, and the perfect example of why our nation is so great. Suzanne, I, for one, will never forget your mother and I feel a kinship to her because she was there that day and I was not.

It has been fun to write about my new “sisters,” and I know in the months ahead we will share many stories. We will laugh, cry, be happy and sad, as we record our memories and share them with one another. It is a blessing for me to be a part of this group.



Mrs. Horny Toad’s Wild Ride
by **Nancy Rigg**
Los Angeles CA

“You promised!” Betsy says with the vehemence that only an incensed six year old can muster. Her eyes, which are large and dark brown like our mom’s, scan my face accusingly. I’m tending to my patient, Mrs. Horny Toad.

We are in the office I have set up on the first floor of the boarding house at Summitville, the gold mining ghost town in Colorado where we spend the summers with our dad, who works the mine year round. I’ve gathered all of the old medical furniture and supplies that were left in the warehouse when the town shut down just before World War I, including an exam table, cabinets for pills and potions, weight scales, a rickety recliner, and various tables and chairs to set up a make-shift office, and I’ve posted a sign that says, “The Vet is In, Please Knock.” Betsy has entered without knocking.

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I arch one eyebrow and give my little sister a serious look. “Mrs. Horny Toad is pregnant you know,” I say authoritatively, as though at age 10 I know everything there is to know about reptiles and reproduction. “She may have her babies at any time now!”

“But you promised!” Betsy is on the verge of crying. Although gloriously beautiful, this remote ghost town is situated in the wilderness at 11, 318.29 feet altitude, 50 miles from the nearest town. The only kids to play with are my older brother and younger sister. We are on our own here. I sigh, gently gather dear Mrs. Horny Toad in my hands, and go with Betsy to set up a teeter-totter outside—as promised.

First we have to gather supplies. In the vast, dark chambers of the old warehouse, there are endless rows of dusty items that have been left behind over the years since the mine first opened during the gold rush years in the 1800s. On past forays I’ve located and claimed an old turn-of-the-century telephone, a treadle sewing machine, some old oil lanterns, and my doctor’s office furniture. There are lots of mysterious looking bolts and heavy iron equipment used by the miners, but Betsy and I ignore that stuff. We wander up and down the aisles until we locate a wooden sawhorse and a long, flat, wide slab of wood. It takes both of us to lift the wood, so I perch Mrs. Horny Toad on top of it and follow Betsy outside.

Just as we exit the building, Betsy drops her end of the board, which flips and lands on Mrs. Horny Toad. With shrieks of dismay and concern, I uncover my scaly patient, who looks dead. “You’ve killed her,” I cry as I lift the flattened and limp body off the ground. Mrs. Horny Toad’s eyes have turned red and she is unresponsive. Should I operate? Give her a transfusion? Do mouth-to-snout?

Betsy stares at me, horrified. “Oh, no, poor Mrs. Horny Toad!”

We hold our breath and wait. After a few moments, Mrs. H, who has evidently only been knocked out, groggily comes to and glares at us both, as if to condemn this totally inadequate maternity ward. “She would have been blowed up anyway,” Betsy adds defensively, “if you hadn’t rescued her!”

Mrs. Horny Toad had come into our lives about a month earlier, when our family was driving up Southfork Canyon from Del Norte to Summitville. A county road crew was blasting boulders off the dirt road. Daddy pulled over and stopped to say hello and compare blasting caps. Being a miner, explosives were of interest to him, so as he and the men chatted and laughed, my mother walked far down the road where she could safely smoke a cigarette and look for gold nuggets. She was always looking for gold nuggets. My older brother Jack took our dogs for a short run, and Betsy and I wandered around gathering blue bells and daisies for wild flower bouquets. As I reached down to pick some columbines, there she was, sunning herself on a rock. Plump, prehistoric, looking like “Honey! I Shrunk the Dinosaur!” Before she could lumber off, I gently gathered her in my hands.

“That’s a really fat horned toad you have there,” Daddy said as I showed the reptile to him. “Wonder if she’s

pregnant? Better get her out of the blast zone, or she’ll be launched to Mars!” I stuffed her, ever so gently, into the hood of my jacket. Although she hissed and objected, I knew I was rescuing her from certain death.

“Mrs. Horny Toad!” I cooed to her as I adjusted the hood to make sure she could get enough air. “You’ll thank me for this someday.”

Mrs. Horny Toad was not thankful. I should have released her back into the wild once we drove past the blast zone, but my curiosity and concern had been aroused. She was pregnant. I would care for her. It would be fun! I wanted to be a veterinarian when I grew up, and here was a patient.

As soon as we arrived at the mine, my older brother Jack and I tore off to explore our favorite haunts and see what winter damage had been done by avalanches and other hazards. Summitville was teeming with hazards, both hidden and obvious. “Don’t you let me catch you anywhere near the mineshafts,” our mother yelled as we headed up the road towards the Copper Mountain tunnel. Despite our mother’s warning, we paused along the way to drop rocks into one of the mineshafts that plunged vertically into the ground. Like guessing how far away lightning was striking, we enjoyed dropping rocks into mineshafts and counting as we tried to estimate how deep the hole was. Jack tossed in a rock and intoned, “One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand...” Plop! The rock splashed into the water below.

I followed with a rock of my own, flinging it into the dark chasm. “One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand...” Plop! PLOP! Uh-oh! Mrs. Horny Toad, who was still riding in the hood of my jacket, had launched herself off of my shoulder into the mineshaft after the rock. In a scramble of heroics and foolhardiness, Jack clambered down the rickety ladder and somehow recovered Mrs. Horny Toad, who was doing butterfly strokes in the water. As Jack emerged with her, I sighed in relief. She was alive and seemingly uninjured. I vowed to be more cautious from then on.

“Be careful when you sit on your end,” I tell Betsy as we balance the board over the sawhorse. I gently slip Mrs. H into the pocket of my jacket—safer than riding in the hood!—and ease the board, with my sister on it, high into the air in order to climb on the other end. We teeter and totter and laugh and bump up and down. If pregnant horned toads are prone to morning sickness, I can only imagine what Mrs. H is experiencing in my pocket.

After playing with Betsy, I carefully return Mrs. H to her special box in my office. Two days later she gives birth. Not by laying eggs, as I had imagined, but live birth! Little thumbnail sized horned toads plop out, but all are stillborn except one. Mineshaft and teeter-totter casualties.

Perhaps Mrs. H would have been better off being launched to Mars by the county road crew. The extra month of life given to her when I removed her from the blast zone allowed her pregnancy to go full term. But a week after giving birth, she quietly slipped into eternity along with her one surviving babe. I cried as I buried them all in our little pet cemetery down by the mill.

Kind intentions can sometimes have a cruel edge, but as children, how innocent we are of this.

Gifts
by Lee Ambrose
Naples FL

A few years ago, on the day after Christmas, I stopped by my friend Ann's house. She had been caring for her terminally ill mother, Lois for many months now. The whole family knew that this would be the last Christmas they would spend with Lois. Her cancer had progressed and there were no more treatment options. Lois faced her final days with dignity, grace and courage. Ann faced Lois' final days with some of that same grace and a sadness at the thought of losing her closest friend and confidante.

As we sat around the kitchen table sipping our tea, Lois got up and announced she had something she wanted to show me. Puzzled, Ann couldn't imagine what Lois felt so compelled to share. Lois' energy levels were almost nonexistent, so it was unusual for her to make any unnecessary trips—even to other rooms in the house. Several minutes passed before Lois returned. I couldn't help but notice the expression on Ann's face as she saw what Lois held in her hands.

Joining us at the table once again, Lois placed a gift box in front of me. Before opening the box, Lois said she wanted to tell me the story that went along with the gift.

Every year as Ann and her sister Kathy were growing up, they longed to give their mother a special gift. A gift that would warm her heart and bring tears of joy to her eyes. Every year they would present their own Christmas wish lists to Mother and watch with anticipation as she read over them. They knew that they would be lucky to get one item on their list. They made a game of trying to read Mother's facial expressions to see if they could predetermine which item might be under the tree on December 25th. Usually they picked the wrong item; but always at least one gift from the list found its way to their tree.

Once Lois read over both wish lists, the girls asked Lois what SHE wanted for Christmas. Every year her response was the same—much to the dismay of Ann and Kathy. "You girls are the only gift I need. But if you must, then give me peace, joy and a dishtowel," Lois would say quietly.

"Mother always asks for the impossible" announced Kathy. "She knows we can't give her peace and joy. Besides, she asks for those things because she doesn't want us spending our allowance on her."

"A dishtowel! How boring!" chimed Ann.

And so, every year, Kathy and Ann would be left to their own devices to come up with some gift for Lois. On Christmas morning, the last gift to be opened was the gift from the girls to their mother. They were never disappointed in their mother's smile and tender response to whatever trinket they had lovingly chosen and wrapped. Every year they were sure they had given her "the best Christmas present ever." Every year Lois allowed them to continue to think so—even though she really wished they hadn't spent their meager allowance on her. She knew that they derived such pleasure from trying to surprise her. And, her heart was warmed at the

excitement and anticipation that always seemed to surround the presentation of that gift to her.

This year, Christmas gift giving for Mother was different than it had ever been in the past. The girls were now mothers of small children. They, too, had proclaimed to want nothing more than the impossible. Now they understood that it was just a more tender way for a mother to tell her child that a gift was not necessary. Still, this would be the last Christmas to shop for Mother. The gift just had to be more special than ever. And yet, what could they give? She really didn't need anything. She wasn't expected to live past January. Every gift option hardly seemed appropriate. During December, when the Hospice volunteer came to read to Lois, Ann and Kathy would slip out of the house and go in search of "the perfect gift for Mom."

Two days before Christmas, the girls still hadn't succeeded in finding that perfect gift. They just had to get something—but what? Feeling defeated, Kathy turned to Ann and cried, "Look Ann, just pick anything. Just so Mom has something to unwrap on Christmas morning."

Then, just as they decided to postpone the gift shopping one more day, they saw the display. Instantly the frustration and dismay that had been so evident was erased from their faces. There was new energy in their step as they made their way closer to the display. They each picked up one of the display items, turned to the other, and proclaimed these two items to be "Perfect!" They made their purchase and headed home to wrap the prized gift and place it under the tree.

On Christmas morning, the house was filled with laughter as Lois, her girls, and her grandchildren opened the beautifully wrapped packages. One package remained—the gift from Ann and Kathy to Lois. Each of the girls gently hugged Lois. She was so frail these days. Then, Ann placed the small box in Lois' lap. It barely weighed anything. Lois wondered out loud what it might be? She might be frail and riddled with cancer, but she hadn't lost that childlike glimmer in her eyes as she carefully untied the ribbon and removed the wrapping paper. Shaking the box gave her no clue. In years past, she had often determined the contents long before the opening of the package, but not this year! "I hope you girls didn't do anything foolish—like spend a lot of money on me. You know I don't need anything. I've told you that a thousand times. But still, it is fun to open gifts, isn't it?"

As she lifted the lid from the small box, the glimmer in her eyes turned to tears—the kind of tears only a mother can cry—the tears that come from a heart overwhelmed with love. There in the box were not one, but two dishtowels, delicate ecru in color. Simple embroidery graced the front of the towels. On one PEACE; on the other, JOY.

With tears in her eyes, Lois placed the opened box in front of me and announced "This is the most beautiful gift my girls have ever given me. And my girls are the best gift God ever gave me."

Lois died not long after that visit. Peace and joy, and not one, but two, dishtowels hang in Ann's kitchen as a loving reminder that Lois is still with her—not just on Christmas, but everyday.

This story is dedicated to my friend Ann and her courageous mother Lois who lost her battle with breast cancer soon after this story took place. May Lois' Christmas wish for



My Mother's Voice by Carolyn Blankenship

Austin TX

The first thing that comes to mind when I think of my mother's voice is that she was always singing. We used to tease her that she had a song for every occasion. No matter what happened in our lives, there was always some musical accompaniment, usually of an encouraging nature: "*You gotta have heart, all you really need is heart,*" "*Just direct your feet to the sunny side of the street,*" "*You gotta accentuate the positive, and eliminate the negative.*" The mundane was not ignored, and we heard "*Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do,*" when asked what we wanted for lunch, or "*Whistle while you work,*" when grumbling about our chores.

Mom and her sister, my Aunt Hazel, would harmonize on Christmas songs, at the Zilker Park Hillside Sing-a-longs, or on long road trips our families took together. She was always pleased when people told her she had a lovely voice, especially since she had never had any voice training.

When she was in her 40s, a new choir director at our small church decided to expand his choir by involving more people. A charming man, he talked to *everyone*, encouraging

them to join the choir, assuring them that they *could* sing, and promising to teach them to read music. My mother signed right up, along with quite a few other novices. This was the beginning of years of pleasure, camaraderie, and pride as a bona fide member of the church choir. She *did* learn to read music, and that director managed to develop their talents and enable them to sing pieces far beyond what they had imagined possible. She always looked so proud and happy filing into the choir loft in her satin-trimmed robe.

Now that she is in a nursing home, Mom is famous for her singing! She rolls up and down the hallways in her wheelchair, singing gospel songs or country music classics. Her caretakers are convinced it keeps her spirits up, and says it gives them a lift as well. We often find two or three attendants in her room, joining her in an impromptu sing-along.

Interestingly enough, as her neurological condition worsens and she loses her ability to speak, her words come out strong and clear when she sings—*I'll Fly Away, South of the Border, Dream a Little Dream with Me*. Even though her memory fails more and more often, she can remember all the words to any song from the thirties, forties or fifties.

I think that when she is gone, her songs will remain with me, lilting down the years, reminding me that she

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