



Story Circle Network

True Words from Real Women

Special Story Issue January 2003

The organization for women with stories to tell...

What a delight it has been to edit the third anthology of writings from Story Circle members. As I read through the many wonderful pieces of writing on the Story Circle web site, in the OWL circle booklets, and in individual submissions, I was struck by the diversity of our experiences as women and the common thread that runs through the stories. I have organized the many wonderful stories in this anthology according to the flow of life events and experiences: we start with stories from early childhood and proceed through adolescence, early adulthood, marriage and children, then into the losses and illnesses of midlife, to the mature and reflective stage of the wise woman. However you choose to read this issue of *True Words*—whether from front to back as the story of Everywoman as she journeys through life, or dipping into it here and there—I know you will find that each individual story has a strength and beauty all of its own. Enjoy!



My Grandpa Pop and Me

By Jennie Boatman
Round Rock TX

Picture a warm Texas day in June 1950. In my mind's eye, I see an old man with weathered face and white hair sitting in a straw-seated rocker on a sun splattered porch. He is holding his leathered, timeworn hands out to a small girl in invitation: climb up here in my lap and let's talk. I'm small for my two and one half years, tiny in fact, in a size 12-months, lacey dress, complete with sash and scuffed off-white shoes. My curly blond hair has been meticulously combed and tamed by my new mother this morning, pinned in place by two shiny new barrettes in the shape of butterflies. My name is now Jennie Lou. This is a different world from the foster home I was in only weeks before. This is the beginning of a new life with new parents and an extended family, a grandfather, a great aunt, and an aunt. There is hope again in my life. Hope I never quite gave up during long weeks in a series of dark, crowded, foster homes, one after the other while the state, unknown to me, waits for my birth father to die or give up parental rights. Now, I'm free—from a family I don't remember, a life I never really knew—to belong, to be a part of a whole instead of alone.

Pop's lap seems big and wide. There is always room for me. A craggy old farmer with fingers swollen and scarred by arthritis and years of work in the cotton fields, Pop is capable of great gentleness. Just as he has delivered newborn calves with these hands, he holds this little girl newly born into his family. He spends hours telling stories, reading books, rocking, keeping company with himself and her in the process.

Pop can't walk very well anymore, and when he does, he uses a cane. The rocking chair is his comfort. There, his bones don't hurt quite as much, and he can turn his face to the sun, settle in and, when someone will listen, talk about the old days.

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This little girl eagerly listens. She wants someone to talk to her after days of no one noticing her, no one answering her cries. In the old days when Pop was a boy, days began at 4 a.m. with feeding the cows and ended at dusk after plowing the fields. The work was hard, but somehow, boys found time for fishing, swimming in the creek and, of course, there was the trip to church by horse and carriage every Sunday. Pop grew up in Sweden on a farm and his father was very strict, and he in turn was strict with his son, my Dad. One of us is too old to work. One of us is too young to work on a farm that is all about work. We are daily companions with nature; our best friends are Pop's sheep dog, Nicky, and my orange cat, name forgotten. We explore a world of words, stories about the past, about nature, and the nature of people.

Sometimes we sit in the big gray swing that has room enough for two, sometimes even three people, if one of them is very small. We wave at the occasional car on the country road outside our farm, and count the number of cars on trains traveling by in the distance. Once we counted 100 cars! We speculate about their destinations. Pop is sure they are going to Kalamazoo, which is where he says he is going when he gets frustrated with something he is carving in wood or something someone says that he doesn't like. I don't know where Kalamazoo is or if it exists, but it must be very far away. Once Pop settled on the farm, I don't think he traveled further than Austin, but in his mind, he went to Kalamazoo.

Pop seemed such a force of nature, such an essential part of life, I could not conceive of a world without him. He died when I was nine years old. That day began like any other day except that Pop had been sick and bedridden for many weeks. On a fall day much like today, I felt something different in the house, a tension and disquiet unlike anything I remembered feeling before. I knew something bad was happening, but knew better than to ask what. I heard dad talking to Dr. Gregg and asking him to come out to see Pop. I heard the words, "I think this is it." I knew Pop was dying. I didn't know what that meant, but I knew it wasn't good. I knew it would change everything forever. When Dr. Gregg arrived, I ran outside and started jumping rope as fast as I could and pleading with God, please God, please don't let him die. My remembered experiences with death so far were limited to chickens that madly danced around after their heads were chopped off and calves that disappeared from the barnyard and ended up on my dinner plate. I had no conscious memory of the birth father who had died before I was reborn into this family. Then the grownups called me into Pop's room. I felt the difference immediately. He was not there and I knew it, so I didn't believe Aunt Louise when she said, "He's just sleeping." I didn't want to kiss him good-bye because I knew he was already gone.

I felt all the feelings that experts now say children feel about loss of a loved one, and at the time I experienced them alone. For weeks, I bargained with God—if you will bring Pop back, I promise I'll be good. I cried in church every Sunday much to my parents' confusion and dismay. No one asked, and I could not put my feeling of loss into words. Today, I know I was grieving. I can look back and say Pop and I were there for each other when we most needed each other. An old man at the end of his life, a young girl newly adopted at the beginning of a new life, we were two spirits yearning to be accepted and loved just as we were at the end as at the beginning. This is the gift we gave to each other at age 85 and two—the gift of unconditional love. That gift will always be with me.



The Best Fried Chicken I Ever Ate

Carolyn Blankenship
Austin TX

It all started the Easter I was nine. My dad brought home five pastel-colored baby chicks from some smooth-talking customer. The whole family was entranced with the tiny, fuzzy peepers. We stroked them, fed them, and put them under a lamp set on the floor to keep them warm. We named them all.

Predictably, they grew—into chickens. Actually, they grew into four docile hens and a strutting, bad-tempered, obnoxious rooster who spurred my five-year old brother every

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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See Editor's Biography
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time he stepped out the back door. This rooster struck terror to my soul and he knew it. Obviously, chickens can smell fear.

I would be playing happily in the side yard under the oaks, and he would come around the corner of the house, feathers ruffled to make him look even bigger, flapping his wings, hopping in the air to flash his spurs, making vicious, jerky, pecking motions with his beak. I would take off running, shrieking for my mother. Round and round the house we'd go, me speeding along, screaming, trying to put enough distance between me and the rooster to safely open the door and get in, the rooster half flying, gaining ground, squawking triumphantly. My mother would grit her teeth, put aside whatever task she was involved in, and come out and shoo the rooster away. Chickens obviously also know true authority when confronted by it. My mom had been raised on a farm and knew how to handle errant critters.

One day she had evidently had enough. As the rooster and I went into our screaming/squawking/running/flapping routine, Mom burst out the back door with a catsup bottle in her hand. Round we went, me screaming, the rooster squawking, my mother determinedly giving chase. Quickly realizing her limitations as to speed, Mom reversed her field and came around the house at us from the opposite direction. As I flew by her, I saw her raise the catsup bottle and heard a satisfying *thunk*, followed by silence. I flung open the screen door, leapt to safety, and peered out the window. My mother's face was set as she snatched up the unconscious bird and quickly wrung its neck—with one hand. Not only had she flattened him with one accurate blow of the catsup bottle, he was going to be dinner! I didn't participate in (or even view) the preparations: scalding, plucking, dressing, dismembering, etc., but my heart was at peace just knowing that sorry bird would not be chasing anyone ever again.

We were all seated at the table when Mom brought in the platter of golden fried chicken to set beside the mashed potatoes and green beans from the garden. My little sister cried—she couldn't believe we were eating a *pet*. My little brother looked puzzled—he was too young to make the connection between yard and dinner table. My father wore his long-suffering expression. Mom passed the platter to me first, and my grin just about split my face as I chose the wishbone and passed the platter to my sister, whose sobs grew louder. My father growled at her and stabbed the breast as he took the platter from her. Mom placed a drumstick on my brother's plastic, sectioned, teddy-bear plate and took a side piece for herself. Though she said nothing, her eyes met mine as she took her first bite, and I saw the silent satisfaction in her eyes. It was a side of my mother I had never seen, and it raised my respect for her guts, grit, and talent yet another notch. Made me a little bit afraid as well.

Now I know some folks might say it was because the meat was fresh and never frozen, or because it was a free-range fowl, or because my mother's crust was golden, crispy, and well-seasoned—but I think we all really know why it was absolute truth when I crowed, "This is the *best* fried chicken I ever ate!"



Papá Lita de los Santos Austin TX

Papá was already old as I remember him. I remember him as he worked so hard to give us a good life. He was a very hard-working man and he instilled in all of us the satisfaction of a job well done.

Holding me in his lap, his hard, callused hands holding my skinny arms, he would tell me how he wanted me to go to university and learn a lot, to be a teacher, to be well educated. He taught me to learn by listening to people talk. He would say they were our best teachers. He also taught me to like myself and to correct those things I did not like about the self. He was a hard disciplinarian but also very just. He shared his love of music and reading with us by telling us stories from his childhood. He came from a land called *Mejico* and would tell us about the beauty of the land and the culture of the people. He loved to dance with Mamá and always made me proud; even in his bib overalls and work boots, he always looked handsome.

He was barrel-chested with a round strong body—not very tall—and had very callused hands, but as he touched my cheeks, my face, I felt them soft and gentle.

I remember one day when he and Mamá took us all in the wagon to town to see the circus. Late in the evening I got very tired and my older sister took me to the wagon and laid me down with my other sister's kids and someone covered us with a big quilt. When the circus was over, late that night, everybody went home. Papá and Mamá rode home with their wagonload of sleeping kids, back to the farm. Only when they started to wake up the kids to bring them into the house did they realize I was not in the bunch of sleepyheads. Papa quickly saddled a horse and rode fast, back into town five miles away to my sister's house, to bring me home! I rode in front of him in the saddle as he opened his big work coat and wrapped me close to his warm body to keep me warm as we galloped home. I loved being held by his strong arms and hearing him say softly in my small ear, "I could not stand you being so far from me for one night." I loved that feeling of riding through the night safe in Papá's arms.

Papá died when I was twelve. I missed him terribly. You see I was not done with growing—I was just a kid!

The Happiest Time of My Life By Pat Flathouse Austin TX

I remember with fondness the summers I spent growing up in a small oil town in the panhandle of Texas. I was allowed to roam freely in the neighborhood for as far as I could walk, skate, or go on the stilts that Daddy had made for all the children in our neighborhood.

A whole gang of us played together, building playhouses in our backyards, climbing up on roofs to jump off with towels

tied around our necks playing Superman, and visiting from house to house. We also foraged for food from yard to yard, eating mustang grapes, plums, peaches, mulberries, and cherry tomatoes and begging treats from Mrs. Robinson on the corner. Mrs. Robinson had no children but had lots of goodies for all of us as we played throughout the neighborhood. We would walk down to the creek and gather tadpoles on our way to the swimming pool where I learned to dog paddle around in the water and do belly busters into the deep end.

As I learned to read, Daddy took me on his every-other-week trip to the library where I was allowed to check out two books to read. I could not go back to the library until I had read both books. On hot summer afternoons, I loved nothing better than to sit under our backyard plum tree and read through the entire Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys series of books. As I grew more adept at reading, I was allowed to walk to the library by myself and pick out new books even if Daddy was not ready for his every-other-week trip. I really felt grown up then!

Storm Shaped

By Susan Schoch

Idledale CO

Most often it seems we are struggling along, doing our best to live with the paradox and ambiguity of life, and in slow movements, over many years, come to recognize that we have completely changed. It is not a matter of intention. We simply act out the years, as a tree bends every day to whatever force assails it. The process creates a solution to living, allows us to endure what might break us.

Then sometimes life jolts us. We are propelled into a future we hadn't imagined, and it happens all in an instant. Lightning chooses us, and we're never the same again. Yet by shock, or by slowly gathered insight, what-we-do becomes more clear to us. Who-we-are becomes less fuzzy, and we recognize ourselves as someone new, who is also that same someone from before. A fresh shape emerges, and the old one exists only in part, as a kind of altered framework.

The first time a big change came to me, I couldn't look back much. I was almost too young to remember. The only self I knew was a little girl, four years old, thin and straight-blond and sensitive, whose greatest worry was the competition with her older sister, the dimpled and curly one who was always a step ahead. That, and her mother's sharp demands for neatness and well-behaved quiet. Of course, that little girl already knew her girlishness was less acceptable than her brother's princeliness, too. Yet, all in all, the only conclusion she'd already drawn was that life wasn't fair. It was good, mostly, but sometimes there was unreasonableness to it.

That older brother, Ray, was seven, in second grade. My sister Linda was in kindergarten half the day, at a different place, a school that I would go to the following year. But I still had to go to nursery school in a basement room that smelled of mildewed vinyl and paste and was crowded with cupboards and unfriendly, strange children. Not every day. I know I didn't

go to nursery school that morning, because I was home when the doorbell rang.

My baby sister, Claudia, was 16 months old. She was on the floor, as I picture it. Or maybe in the high chair in the kitchen. I stood in the kitchen doorway to watch her as Mother crossed the living room and pulled open the door. At first I didn't see the men who were outside. Just Mother, wavering about something, holding onto the door during some long moment that felt strange to me. Then they came in, and I'd seen them before, two men who were friends of my dad and worked at the same place, out near the airport. The man named Bob was a pilot like Daddy. But he wasn't in a flight suit today. They were both in white shirtsleeves and office slacks, and seemed rather formal as they stepped into the small living room, made smaller by my mother's black baby-grand piano, silent in the corner.

Probably I was sent back to the kitchen with the baby. Or maybe upstairs to the room I shared with Linda. I know I didn't get to hear what was said, and didn't know why the day changed, only that it did. It wasn't until later, when Mother and all of us girls went to pick up Ray at his new school, near the big old house that we were moving to, and Mother took us to a bench out in the big schoolyard, that it seemed she was going to say anything about that.

I can see the blue and white stripe of her dress, a cool cotton because Missouri is still hot and muggy in September. I remember the smooth feel of it against me as we gathered about her in the shade of a tall old sycamore, Claudia taking up her lap, Linda next to her on one side and Ray on the other, while I stood near her knee. The dark red brick of the school rose tall behind her, and I was curious about it, knowing that one day I'd be in first grade and go inside there. I was distracted by that as Mother began to tell us the news. Then I heard it. It sounded like she said that Daddy died. What? Yes, she did say that. Daddy's plane crashed and he died. I didn't quite believe her. Where was he? When was he coming home?

The body was shipped to Buffalo. My mother must have gone there for the funeral, to be with his parents and brother and sisters. Maybe her mother came from California to stay with us while she was gone. I think there was a memorial service at our church, too, but the children didn't go. I don't remember much, and like all the other details and feelings of that time, it was rarely spoken of afterward. My father just disappeared.

When you ask her now, at 82, my mother says that for a few months all she did was play the piano and cry. Then, being

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naturally stoic, she figured she'd better pull herself together and get on with life. She was a nurse. She'd get a job. And so she did.

There are pictures of us, me and my brother and sisters, not during that immediate period of devastation, while I was still hoping that Daddy would come back, the victim of some accident that had temporarily caused him to forget us and be lost, wandering. Not while Mother was unreachable and withdrawn, settling us into the new home they had bought together and playing the piano downstairs, alone, in the low light. But the following Easter, when his folks came down to visit and we stood next to Grandpa in the big yard and had on new Sunday outfits for spring.

In that snapshot, the earlier children that we were are gone. And I knew it.

Dark circles shadow my eyes. I have gone from thin to skinny, and we're all squinting in the light. Not in the moment unhappy. In fact, pleased to be with our grandparents, interested in egg hunts in the nooks and crannies of the new place, glad to have the hollow crystal-sugar eggs with the small dioramas inside. Yet we were changed, and would never again have an innocence in our eyes. I was never again so light.

Hilda's Kitchen

By LouAnn Opitz

Austin TX

Hilda's kitchen was open to family and friends, as well as to friends of family and friends of friends. It made her day when someone dropped by when they came to St. Paul, or stopped over when they were in the neighborhood. Coffee was always brewing and was seldom served without lunch or a meal, and Hilda had a knack for putting it together in just minutes. Holding to Scandinavian ritual, she daily prepared breakfast, mid-morning lunch, dinner, afternoon lunch, supper, and lunch before bed, believing that good food was as good for the soul as it was for the body. Hilda not only liked to feed people. She fed stray dogs, cats, birds, squirrels, and rabbits that some of our neighbors wanted to shoot. For those of us who lived with Hilda, Lent came as an anticipated relief—she could relax from cooking and we could relax from eating.

I came into this household as the firstborn. Father, who served in World War II, was discharged the day of my birth, and he and my mother, Hilda, purchased a great Victorian house near downtown St. Paul. A shortage of dwellings after the war influenced my parents' decision to sub-divide the house into four, smaller, family units. We lived in one of the apartments. The other units were occupied by: two uncles and their wives; Mother's nephew and his wife and their young son; and two more cousins, who were brother and sister. Some wished to take their meals with us, so Mother graciously accommodated them with her home cooking. When I was nearing 10 years of age, and had two younger brothers and a sister, the multi-family dwelling was sold, and we moved to a single-family home in the suburbs. While my youngest brother

and sister attended Catholic school, my mother worked there preparing hot lunches. She held this position until she was 65. After she retired, she volunteered in the parish assisting with luncheons, funeral meals, and church picnics.

Hilda liked to think she was a simple person with simple tastes, easy to please, with principles and values she upheld with honesty and sincerity, and this was reflected in her cooking. Not too fancy, but always sacred. Meals were preceded with prayer and ended with prayer, and in between there was time for conversation and eating.

In conversation Hilda did more listening than talking. This, she felt, would make her more open to learning. Always showing interest in what others had to say, Hilda seldom aggravated anyone. She avoided advising because she preferred others to make their own decisions. When asked for advice, she would shrug and then say, "I really don't know what to tell you but to pray. Pray every day and you will find answers and solutions."



Summer Picnic

By Phyllis Browne

Austin TX

It was 1933, July 27 on a Thursday at 4:00 p.m.—the Concord picnic was here. My family was living in Omaha Nebraska at the time. This picnic was a yearly event priced at 50¢ for adults. Children evidently were admitted free. We eagerly awaited the time, counting down the days until the day before, which was when preparations began. My biggest recollection was the making of the ice cream. Out of winter storage came the ice-cream freezer, which had to be soaped and washed inside and out. Now the process began. Mother would gather the ingredients: cream, sugar, eggs and, most importantly the flavoring—big juicy black raspberries. She filled the cylinder, which fit into a round wood bucket, three-quarters full. This, she said, was to allow for expansion. In the meantime, my brother Jack, with the aid of large ice tongs, pulled out a piece of ice from the icebox and positioned it on the ground mat. We each chipped at the ice with ice picks into pieces to fit between the cylinder and the bucket, along with special salt. Now the churning began. We took turns turning the handle on the side of the bucket that was attached to the bottom of the cylinder. We continued until our arms ached and turning stopped.

Arriving at the picnic early, we joined in the playing of the games. One of the favorites was the three-legged race. With a partner, you would each place your inside legs next to each other in a gunnysack. A gunnysack is a burlap bag that once housed 100 pounds of flour, sugar, grain or such. After using the contents of these sacks, they were washed and had a multiplicity of uses. Back to the race. With our legs in the sack, we'd race toward the finish line. Unable to get their legs synchronized, many fell by the wayside. There were other races, such as the short dashes, that I won ribbons in.

The ice cream with the luscious black raspberries, however, is my fondest memory. It turned our mouths purple and made us laugh with joy.

Working Girl

By Carole Buckman
Austin TX

I've always loved working. My first job was running two blocks to the store for our neighbor. I was five. She let me keep the change. One day she gave me a whole nickel after I'd gone back twice to get the correct brand of soap. At seven, I had a new neighbor, one who let me push the hand mower to cut her grass every Saturday. She paid me a crust of freshly baked bread slathered with butter.

When we were 15, my friend Linda and I took jobs in the sale barn office. They paid five dollars a Saturday whether we worked five hours or twelve. We had to balance to the penny before we could leave. We could also eat whatever we wanted from the greasy-spoon sale-barn restaurant. This job introduced me to characters that I've used in stories my whole life; auctioneers, hog buyers, farmers, truckers, yard men and a drunken railroad engineer who told jokes and teased and danced us around the office.

My greatest fear was that the ticket boys would get behind and I'd have to enter the auction barn. The first time I went in, I thought they were all very loud and crazy, and then I realized that I was being auctioned.

A Television of Our Own

By Donna Van Straten Rimmert
Austin TX

December, 1953: This Christmas will be the best Christmas ever. We're finally getting a television set! Daddy ordered it way back in July and Mother is furious that we've had to wait so long. She wanted it to arrive way before Christmas because she's tired of going to the neighbors to watch *I Love Lucy*.

When Daddy hints that she might be wearing out her welcome, Mother says, "I refuse to miss a single show. If you say I can't go to the neighbors anymore, I'll drive all the way to Appleton and stand out in the cold to watch." Weber's Appliances keeps the television that's in their window turned on after they close at night, and they even pipe the sound out to the street. Lots of people stand out in the cold to see television but I can't imagine my mother doing this. Her feet are always cold, even when she's in our nice warm house.

I don't think Burmeisters care when Mother comes to watch *I Love Lucy*. Heck, they put kitchen chairs into the living room for anyone who wants to come over to see the show. Louise Litzkow and Katy Dryden are there every time just like Mother. The chairs are for grownups only and kids sit up front, on the floor. A 15 year old like myself can be a grownup when there's an empty chair. I was last week, until Grandma Schauger came.

"What's so special about the *I Love Lucy* show that you have to see every one of them?" Daddy asks. "It's on at the

same time the other channel broadcasts the news. I've got to watch the news."

"We're watching Lucy!" Mother says like she's the boss. "Nothing that resembles anything about my life has ever been on television before this."

"Lucy's life isn't anything like yours. She's a rich Hollywood celebrity," Daddy says.

"That's in real life. On television, she's an ordinary person like me who gets pregnant and then has a baby to fuss over. This is the story of my life and it's about time people hear what it's like." Mother's voice shakes like she might be on the brink of tears. It's because she thinks Daddy doesn't appreciate what she's gone through having all seven of us kids. I know because I heard her saying this to the washing machine, as if it were Daddy. She didn't know I was sitting on the basement steps where I could hear.

"You shouldn't talk like this in front of the kids," Daddy says.

"Hogwash!" Mother snaps back. "I'll say pregnant whenever I want to. Pregnant, pregnant, pregnant! If Lucy can say it on television, I can say it in front of my own children." Lucy got herself into big trouble for saying this word on television. People think it's indecent to talk about this sort of thing in such graphic language. The *Appleton Post* wrote that if Lucy must talk about it, she should at least have the decency to say expecting instead of pregnant. I don't see why it's such a big deal. Doctors say this word so why can't ordinary people? Also, I think it's good to talk about things like this on television. It's educational. I didn't know anything about expecting a baby before Lucy told about it. Now that I know the gory details, I know more about my mother's life. The gory details also make me wonder about my own life. Like, do I really want to put up with morning sickness just to have a baby?

"There's nothing I can do about our television not getting here in time and I wish you'd stop griping about it," Daddy says to Mother on Christmas Eve. I wish they didn't bicker the way they do, especially on a night like this when everything is supposed to be perfect.

Gosh, things will be different when we get our television set. Daddy says that in a couple months, there will be three

Anybody Who Was Anybody

By Trudie M. Eklund
Cedar Park TX

Easter 1946—the first Easter since the end of the war! The center of our attention was no longer being focused on strange sounding places where battles were being fought and people were dying. No longer walking home from school and having our hearts skip a beat when our eyes caught sight of a new gold or blue star flag in the front window of another neighbor's house. And no longer wondering how the families were coping

with the news of a wounded or dead relative. Yes, that was all behind us now!

Fashion was uppermost in our minds. We felt we had gone without and sacrificed long enough. After all, hadn't we been deprived of those dreamy silk stockings long enough because the war left no time for the Chinese to export silk to the rest of the world? And hadn't we watched with dismay when nylon stockings practically disappeared from the store shelves because thirty pairs of nylons were needed to produce one parachute?

Oh yes, at first we had giggled at the new style of women's clothes but we decided we were doing our bit to conserve cloth for the war effort and made do with the new tighter and shorter skirts. Now with spring upon us, newspapers and magazines were flying off newsstand shelves as women gobbled up news about the new peacetime fashion trends. Helen, my best friend, and I had been saving for what had seemed forever for new clothes. Oh, how we had daydreamed about *after the war is over*. We'd act very grown up and go shopping just like the older neighborhood girls. Well, the day had arrived! Helen and I agreed that there was no time like the present to find that special Easter outfit. Each of us had our money in a plastic wallet tucked into an oversized plastic purse so fashionable in those days as we headed to the big, sophisticated downtown department stores.

First stop was the hosiery department where we stood in a long line of pushing, shoving, and anxious women, all of us ready to plunk down \$1.15 for a coveted pair of nylons. We'd heard the gossip that the stockings would feel funny and would be itchy but we just had to have them because anybody who was anybody would be wearing nylons. Next we wandered into the suit department. The New York fashion world had determined that navy blue would be the color for spring and it was a given that those who wanted to look their best would follow the trend. I picked a navy blue and yellow suit, while Helen settled for a navy blue and pink one. In the shoe department our eyes caught sight of the neat-o, thick platform-soled shoes with matching pocketbooks. We pretended to be nonchalant when we tried on the shoes and, even though we weren't sure how we could ever walk in three-inch heels, we tucked new navy blue shoes into our shopping bags. Of course no outfit would be complete without a hat. My tiny dark blue straw hat had a touch of netting around the brim and rows and rows of blue velvet ribbon on the crown for special effect. Helen decided on a pink feathered one that she believed looked much more glamorous when tilted to the side. We were so pleased with ourselves especially since our hats sported those trendy nose-length veils because anybody who was anybody would be wearing hats with veils. What was next? Well, it certainly was common knowledge that no well-dressed woman's outfit could be complete without matching scalloped-edged gloves and, after trying on and admiring several pair, I picked a pair of yellow ones while Helen decided to continue her pink theme. But wait! I had \$1.20 left out of

\$30.00 and there was a brass bracelet I just had to have. I didn't know then that that bracelet would lead to disaster.

Easter Sunday finally arrived. Dressed to the nines and, trying desperately to ignore the fact that my shoes were too tight and too high and the heels flopped when I walked, I was ready to take on the world. While waiting for Helen I decided to check my itchy nylons one more time to see if the seams were perfectly straight. One minute everything was fine; the next minute as I twisted and turned, my bracelet's clasp slipped open and caught in the nylons. Before my very eyes one stocking had a hole in it and runs were speeding up and down my left leg. How could I face the world with runny stockings when anybody who was anybody never wore stockings with runs? Tears spilled down my face through my nose-length veil leaving it limp and lopsided, my feet hurt, my purse was not the exact shade of my shoes—in other words my life was in shambles. I was about to jump into bed, pull the bedclothes over me, and dissolve into tears for the rest of my

Turning Point

By Judy Gesch

Austin TX

It's eighth period Senior English class and I find myself staring out of the second story window of my classroom at the vibrantly striking red, gold, and orange fall leaves dancing in the wind across the school parking lot. Sr. Mary Donatha is talking about an upcoming term paper and providing the class with last-minute, fine points that need to be included. Life is good and everything is going well. I see some of my friends taking notes while others whisper and go about the duties of being a student.

Out of nowhere, the principal, Sr. Mary Digna, appears at the doorway. She interrupts the class to make an announcement. I can't believe my ears! President Kennedy has been shot and he is on his way to the hospital. Sr. Mary Donatha tries to regain her own composure and asks us all to put our books away and pray the rosary together for the president.

Looking around the room, everything has become magnified, almost surreal. The class jokers aren't laughing. They look sad and lost. Several members of the football team hug each other as some sort of sign of reassurance. Sounds from the radio that seem to come from nowhere are squawking details of the horrific event. Class is dismissed a little early but no one moves. Pain and disbelief can be seen on most every face. *My world feels upside down. The carefree*

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The Whisper That Screamed

By Judy Fettman

Ann Arbor MI

There are moments in which, looking back, we realize that our lives have changed forever, and that there is no going back, when we realize that before I was one person and after I was someone else. This story is about five whispered words that transformed my life.

He was Scottish or Irish, I forget which, and his name, Donald Williamson, really offers no clue. He was perhaps forty at the time, soft gentle lines beginning to deepen at the corners of his eyes, hair sandy and greying at the temples, tousled as if he'd been walking in the wind on a moor. He wore rich tweed jackets of rosy browns and tawny golds. His voice was warm and gentle, his British Isle brogue rippling richly into the room. His only features that were not soft and gentle, that more matched his inner acumen, were his pale blue eyes. When he looked at you, his gaze pierced your corneas and into your soul, and he peered into your heart. When he looked at you, you felt like you were the only person in the world that mattered.

When I met him I was a junior at Duke, a 21-year-old mediocre student. For the most part I was living the same narrow life as my parents, barely questioning any wisdom passed on to me. But it was the sixties, and there was unrest in the South and in my soul. The civil rights movement was simmering around us, and the Wesley Foundation was active in promoting social justice. The human potential movement was spreading its roots—Esalen was moving east. I was excited by new thoughts, new ideas, new ways of thinking, beginning to see that the world was a bigger place than the isolated hills and minds in rural Pennsylvania where I grew up. So, when I was invited to participate in an experimental group experience led by Donald Williamson, a university chaplain, I was intrigued.

There was an atmosphere of mystery surrounding this proposed group. When we asked what the group would be doing that evening in March, no one offered a concrete answer. "It's a process group. We'll see what happens," we were told. While I was pulled in by my curiosity, I was still deeply cautious.

Seven or eight of us gathered in the cramped living room of the chaplain's quarters—plopped on the small couch, a few propped on pillows against the wall, and one balanced uneasily on a desk chair. There was tall, dark, and handsome Dennis Campbell from Long Island, a brilliant student, the kind who might be voted the Most Likely to Succeed. There was boyish Rusty Cramer with his shaggy Beatles haircut, who looked at you with big puppy dog eyes, anxious to please. There was Gayle Rubin, the daughter of a Methodist minister, who had a good soul, but whose adolescent hormones ran as untamed as her flaming red hair. There was Louise Speight, a Bible-carrying, slightly crossed-eyed southern belle from Charlotte, who was not going to be left out. And there was me, Judy McKnight, good student but not outstanding, good musician but not the best, all-work-and-no-play-makes-Judy-a-dull-girl, always feeling not quite good enough.

From his seat in a canvas chair, Donald Williamson offered his large warm hand. "Hello there, glad you could come

tonight," he greeted me in his lilting brogue. As his eyes caught mine I found it impossible to look away. He seemed to be looking through my skin, deep into the center of my being. I shivered. He both fascinated and scared me.

"So what are we doing here tonight?" he asked as we settled ourselves in the crowded room. We smiled—how exotic he sounded with that foreign accent! Feet shuffled and there were anxious coughs as no one spoke and the silence lengthened.

"Well then, let's just begin," he said quietly.

Perhaps we talked about events that were shaking our world, about Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat to a white man on a bus in Alabama. Or maybe it was how students were supporting the campus maids and food workers in their demands for a living wage. Or we may have talked about more mundane concerns, upcoming exams or how weary we were, juggling six classes and writing two term papers. Or maybe it was something about dorm life. The only thing I remember is longing to participate but feeling I had nothing important to say, secretly thinking that I was out of my league in the Ivy League. These feelings had kept me silent for a long time. And I well knew the discomfort of staying silent, but it seemed better than exposing myself.

But then I spoke. As uncreative or unoriginal as it might sound, I had to say something. So I said...something. I don't remember what.

As Gayle and Dennis chattered on, the pale blue eyes turned toward me. His blue eyes caught mine, and though I wanted to drop my gaze to my hands twisting in my lap, I couldn't look away. I was held there, looking back into those deep blue eyes. They wouldn't let me go. Then his lilting words wrapped around me.

"You must feel very lonely," he whispered.

What? What did he say? I must feel—lonely? Was I missing something? Why would he say to me, "You must feel very lonely?" What kind of question was that? What did it mean? What was I supposed to answer? I realized that the chatter around me had fallen away. Each person, confused,

continued on page 9

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looked to another in the uncomfortable silence. What was happening here?

Why no, of course I'm not lonely, I thought. Who could be lonely in a dorm bursting with girls? I have friends! I would tell him, I don't know what you mean! I even belong to a sorority! Who could be lonely with six classes and homework until 2:00 every night and papers to write? And if I could squeeze it into my busy schedule, there was my music. Playing Handel and Vivaldi and Bach always filled the...the empty spaces... Wait...what? I couldn't deny those empty spaces, now that he had called my attention to it. I tried so hard to be liked. But deep down, I didn't fit in. In fact I was miserably lonely. I was dying inside. I had been hiding it even from myself. I was terrified realizing how lonely and desperate I felt.

His pale blue eyes wouldn't let me go. "You must feel very lonely." Silently I turned the words over in my mind. His lilting words seemed seductive, deceptive—leading me somewhere I didn't want to go. But I allowed myself to follow. Suddenly I felt exhausted, and as if I were at last laying down a heavy burden I had carried far too long, I said, "Yes, you're right. I am lonely."

These may have been the first authentic words I had ever spoken.

On the surface, that night and the days thereafter, life went on pretty much as usual—classes, papers, exams. Except that inside I was different. I felt fractured, shattered. Some heavy protective armor around my soul had been cracked open and blown apart. I felt naked. Bleeding. His whispered words continued to scream at me.

Now, for me it was quite a leap of courage to say, "Yes, you're right. I am lonely." Admitting that to myself made it impossible to pretend any longer. Owning that loneliness demanded that I change. Hearing those words was the beginning of a long journey. One does not unlearn old habits overnight. It was many years until I could work my way through the pain that was tapped by that whisper, and could build an authentic life no longer based on denial. Sometimes I still find myself acting without thinking, automatically complying, ambushed by old habits. At those times I need to reach back to that evening with Donald Williamson and remember how his eyes grabbed me and how those whispered words screamed at me and how they woke me up to the rest of my life.

Mother to Be

By Suzanne Vance Zoch

Austin TX

In May of 1958, Sid and I married and moved to Oxford, Mississippi, where Sid had a part-time job teaching freshman English while he worked on his PhD. I was only 19—a girl just out of high school and five months pregnant. Before we left home Sid had asked, "Are you sure you want to come with me? Don't you want to stay at home with your parents until after the baby comes?"

I had answered, "No, I want to be with you, Sid."

By the end of that summer Sid had become withdrawn and unhappy. He seldom talked to me and he was gone most of the

time teaching or doing research at the library. I had no friends and Sid did not introduce me to his friends at the university. I was alone with the knowledge that the baby was a circumstance that had trapped him and he was unable to support me as I made the transition from high-school sweetheart to wife and mother. I was very apprehensive about our future and decided I should return home so my mother could be with me when the baby was born.

When I approached Sid to tell him about my decision, he brushed me aside and said, "We'll talk later. I just realized I left some test papers in my office. I need to go get them. I won't be home until late so don't wait up for me." Sid did not return home that night.

The next day was cooler than usual. I sat on the back porch waiting for Sid to come home or telephone. Up and down the campus sidewalks, returning students were hurrying to fall semester classes. White clouds formed a halo above everything: the old red brick buildings, campus grounds, park, and our little house. A lonely sweetheart, a mother to be, two still as one, I sat in limbo on the edge of everything.

At noon I still had not heard from Sid and I was angry. I thought: *I should go over to the university, walk into his classroom, stand in front of all his students and ask him why he didn't come home last night. His embarrassment would make it even.* My harsh thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the doorbell.

I opened the front door and a pretty young woman introduced herself, "My name is Sally. I go to the university. My sorority is raising money to redecorate the sorority house. We're selling perfume. I'd like to show you some samples." Staring at the fullness of my abdomen, she stepped into the living room, placed a canvas bag on the coffee table and removed a small bottle of perfume. Before she continued her sales pitch, I explained, "Sally, I don't have any money. My husband teaches at the university and he's also working on an advanced degree. We just don't have any extra money for luxuries." She inquired, "What is your husband's name? I may know him." I pointed to a small picture of Sid and me on the mantle above the living room fireplace. "His name is Sid Varner and I'm Sue." Sally walked over to the mantle to look at the picture. I followed her. On the mantle beside the picture we saw Sid's wedding ring. Sally's lips quivered as she spoke, "I know your husband. He's my English professor." She turned away from the mantle and we looked directly at each other. She had tears in her eyes. I suspected there was a secret between us that could not be confessed. Before I could speak she ran out of the living room, got in her car and drove away. She left the perfume and canvas bag on the coffee table. When I picked up the bag to put the bottle in it, I discovered there were no perfume samples inside it. Pretending to sell perfume was her sneaky way of getting information.

I felt as if I were going to vomit. My heart was beating so hard my head hurt. The baby squirmed inside my womb. "He doesn't want us," I said aloud. Then I went into the back yard and walked in circles until months of pent up tears were finally released. I don't know how long I had paced when I saw Sid approaching me. I opened my mouth but I could not speak. A labor pain slapped me to the ground and I fainted. When I

Seeing these rocks takes me back to the very first time we took our children on a camping trip. We drove to northern New Mexico, just north of Taos. There we found a clearing alongside a small river in a National Forest. We were the only people around. This was truly camping. We slept in a tent and cooked on a camp stove outside. No camper, no RV, no established campground. We truly roughed it.

The river ran right alongside our tent, a small stream really, that tumbled downhill over rocks and small river stones. This tumbling caused the rocks to become very smooth and because of their origin they were very colorful. Our six young children took great delight in collecting these rocks. The box of rocks has lived with me on a closet shelf for over 40 years. More recently I have taken that box out and looked at these rocks, and I know why I keep them. They are a tangible reminder of happy family times.

Best Actress Award

By Ann Byrd
Austin TX

This dusty wooden block with its glitter-covered Styrofoam film cartridge is one of my favorite memories of Annie and her good times.

In the summer of 1982, my kids and their friends were into movie making with a vengeance. The summer of 1981, they had made some interesting films and this summer Annie was invited to do her own film.

After all of the films were completed, there was a film festival at the country place of one of their friends. The Land of Goshen was the name given to their home.

Annie was thrilled to be able to participate and, being a fan of Perry Mason, decided to do a detective story. Annie was then 21 years old, but not always a part of her brother and sisters' group.

The name of the film was to be *Justice on Wheels*, written, directed, and acted by Ann McCormick Byrd. Annie was in a wheelchair and thought that she could be a great detective—and she was.

The story line was this: a robber escaped from prison (Murchison Junior High), jumped the fence, and was later found on the West Mall at the University of Texas. The next shots show him stealing a purse from an unsuspecting woman. Along comes the star detective in her wheelchair and, somehow, she is able to arrest, handcuff, and bring to trial the escaped prisoner. She had plastic handcuffs and a plastic pistol. And hauled him in! It was hard for the detective to keep a straight face as she was handcuffing one of her brother's very good friends.

When the film festival was on, there were some really wonderful, funny films, beer, sausages and an awards ceremony.

Annie was the winner of the Gosh award for Best Actress, 1982. It was also one of the best times that she had. Her mother was proud of her, the mother of the best actress, 1982.

Uncle Henry **Mary Faloon** Austin TX

Just as the proverbial robin heralded spring up north, likewise Henry would make his appearance at our home in Florida each spring. We had known Henry at Penn State and, like so many others, he was happy to renew a casual friendship when we moved to Florida. He was probably in his mid-30s at the time. He was employed as the wrestling coach at Pennsylvania University, and wrestling season ended before spring semester was over. Consequently, Henry's vacation started early. He would pack his large station wagon with bare essentials for camping and all his fishing equipment and head toward the Midwest.

Henry used his World War II severance pay, with overseas bonus, to buy 20 acres of a meadow and stream in Wyoming at the base of the Grand Tetons. The view was breathtaking. This was his first campsite where he could fish and renew a childhood friendship with the Craighead twins who were doing extensive research and photography for National Geographic on the grizzly bear. Theirs was the first study by radio tagging to determine the bear's location, range, and number in the Rocky Mountain area.

While in that locale, Henry often served as a guide for Nelson Rockefeller, whom Henry regarded as a tightwad because he wouldn't buy himself a decent fishing rod.

Rockefeller's answer to such a suggestion was always the same. "I don't fish that much, Henry, to justify the expense." Needless to say, this excuse, in Henry's mind, was not adequate from a man who could buy himself anything he wanted. It was a frustrating mystery to Henry, who lived frugally in order to spend as much as he could on the finest fishing rods. Rockefeller, on the other hand, could have the best without the sacrifice. Nevertheless, the two men met on even ground when it came to love of the beauty of the Rockies and the Grand Tetons.

When the salmon left the ocean waters and began their run upriver to their place of birth for spawning, Henry would pack up and head to the northwest. There he would enjoy salmon fishing until it played out. Finally he would turn south and head for Florida to fish for tarpon, snook, and bonefish.

Henry was a short man, not much above five feet tall and probably in his youth wrestled at 125. Now his body had filled out, but all of his weight was muscle. Our children particularly enjoyed him because he wasn't much taller than they were. Plus, he enjoyed roughhousing in the yard with them and teaching them wrestling. Watching him play with the children like young pups around him, I sensed that on some deep level there was a yearning for family life that my children fulfilled.

The only child of a widow, Henry confided to me that he had a deep depression following his mother's death. He would sit in his room for hours, doing nothing. Henry confessed that one of the things that finally helped him was to pack up and move out to his favorite fishing holes. He added, "But what I looked forward to the most was getting to Florida and enjoying the company of this family." Our children called him Uncle Henry.

Henry brought tales of tracking grizzly bears, of the Indians who camped in a teepee on the Craigheads' property, and of the injured Canadian goose nursed by Betty Craighead. In the evenings, he entertained us all while he tied flies for fishing. Henry used no artificial lures. Fly tying is an art form well known to avid fishermen, although few tie their own. Henry carried with him small animal pelts and colorful bird's plumage. From these supplies, he would carefully select a tuft of fur and tiny feathers, which he bound to a small hook with fine silk thread. Different fish were attracted by different flies, created in the apparent image and likeness of their favorite insect. Henry knew which fly, color and size, to make for each fish as he also knew the diet of his prey.

To watch Henry fish was a privilege. He never randomly cast his line but waited until he found a fish. When he fished for snook, he drove the Tamiami Trail through the Florida Everglades to Marco Island on Florida's west coast. The road ran next to the Tamiami Canal, which was created to raise the roadbed above sea level. As he drove, Henry would watch the waters for a cruiser, the gentle wake that the large snook made through the shallow waters. When he spotted a fish, he would park the car, hop out, and cast his line. When he cast, the fly inevitably fell just in front of the unsuspecting fish.

He planned his trip to reach Marco Island, an undeveloped beach near Naples, Florida, at low tide. Driving the car at the edge of the water, he would watch for snook in the surf.

Following his usual practice, he parked and cast only when he spotted the fish. He returned home one day excited and disappointed. He knew he had caught a record fish, but there was no one available to take a picture or to weigh the fish. "Mary, I know it was bigger than I am. I had to cut it up to get it into the cooler." The idea of letting the flesh spoil just to prove a point was not sportsman-like in Henry's mind.

Bob bought a three-hole, ice-cream freezer for \$10. It sat in our carport. The deep ice-cream containers were removed to leave a huge freezer area. Henry always cleaned and prepared the fish for freezing and took pride in his large contribution to our family diet.

The tarpon and bonefish were game fish, and Henry fished for them strictly for sport. The bonefish, he told us, was also called the gray ghost, for it was fast and elusive. Henry found these also in the surf and would again cast only on sight. If a bonefish took the hook it would immediately turn and run for the reefs, hoping to catch and tear the line free. The fish would continue to run back and forth and, if a fisherman wasn't alert, his line would tangle and he would lose his fish. This tactic continued until the fish exhausted itself. Then Henry would wade into the water, draw the fish close, and tenderly remove the hook from its mouth. Finally he worked the fish back and forth in the water, repeatedly filling its gills of life-giving oxygen. When the fish revived, Henry would gently release his catch to the sea.

In early May, Henry would collect his things and carefully pack his station wagon. As summer approached, he would leave us. As I remember, it was May 21 each year that the shad flies rose on Spring Creek, in State College, Pennsylvania. At that time, shops closed for the day, as storekeepers left to trout fish. Henry was always among them.

Uncle Henry was one of our many Florida visitors. He was one of our favorites, one of a kind, and the best in many different respects. Years later, in deep depression over an unrequited love, Henry committed suicide. We miss him, and the children, now middle aged, still like to reminisce about the Uncle Henry of their childhood.

Party of Surprises By Renee Howard Cassese Seaford NY

I wasn't expecting much acknowledgement of the upcoming milestone birthday. My children were in school, too young or too unemployed to finance a party. My husband, Bob, was so pickled in martinis and beer that a card for the great day would have been more than I could hope for. I'd spent years trying to decide if he was a true alcoholic. After all, he did go to work every day, he did do things around the house, and the term *functional alcoholic* was not yet part of my vocabulary. My denial was strong enough to render me an enabler, but even that was a foreign word at the time.

Bob was planning a party with the help of my friend Joan. It was meant to be a surprise, but it wasn't. I had seen them conferring at the beach while I waded in the breaking waves. The tail ends of their conversations held obvious clues. I had also found a note at the top of the garbage pail in the kitchen. The words, in plain sight, read, "Bob, while Renee and I are out shopping, please call the following people about the party." The list was the names of all my friends.

By the night of my birthday, when we went to dinner with another couple, I was not surprised to see my girlfriend's car in the parking lot of the restaurant, or to find several of our

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friends clustered at the bar. Their plan to make a surprise party for me had failed, but I was in for a bigger surprise.

Bob was already drunk when we got to the restaurant. Apparently the pressure of trying to make a party for his wife was too much for him to handle. Before dinner arrived, he was totally incoherent. By the time the cake was served, he was unintelligible. He ranted on about how we should leave since the people who had driven us wanted to go home. He said everyone was waiting for me to leave so they could go too. No one looked to be in a hurry to leave, and my refusal to listen to his orders only made him more belligerent. I chose to see things my way, even though a storm of fear brewed inside me.

The couple we had come with had asked me why he was in such a hurry to leave, so they surely weren't ready to go. I couldn't understand his anxiety or the way he demanded that I had to do what he said. The more he pushed me to leave, the more frightened I was to go home with him.

Eventually we did go home and that's when my surprise came. Bob began to jump up and down, insisting that Joan and her husband had wanted to leave. He screamed that I should have listened to him, merely because he was my husband. He was so out of control that he smashed one of the kitchen chairs.

I slept on the couch that night and refused to speak to him the rest of the weekend. I also refused to continue to put up with his alcoholic antics. Over the course of the next year I spoke to everyone I could about the issue. I went to Al-Anon, I spoke to an alcoholism counselor, and I read every book I could get my hands on about the behavior and treatment of alcoholics. My denial began to rot away like the tulle of an antique wedding veil.

Excerpt from a longer work on the Story Circle web site.

Empty Nest Job By **Mary Jane Crownover** Austin TX

The house was empty. The children were all in school or away at college. I was restless and bored. Out of the blue, a friend asked if I was interested in a part-time job. I asked what it was and was told they needed a receptionist at the local real estate company. I consulted John and his answer was, "If you want to, do it." I applied and I stated that it had been 36 years since I had done any work and still I was hired. The first day was a nightmare. I was given some envelopes to type. The typewriter was an IBM electric, which I had never used. I had only used a standard typewriter. I did not know how to space. When I got home that night, I was in tears. My sweet John told me to stick with it. I had never quit before. Give it a try. I did not have to work but I could not quit without trying. So I went to the library where I checked out a book called *So You Want to Work after 20 Years off*. Though I had been off longer, I thought I would try it. Every answer to every problem was in that book. It became my bible. I checked it out as long as I could and then had each child check it out for me. I learned how to do the things that I needed to know and worked till they closed the place. They even asked me to go to another office but I did not want work that badly.



Shoes By **Beth Kennedy** Austin, TX

Right now, I have about 87 pairs of shoes. Eighty-seven! Most, of course, I don't wear. Some are out of style but still perfectly good, or are a color or style that no longer suits me but might in the future. Or they're old but I can still wear them for everyday. I probably wear about six pair on a regular basis. The others? Well, they're like jewelry—you never know when you'll need that perfect pair. A woman can't have too many shoes, bags, earrings, necklaces, bracelets, watches, or rings.

I used to feel the same way about eye shadow and socks, but I've scaled back. I still do feel that way, however, about books, quilts, beads, threads, cloth, and art supplies.

Where does one store all these options in footwear? No closet is big enough. Every bedroom and closet door in my home has a shoe rack that extends the length of the door. Those shoes eligible for daily consideration are in a pile by my bed. Studio and walking shoes nestle near their respective doors.

Why do I have so many shoes? Besides the obvious reason of necessity, there's the issue of comfort and fit. I don't know how a pair of shoes can feel so right on the showroom floor and turn into such instruments of torture once you get them home. And why do we think that if we just wear them awhile, that annoying pinch will go away? Or that our feet will settle in and conform to the shape of the shoe?

If I'm going to be gone for an entire day, I carry an extra pair to change into—it's the only way I can stay on my feet for longer than two hours. We try to salvage the irresistible but offensive footwear with inserts—heel pads, insoles, lambs wool—anything to cushion the foot and allow continued wear. One pair of shoes that fell into this beautiful but unwearable category finally led to surgery on a little toe. Until then, I just could not convince myself to abandon that adorable little pair of lizard sandals with the square toe and classy heel strap. Not until the pain of surgery did I finally acknowledge that this pair was just not for me. But they felt fine in the store, and they were so good-looking.

My husband's feet are soft as a baby's behind. He has no heel calluses, no rough spots, no corns. My pedicurist tells me it's because men's shoes are made for comfort, better-made in general, fit better, and last longer because they don't have to conform to the style extremes that ours do. Also, he always wears socks. Women's shoes aren't made as well because the style will go out before they wear out—but we still keep them. And our feet suffer because of it. She tells me this as she soaks and scrapes, files, and shaves my tortured tootsies.

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With age comes higher maintenance, and I have become a high-maintenance woman. It isn't restricted to my feet, either. My hair, nails, spine, skin, and knees all require more intensive and expensive attention now than when I was younger.

But shoes are so much more than support for our feet. They are an expression of our personalities, a part of every experience. Every important event evokes memories of the clothes we wore, and the shoes—our first patent leathers at Easter time, the red velvet shoes we wore at Christmas, our first pair of heels, and the shoes dyed to match a special gown. Maybe that's why it's so difficult to get rid of them. I have a pair of pink loafers from when I was blonde. I've been a redhead now for over nine years. Orange has replaced pink as my color of choice in footwear these days. But you just never know when you might need a pair of pink loafers. That and knowing the day after you toss them is exactly when you will need them.



It's Okay, Pop
By Jackie Woolley
Round Rock TX

Little things were missing: Pop's reading glasses on the mantel; his car keys on the kitchen cabinet; the sag of his body in his favorite chair. The polished maple tables, the plumped-up cushions on the couch, and the shining, waxed floor looked the same. The delicate china lovebirds, the vases of colorful silk flowers, and the hanging baskets of fern were familiar. Everything was in its proper place. Too much so.

I hadn't been back home since my husband's father had died a few months before. We went through the usual greetings with Babe, my mother-in-law. But I quickly found an excuse to wander off. There must be something left, some tangible sign of that robust man who'd been my father-in-law for over 18 years and whom we all affectionately called Pop.

In the bathroom where he had shot himself, the bloodstains were gone. The pink and gray tiles were scrubbed squeaky clean and the ceiling painted. There was no evidence of the struggle that must have taken place in his mind before he put the gun to his head. No note, no explanation. We'd all noticed his moods of depression over the years, but we'd grown used to them. Babe usually explained, "It's because of that horrible war. He was right in the middle of things in the Battle of the Bulge."

The pictures he'd taken of his grandsons when each had reached two years of age hung on the wall. Framed snapshots of their school years and vacations sat on the dresser. The words of the telegram he'd sent when our first son was born flashed across my mind: "Stand him on the floor and mark him for boot size." He gave up cigarettes that day, saying he never wanted his grandson to take up smoking because of him.

Since I can't say these things to him now, I'm trusting God to relay my thoughts. "Though I don't understand your death,

Pop, I hope you found the peace you so desperately sought. You did the best you could in your own stubborn way. Rational or not, it's what you wanted, and I trust you to God's mercy and love." And that it's okay, Pop. It's all okay.



Roses
By Louann O'Bannion
Austin TX

The furniture in my mother's living room faces a glass-covered coffee table that holds her collection of porcelain roses. She loves to tell us how fortunate she feels to have responded to the magazine advertisement that allowed her to buy one of these beauties every month until she had the whole collection. There are, among others, red roses, a cluster of baby pink miniatures, and yellow ones with petals tipped in scarlet—one dozen in all. On the back of each rose she has carefully taped the name of one of her daughters or granddaughters. She has put great thought into choosing who will get which rose when she passes on.

The perfection and beauty of these roses are what appeal to her. She has a hard time accepting anything that isn't lovely and perfect. On several occasions when visiting her I have answered her phone and heard the voice of some elderly gentleman asking for her. They like my mother and want to spend time with her, but she does not want to spend time with them. They go to old peoples' places, she tells me, like church pot-luck dinners or relative's houses in the country. There's no future in that, she says.

For a long time she has not been to my house either. At Christmas I invited her to come be with me and my family for the holidays. Transportation would be simple, I told her. She could ride down with my son, then I could easily drive her back. No, she said. There were other things she needed to do, and she would not want to inappropriately intrude on my family time. So she did not come. Instead she prepared food to take to my sister's house, where she would spend her Christmas day with that family just as she had done for the past several years.

Probably she follows this tradition because my sister lives in the same town she does, I tell myself. It is not because of my imperfection. She is getting too old to travel the several hours it would take to get to where I live. Also, it's hard for old people to break routine. That must be it. And anyway my name is still

*Because I sit and listen, I know where I have been, and I know where you are.
You are stepping into a space apart from me and that is as it should be.
But I wish for you.
I wish for you the whole beautiful world with all its myriad contrasts...*

No Makeup

By Pamela Kinnaird
Shoreline WA

I don't wear makeup anymore. There's no point really. My tears will simply wash it away as soon as I put it on. It won't camouflage the ravages of too little sleep and the numbing grief that marks my face. Makeup is superfluous. It no longer means anything to me.

I put off driving to the house as long as I can. I left there at 3:45 a.m. this morning and now that I've gotten the children off on their buses I'm going back down. Heaven help me, I don't want to go back. I yearn to turn off my phone, turn on my electric blanket, crawl under the covers and place a pillow over my head. I want to be unconscious. Please, let me be unconscious. I wander around the house aimlessly, recognizing that the dishes in the sink are from two days ago. The floor needs to be swept and the table wiped up from last night's hastily prepared dinner of Ramen noodles for the children. I can't seem to focus on any task here at home. It's overwhelming, there's too much to do. So I do nothing. I put on my shoes and walk out the door.

As I drive down the freeway my right hand holds the wheel and my left hand lies clenched tightly in my lap. Where are all these people going? I drive slowly and wonder if anyone else besides me on this road is going somewhere they don't want to go. Do they know how much pain passes them in the vehicle beside them? How can everyone be going on with his or her life when my mother is dying? I pass houses and wonder if closed curtains and blinds shelter other people in pain. Odd that I never wondered about that before.

I park my van in the street in front of the house and turn off the ignition. I sit in silence. Maybe if I just sat there long enough I could go to sleep and not have to go inside. I will myself to open the van door and step out into the chill March wind. Walking through the back door seems to get more difficult each time I do it. Nothing is easy anymore. How can I be numb and in pain at the same time? Both feelings shouldn't be able to coexist in me, yet they do.

I take the chair by her bedside and slip my hand inside hers. She attempts to bring my hand to her lips and kiss me.

"Mom, did you just kiss my hand?" I ask.

"I might have," she mumbles, eyes never opening.

This is vintage Mom and it makes me smile. She begins to ramble incoherently once again, the moment between us lost in the haze of powerful narcotics and the pain of her disease.

I know she is still in there, half in this world, half in the next. I hear her call out to Kathy, the stillborn baby daughter born before me. Her eyes flutter and open for a second before she drifts off to sleep once again.

It's a very good thing that I've forsaken makeup.

She doesn't really see me now. Her eyes are rarely open and, if they are, they are not focused on this world. I stand by her bed and wipe her face with a cool cloth as she softly mumbles something that I can't make out. This woman that lies before me is no longer the woman that raised me with fire in her eyes and a love in her heart so powerful it was sometimes overwhelming.

I watch my father, gentler than I've ever seen him, leaning over his bride of nearly 50 years, asking her to please try to swallow just a bit more water. He worries because she is drinking less and less with each passing day. I see him stand over the hospital bed in what used to be their dining room and watch her face with eyes so lost that I nearly dissolve in the tears that wait so readily to sweep me away into that river of pain that owns me of late. I wonder how I am able to stand when everything within me has turned to liquid fire and is falling from my eyes. I hurt, oh how I hurt. I feel so wounded, body and soul. So raw. So much pain. How is it possible to live and hurt so much?

We have let strangers into our circle now. Nurses, aids, volunteers. Hospice workers come in and join our web of sorrow. They come with smiles on their faces to help us do things for her that we are unable to do on our own. We smile back at them, welcoming them as we both realize that our fragile smiles mask more unshed tears. We smile harder.

A new nurse comes today. In her attempt to help, she inadvertently grabs Mother's bad hand. Mom's eyes open wide as she cries out in pain. "Oh my God!" she yells, then quickly mumbles that she's sorry, she didn't mean to say that. "He is my God," she says softly. "He is." Her eyes flutter closed once more.

I go home and have prayer with my children. Mommy is crying and they don't understand. My son lays his head on my shoulder and pats my back, comforting me as best a 10 year old can. After Daddy says the prayer my three year old crawls over to me and touches the tears running down my face. She asks Daddy why Mommy is crying. Daddy tells her that Mommy is sad because Nanny is very sick and will be going home to heaven soon. With her chubby, three-year-old fingers she wipes at my tears as she says, "Oh Mommy, it's okay. Nanny will be home with Jesus and everything will be okay. She'll be with Jesus, Mommy!" Now Daddy is crying.

She's gone now. Who am I without her? I feel so lost now. Where once I was identified as Ellen's daughter, now what am I? No longer a daughter that can treat her mother to dinner on Mother's Day. I am unable to call her to tell her something funny or sad or life-altering that happened to me today. I am a motherless child now. I visit her in a garden of stone and weep as I place flowers upon her grave. I miss her with every beat of my heart.

After many months and countless tears it comes to me, who I am and why; I am still my mother's daughter. I am the sum of all she was and all that she hoped and dreamed for me to be. I am mother to her grandchildren, a sacred duty placed upon me as a living link in the chain binding my children to their past. I am stronger for having been Ellen's daughter. Much of her lives on in me, as it will live on in my children after me. Wearing makeup is still not important to me, but Mom would have wanted me to wear it again.

So I do.



For His Purposes

By Flossie Wilson
Round Rock TX

*Many are the plans in a man's heart,
but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.*

—Proverbs 12:21 (NIV)

Before Labor Day weekend in 1998, I was on the phone talking with my friend, Mike, in McAllen. During our conversation, he mentioned the city was having a reception to celebrate the completion of a project that Mike and my late husband, Charles, worked on for several years. Charles and Mike were best friends, and he told me it would mean a lot if I would be there in his place. Of course I agreed, as I began a mad dash to secure airline reservations and make arrangements to stay with my good friend, Joan.

It was a wonderful and exciting evening. It was good to visit with dozens of old friends and acquaintances. The occasion was both sad and happy for me. Many of these people were friends of Charles and we attended many of these functions because of his position as City Commissioner. They expressed their love for me but understood my need to move to Austin and be closer to my children.

The next morning, I was in a rush again to get to the airport. I soon realized I was not feeling well and moving slower than usual. The heat was overpowering as I opened the door to take my luggage to the car. I reached down to get my tickets out of a small bag at my feet and couldn't locate the bag. I remember a panic began to set in and how I started fumbling around and hoping the neighbors would not see me in such a state. I was so hot. Finally, I went back into the house and Joan said she thought I'd left without telling her good-bye and told me I'd been out there over 15 minutes. She asked what I had been doing. I knew something was not right. I couldn't speak. I remember standing in the kitchen and just patting the air. I wanted to push this feeling down and away. I turned my back on Joan. I did not want her to see my face and know that something was seriously wrong. I knew my mouth was drooping, this could not be. I wanted to get on that plane and go home.

Because Joan is a nurse, I knew that she would take charge. I also knew that she was very concerned because she told me to sit down and be still. "This is serious. You will not be going anywhere today." She called Dr. Hiram and he told her to take me to the hospital immediately. I can remember thinking, "God, please help me!" She left me alone as she got dressed. I was so frightened. I had no idea what was happening to me. I was completely dependent on her. I could not speak or direct my movements. The water I was trying to drink would not stay in my mouth and spilled on my dress.

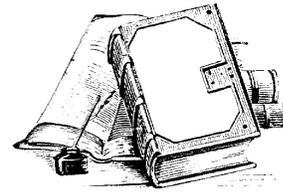
When we arrived at the hospital, I was amazed to see so many friendly faces. I was among friends. The ER staff and doctors moved fast. It was crucial to establish what time I had started having problems, so with Joan's help, we decided about two hours had passed. The neurosurgeon asked more questions and told me that he believed I was having a stroke and had a

blood clot in my left brain. Once he ran some tests and established that this was true, he took me by the hand and told me there was only one treatment available. It had been used for heart attack and stroke patients for some time, but it had a possible side effect—death. I thought of my loving family, who would be devastated if I were to die. There was another problem. This drug could only be given within a three-hour window starting at the onset of the stroke and we were closing in on that time. I met the eyes of Dr. Hiram and he nodded. I know the Holy Spirit that is within me gave me the ability to speak and give my consent to take the *clot buster*.

They immediately inserted intravenous tubes in my arm. It took three hours to complete. After the first hour they moved me to ICU. I kept waking up and asking the nurse if I was dead. I thought about death and dying at that particular time. I knew that it was God's will for me to be in that place and time with those friends, but I wasn't sure what His purpose was.

I recovered completely, no side effects. This was a miracle. And I thank God for blessing me with the renewed gift of life.

When I returned home to Austin, I struggled to find the answer and what to do with my life. I wanted to be a good steward of my experience. I have found that the best way to do that is seeking God's will day by day, and remembering that He saved me for His own purposes. I can rest knowing that I don't have to know His reasons now. He will reveal them in His time.



Faith
By Carolyn Cantu
Austin TX

The last visitor to leave my hospital room that July evening was my husband. As he kissed me goodbye and assured me he would be back early the next morning, I felt torn between wishing he had offered to stay overnight with me and wanting him to go home to comfort the children. Suddenly I felt very alone after my mastectomy. I remember that feeling more than I do the discomfort and the effects of the medications.

The drapes to the windows were left open that evening. Since my bed was situated next to the windows, I had a clear view of the night sky and the quiet street below. The stars were exceptionally brilliant, so much so, that I felt absorbed among them. As I continued to gaze into the night, my loneliness began to dissipate. My fear and apprehension was quieted, my wild thoughts of the future quelled. Questions regarding my radical treatment decision stopped. A peace settled within me. Although the bandages were wound tightly around my chest, restricting movement of my upper limbs, I imagined my arm reaching out toward the window to touch the fingertips of God. All would be well.

My Brother
By Cheryl Martin
Austin TX

I know you are gone
eight months now.

Funny what nudged me
to feel your absence
this weekend
at your house.

Cool and gray there
but no rain
a welcomed relief
from our week here.

Tall swaying trees of your land
colored in autumn
rustled whispers as a reminder
I can no longer
ask you their names.

I barely touched
the long, black barbecue pit
cold, silently rusting, part of the landscape.
Once it was fired, smoky, sizzling
you offered your sacrifice
of tending the pit all day.
I won't eat your brisket again.

Indoors, a sideways glance
revealed the pricey telescope, still
unfocused without the astronomer.
Now who will explain
those glittery patterns
in a moonless night sky?

Unintentionally I noticed
the shelves, everywhere
overflowing with books
unopened and dusty
no longer in fellowship.
Who, I wonder, will bring
life back to your friends?

I tried to ignore the coveralls
hanging from their hook
they seemed to wait
for you to fill them
and the boots
perfectly placed
no longer dirty from time
spent on the tractor.
The last time I saw you
wearing them
was the last time.

This weekend
your house screamed
you are gone.
I turned a deaf ear
until, one look
into the sad, dark pools
that are Stephanie's eyes
made the piercing sound
of your absence
unavoidable.

I know
eight months now
you are gone.

The Peace Within
By Lee Ambrose
Naples FL

I sit in a dimly lit room. The only sounds are those of the clock on the wall and the slow, rhythmic breathing of this sweet babe I hold. My rocker has never held so much love as it does during these nighttime interludes. I am tired, but the tiredness is diminished by the peace and tranquility that overcome me each time I sit here and hold my little blessing.

I don't remember feeling half so contented when rocking my own children to sleep. Is it that I am more keenly aware of my inner self now than I was then? Is it that I am more relaxed as a grandmother than I was as a mother? Or is it that I am ever mindful of what I almost lost when Caleb made his entrance into this world three months ahead of schedule?

Caleb and I have been sharing quiet time in rockers since his earliest days in the neonatal intensive care unit. Even a ventilator could not separate us from snuggle time. The nurses would pull a rocker-recliner next to his Isolette, bundle him up or direct the heat lamp over both of us, and gently place him in my arms. With a little help, we managed to find a way for him to nestle in close to me despite all the tubes and wires.

Hours turned to days, days to weeks, and weeks to months. For countless of those days, weeks, and months, I could be found in that unit with my wee babe snuggled close to my heart. For whatever reason, when he was in my arms, his breathing

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Learn to get in touch with the silence within yourself, and know that everything in life has purpose. There are no mistakes, no coincidences; all events are blessings given to us to learn from.

—Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

became less labored. He didn't fight the ventilator. And, once off the ventilator, he had fewer episodes of forgetting to breathe as we sat there in that rocker together. Amid all of the alarms and life-saving equipment, he and I found a certain peacefulness in the moments we shared. The love I had for him transcended all other emotions. I could not—would not—allow myself to think of anything other than a good outcome for this little one.

Fittingly, the day that Caleb was discharged from the hospital was Grandparent's Day. A Hallmark invention to be sure, but nevertheless it was my first such day and I was marking it by bringing home this dear tiny one for the very first time. Home to my own rocker, the rocker I had longed to use to cradle a grandchild in a loving moment or two, the rocker that, for the past many weeks, seemed to sit there begging to be occupied.

That was nearly two years ago. The months have passed by us faster than I would have wished. Caleb has not only beaten the odds at survival; he has caught up with the children who were full term when they arrived in July 2000. And I have savored every moment with him, never forgetting the incredible gift that he is to me. Always remembering what a tenuous start he had. Not a day goes by that I am not amazed by how far he has come.

Countless are the hours he and I have spent in the rocker watching moon-beams dance upon the darkened walls. Immeasurable are the ways in which his life has enriched mine. In the hushed room, I am keenly aware of my own inner silence. I am filled with the soul-nourishing energy that comes from holding an innocent sleeping babe. And I am soothed by the belief that, no matter what is going on in the big world around us, all is right in our little world.

In the peace that comes from this nightly ritual, he dreams whatever it is that wee ones dream while my spirit rejoices in the renewal that comes each time he and I share this rocker. As we rock, our breathing is in synch—just like it was in those early days in the NICU. Our lives are enriched far more than one could have ever thought during those early days. We have rocked and rocked and rocked, never tiring of the safety of that time together. We are linked as surely as if I had conceived him. He is my *boo-bear*. I am his *me-ma*.



In Remembrance

On September 13, 2001, Story Circle posted a web page on its website, entitled Give Sorrow Words. Here, women were invited to share their stories, to express their anguish over the terrorist attacks and loss of life of September 11, and to begin to heal.

A year later, as the anniversary of the terrorist attacks drew near, many of the writers whose work had appeared on the web site added to their earlier contributions. And in OWL groups and writing circles throughout the country, Story Circle members reflected on how the attacks had affected and changed them.

The stories and poetry on the following pages are a sampling of these healing stories.

To read more, go to the Give Sorrow Words section of the Story Circle web site, at:

<http://www.storycircle.org/sorrow.html>

About the Editor

Jane Ross was born and raised in New Zealand of British parents. In her final year of college, while majoring in math, Jane discovered that what she really wanted to be was an editor. After graduation she moved to London England and soon found work as the mathematics editor for Chapman and Hall, a venerable London publishing house and the original publishers of Charles Dickens' works.

After she met her future husband, mathematician Felipe Voloch in 1985, the next several years were a period of long distance

romance, including horrendous phone bills and frequent jet-lag, until Jane and Felipe married in New Zealand in 1988 and moved to Brazil.

A stint as Subscriptions Manager for Latin America with Time magazine followed until 1991 when the family, now with a baby daughter, Sofia, moved to Berkeley CA, where Felipe had a post-doctoral position in the math institute. A year later, Texas called, with the offer of a position at the University of Texas for Felipe and the promise of endless summers for Jane and Sofia. In the 10 years she has lived in Austin TX, Jane has worked as a freelance writer and editor, web designer, OWL group facilitator, cafeteria monitor, and



Anniversary
By Alyce Guynn
Austin TX

Who in this country
does not remember
where they were
this day last year?

Who among us can say
what ways our lives
have changed since then?

For those whose loved ones died
the changes are apparent;
for those who lost livelihoods
change is obvious;
for those who escaped with injury
change might be seen clearly.

But for most of us
who suffered from afar
feeling a collective pain
but avoiding personal loss
changes have appeared more subtle.

I would like to think
that many have lost
the need to acquire,
replaced it with the desire
to spend more time
with friends and family.

I would like to think
that those of us
fortunate to have
comfortable homes
plenty of food,
have cultivated gratitude.

I pray it has made us more
tolerant of differences,
less self-righteous in our beliefs,
more compassionate for those
who live with less freedoms.

This day marks one year
since my world was rocked off center.

Three-hundred-sixty-five days
fifty-two weeks, twelve months,
four seasons of learning to accept the reality
that my country is vulnerable to attack,
of watching atrocities
committed in the name of justice,
of feeling fear.

On this anniversary of Nine Eleven
I resolve to open my heart more to love
to be a little kinder to those who are near
to reach out more to those who are distant.

I want to pray for a healing
at our country's core,
not just for the damage
inflicted by acts of terrorism
but for the hurt
we cause ourselves
by clinging to hate
indulging in greed.
I pray for seeds of forgiveness
and love to sprout in
every soul who walks this land.

I pray for us to join hands
and lead each other to the light.

I pray for a reawakening.



Come Sit by Me
By Linda Wisniewski
Doylestown PA

Last fall, I went through the news coverage, the church services, the anger, the sorrow, with the rest of the country. I knew none of the lost or injured. I thought about the risks of plane travel but flew anyway. My life went on, little changed, except that I felt a need to connect with people.

I thought about the people who cried with me in church in the days after the attacks. I thought about the people I love who fly on business and the friend who lives and works in Manhattan and how I felt until I knew they were safe that day. I thought of the heartbreaking stories of people calling loved ones from the doomed planes, the doomed towers. Most of them said, "I love you."

As the year went on, I thought about my own family and all its branches. I'd moved away from my hometown over 30 years ago and counted on my parents to keep me up to date on family events. Suddenly, I realized that it was now up to my generation to keep in touch since my father and all his siblings are dead, and my mother is in a nursing home.

I started writing letters to my cousins. Each one sent me an answer, pages and pages of family news. They were happy to hear from me! They wanted to be in touch! Like a wanderer of old, I had found a way back to my tribe.

Late in August of this year, we got together for a reunion in Amsterdam, New York, our hometown. There were 10 of us, plus spouses and children. We gathered in wreaths of smiles. I felt enfolded, uplifted. And safe.

We hugged, all the cousins, for the extra few seconds that tell you it's not just a perfunctory, social hug. Those extra seconds let you know it's a hug that is meant for you and you alone. I stood in the sunlight of my cousin's back yard and let myself feel the hugs. And then I hugged them back. I want to do it again and again, to let their love heal my wounded heart.

"Come sit by me," Cousin Patty said. I had forgotten how lovely that sounds.

I feel powerless in the face of global suffering, but I believe that the power of love and family can extend outward. I



September 11, 2001

By Hanna Wickenberg

Austin TX

The September 11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 came at a time that Ralph and I were traveling on a tour in China. We had just arrived in the city of Xian after an overnight train ride from Beijing. That particular day, we had been out enjoying the sights and were returning to our hotel room from an evening out. Friends quickly came to our hotel door and told us to hurry and turn on CNN. We didn't know what could be so urgent and quickly turned on the television just as the second plane hit the Twin Towers. We were shocked, frightened, and unsure what to expect next. I realized tears were coming down as thousands of thoughts flew through my mind. We both first thought of our adult children and where they were and their concern for us. Next day, we immediately e-mailed one daughter to notify the others—she had already e-mailed her sisters and us her worries.

The fright and concerns that occurred that day have developed into a constant communication with our family, as they all live in other states and one in Germany. The concern, worry, and prayers of the foreigners we met for the people in New York were evident and similar to how many Americans at home had responded. The key difference for us, being in another country at this time, was that we experienced a caring response from the Chinese people as well as from foreigners from many countries. People came up to us on the street or in public places to give condolences to America and New York. Their tears brought tears again to our eyes. One Israeli lady said, "What will President Bush do? He must bomb now." That statement stays in my memory. She was very sad for our country. We experienced the same feeling as those in America but estranged from the immediate reaction. We felt very proud being Americans and more so now.

A Day to Re-member

By Joanna Athey

Austin TX

Hospital gown with neatly tied strings against her back
She stares to acoustic ceiling tile above.
Restrained by A-line, IV's, electrodes, secured by Velcro
straps
A call-button lies just out of reach.
She lies in antiseptic darkness—waiting.

Anguished surviving faces from the day-before's terror
replay in her mind
A dark rolling cloud of chaos from her personal Ground
Zero threatens to consume
As two parallel universes race toward implosion.
"Rape me once and rape me twice and rape me once again,
It's been a long, long time."

In them she sees herself, a mirrored reflection from so
long ago.
As a nation sinks to its knees in agony reeling from assault,
The poisoned arrow of violence strikes through the
American heart.
That so struck her other part.

Ah, I remember once, remember twice
And remember once again, the violence done to me.
Once, isolated and alone
Now, I somehow am set free.

Violence shared is pain felt all together.

On quiet nights in darkened streets
The ghosts of past do wander
Through mind and body
To disturb the psyche of a being.

Disturbance marks the time
From the past unto the present
Until a soul surrenders
To a Greater Power of some kind.

The Great Eternal Lover of us all
Will bind your wounded bodies,
Heal your wounded souls.

Seek not your healing, wounded nation,
By shared violence, revenge and hate,
But, rather tell your pain one to another
And to the Great Spirit beyond.

Give each other voice. Lend to each an ear.
Treat another as your equal and forget not to share your tears.
Otherwise a violence done to you becomes a violence to
another.

Excerpted from a longer work on the SCN web site



Snow Falling in Albuquerque

By Mary M. Elizabeth
Austin TX

The snow fell luxuriously, thick and heavy. So heavy that it fell straight down, fast, like rain. It looked like a normal snowfall recorded on videotape and played back at high speed. Streets and yards were covered in minutes. The sky held her veiled face low, close enough to the city for intimacy but far enough away for ambiguity, as if she had nothing at all to do with the sudden barrage of wet white goose feathers falling with the rhythm of the Keystone Cops. The flat gray sky, the lack of texture to the clouds, gave the impression that there were no clouds at all, just a vast expanse of colorless heaven. It gave off a light that was bright but that illuminated nothing. White on white on white with no luminance of its own. Somewhere a weak late afternoon sun in Aquarius was responsible, but the quiet gray light was too soft and ethereal to be solar. Like the paleness of someone very ill for a long time, this light stilled all sound and motion. The day's tone was private, withdrawn. Nothing much got done.

Suddenly the snow stopped, as quick and solid as the slam of a garage door. Now heavy and dull, the slushy snow clung to trees and banisters. The manic white motion no longer masked the sky's gray face. In the quickly fading light, Sky had abruptly taken off her veil and stopped flirting with Earth. Sky and Earth looked at each other like two intimates at a silent impasse. Each waited for the other to make the first move, which could only be a departure. The silence between them became an uncomfortable third party. Slowly they regained their composure. Sky put on her hooded black velvet cape and Earth turned away from her for another solitary night.



Lost and Found
by Katherine Misegades
Fort Wayne IN

I still believe there is no *them and us*. Mama taught me that. She was the strongest person I've known and I lost her last December—she lived through 95 years of terrible wars, the depression, and other losses. Up to the end she focused on what she'd found in life, not on what she'd lost. We watched TV on September 11 and she related it to other overwhelming events. Then she said, "The biggest way this will change us will be to make us look inside to find a balance of strength and compassion. We will grow."

Just when I realized I lost mama, I found the best parts of her inside me. She'd planted her positive, faithful, practical attitudes in me when I was a little child. She'd nurtured my growth with patience. What we lost on September 11 was huge. What we are finding in ourselves is even greater.

Thorns
By Jane Ross
Austin TX

It was January and high summer in New Zealand. I left the others to laze on the sands of Taylor's Mistake Beach while I walked the track leading out to the headlands of Banks' Peninsula. Here on the buttress of ancient lava that had flowed from a huge volcanic crater and then solidified into black craggy rock fifty feet above the waves, I sat alone and stared out over the Pacific Ocean. Sea birds swooped overhead, circling the headland before landing on crags in the cliff face of an adjacent inlet. At my back was a treeless windswept slope covered in sun-dried grasses, the landscape austere. In times past, dense temperate rainforest had covered these slopes, with its majestic towering evergreens, twenty-foot tree ferns, and abundant birdlife. The first settlers, arriving from Scotland in the mid-1800s, had felled the trees, banished the forest birds, and overgrazed these slopes so that all that remained was a thin skin of topsoil and delicate grasses blanketing the volcanic rocks beneath. Thin the skin of the earth—thin my own skin. A friendship I had valued was gone amid judgments and recriminations, and my thoughts combed through the driftwood of that friendship as I watched the seabirds circle.

Arriving at Hinewai the next day, we left the van at the summit of the valley, at Miki Miki point, and descended the dirt track on foot. Hugh, the custodian of the valley, greeted us in the clearing above his small house and showed us into the lodge. The children set to unrolling their sleeping bags and arguing good-naturedly over who would sleep where, among the dozen wooden cots with their foam mattresses and neat blue covers that were ranged round the walls of the lodge. It was early afternoon, the sun was high and brilliant, and the varnished wood panels of the lodge walls glowed golden amber. The wide windows looked out onto clear sky, young native trees, and in the distance the serene Pacific.

To our right and left, the sides of the valley were coated with the dull yellow of dense gorse bushes at the end of their bloom. Gorse, the bane of the peninsula's farmers, had been introduced from the sheep farms of Scotland by the early settlers for use as hedgerows. To their dismay, it grew out of control wherever the land was cleared of native forest. With its fierce spines, no animal or bird would touch it, and it grew fast and densely on the sheep paddocks of the peninsula. These days it was sprayed ferociously wherever it threatened productive farmland. But Hinewai was different. Here, on a tract of former farmland that had been bought by a wealthy philanthropist and set aside as a botanical reserve, the gorse was left to grow

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Visit the Give Sorrow Words page on the Story Circle Web Site
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unchecked. For in its spiny, sheltering shade grew tiny saplings of native totara, kowhai, and punga punga.

The children were clamoring to be gone down the trails that led through the reserve, their destination a waterfall halfway down the valley. Leaving our belongings, we closed the door of the lodge and set off. On either side of the trail, eight-foot-high banks of gorse soon shut out the view. The gorse's twisted trunks and thick desiccated wall of leaves, dense with inch-long thorns, made sure hikers stayed to the trails.

The other adults and the children ran on ahead while I ambled down the track after them. Native larks sang out high overhead and a warm breeze blew against my face. Descending the path, my thoughts wandered between the fate of this land and my own recent inner turmoil. Apologies had been exchanged, regrets expressed, but the forest was destroyed and would not soon reappear. In this razed landscape grew thorns—tears, self-doubts, and a dull, enervating depression.

I wondered now: had a settler once strode the very trail I now trod? Did he swing his axe with the arm of a conquering hero, believing himself and his work immortal? Other farmers had surely joined him, swinging their axes, grunting with the effort, proud of their work. *This forest has nothing to offer us. Its plants are bitter and inedible, good for nothing, the settlers had believed. Its trees will make good timber—the rest is fit only to burn.*

And the forest had replied in words one only hears when the mind is silent, free from its cacophony of beliefs and judgments. *See me. See the great work of living and dying going on within my shadows. Taste the crystal water that I filter through mosses and roots and rocks. Hear the birds that nest here and whose young I shelter and nurture. Smell the rich, moist earth. My destiny is to be and to give you deep peace, if you will come to me with an open mind. My fate is to die and to be reborn in a bed of thorns.*

But the axes had swung and the strangers had congratulated themselves on bringing progress to this pagan place. So had I banded my judgments and congratulated myself on being an agent of improvement. Now the thorns seemed only to grow higher and more suffocating, overshadowing the joy I might have found in other pursuits and other friendships.

A side path turned off the main Hinewai track and led down to a creek and then upstream to a waterfall. Along the creek bed was virgin forest that the settlers had not bothered to fell. The children waited impatiently at the head of the path, and set off down it as soon as I came into sight around the bend. Following the rest of the party, I picked my way over and under great fallen trees that criss-crossed the creek-side path, their trunks thick with moss and ferns. Making our way upstream, treading carefully on slippery stones, we arrived at a pool below the dark, gently cascading waterfall. In the center of the creek bed, a shaft of brilliant sunlight lit up a great moss-covered boulder and a patch of the rocks and water around about. In the deep green shade of towering totara trees, slender kowhai, and lush tree ferns, sunlight penetrated through layer after layer of forest to turn this one boulder to the glistening jadeite green of the *Pounamu*, the greenstone so sacred to the Maori. The waterfall seemed to murmur, *This is the deep green heart of a great forest that was and that will be again. Look in awe.*

From Parsley on to a Legacy

By Carolyn J. Scheider

Austin TX

A decade or so ago, I ate fresh parsley right out of the fridge. Know why? Because I read somewhere that it helped complexion and bad breath.

I didn't know much about any other herbs. And other than my parsley, which I bought in bunches at the stores, I used only basic bottled herbs like poultry seasoning.

But when Max and I joined up in 1997, all that changed. My now husband, Max, enjoys planting and growing herbs. And since I tend to lean towards vegetarianism, I love learning about them. We actually belong to a mutual admiration society since I admire his gardening interests, and he appreciates my interest in cooking with his produce.

We don't have any pet animals, but our herbs feel like pets. We rejoice when they do well and feel sad to see them wither for whatever reason.

For example, recently the monsoons came. Last year Max planted rosemary in the ground rather than in a pot. She did well, even survived a cold winter, and all of a sudden when the rains came she started looking sick. Max transplanted her into a pot and we'll see if she snaps out of it. We've also noticed the dill and cilantro bit the dust. That makes us sad.

Fortunately, we have plenty of herbs continuing to do well. Besides parsley (which, by the way, I can now eat right off the plant), we have sage, rosemary, thyme, basil (a favorite), oregano, marjoram, mint, tarragon, dill, and cilantro. Quite an abundance, right?

I regret not having enough time or knowledge to use all of them as much as I'd like. But I have tried them all, and I always have my eyes peeled for more recipes or other herbal uses.

I find myself continually learning and making progress every season. For an old woman, I think I'm doing quite well. Interests like this keep me blooming like the herbs and feeling ageless.

In fact, I'd like to leave this legacy (sage advice) with you. You are never too old to learn or to develop new interests. When you do that, you too will grow and bloom where you are planted, and you will stay forever young.

The Best Is Yet to Come

By Rosemarie Durbin

Austin TX

Being Nonna (which is Grandmother in Italian) is truly the greatest gift in the world. And, yes, I am guilty of winding up my two grandsons before their bedtime and then saying goodbye before the difficult task of winding them back down and getting them to bed. Isn't that what grandmothers are for?

My motto is, Make every day better than the previous one. Oprah says it another way: Live your best life. I'm just learning how to do that—and I think I'm becoming pretty good at it.

I'm learning to live in the moment. When I do that, the sunsets are prettier, the coffee tastes richer, the company I am with is more enjoyable. I am not saving the pretty candles and

china for special occasions any more. Every day is a special celebration.

I'm using the expensive fragrant soaps and sleeping in sexy lingerie. I'm wearing the fanciest clothes I can find. I am being more creative and having more fun. I laugh more and giggle even more. I enjoy my own company. I'm more fun to be with.

Isn't life wonderful? It's just getting grander everyday—and I believe the best is yet to come!



Writer's Day

By **Linda Wisniewski**
Doylestown PA

It's Thursday, my day off from work, my Writer's Day—a whole day to myself, to write and write until the school bus comes at four. I've been looking forward to this day all week. I sit down at my desk and read the introduction to a book I bought at a conference for women writers. The author is a wonderful teacher and I want to be like her. I read her inscription, "To Linda, for your journey." I want to be like her *now, today*. What does she mean by "journey?" I want to write and be recognized *now*.

I go to the bathroom and the yellow stains on the rug and the toilet bowl disgust me. I spray the toilet with Lysol Basin Tub-n-Tile, and wipe it off with an old tee-shirt. I toss the rug and some towels down the stairs in the direction of the washer.

Back in my office, the room of my own where I write, I decide to wrap a few Christmas gifts. The boxes and bows are staring at me from the open closet, and I'd better get started or later I'll be overwhelmed at all the wrapping I have to do. I box

and wrap a pair of corduroys for Steve and a sweater for Aaron, but now I'm out of colored tissue paper for inside the boxes, so I stop.

I'm feeling anxious and need to get out of the house, so I grab my keys and list and drive to Staples. I promised Matt I'd buy him some poster board for his timeline on Albert Einstein and I'm out of paper for the printer. They don't have light blue, which Matt wanted, so I buy white, and royal blue and neon green. I mull over three different displays of printer paper—bright white, heavyweight, inkjet—and buy two packs of regular that are on sale.

On the way home, I stop in a development of McMansions where I often walk, because I'm hungry but I've gained five pounds. I'm hoping the exercise will clear my mind. I think about canceling my registration for the Story Circle conference, because it's so far from here to Texas, and I'm a nervous flyer. The tickets, the packing, and the airport procedures are such a hassle. But as I walk, I remember that I've volunteered to introduce a speaker, that flowers will be blooming in Austin in February, and I've never been to Texas. I've been thinking how I love to help people express themselves, how I love to be with women writers, and how I crave their companionship. I believe in the Story Circle, I want to support it, and I want to meet the women I know only via the Internet. I decide, again, to go to Austin in February, and I feel better.

I've walked for half an hour and resolved a question. That's good enough. I get back in my car and drive home, but first I stop on the way for coffee and a muffin.

"How are you?" the woman behind the counter asks, and I stick out my tongue and roll my eyes.

"Too much running around today!" I answer, and she laughs. I get eggnog-flavored coffee and chat with her about raffia bows and country-style decorating. I buy a country-style tree ornament, a heart with a raffia bow.

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Pulling into my garage, I see the white pine roping I bought yesterday to decorate our fence, but I can't do that now because this is my writing time. Inside, the fax machine rings, and I go to see if it's Susan Albert's comments on lesson four of *From Memoir to Fiction*. It is, so I read it and turn on the computer. She always sends an e-mail at the same time, and so I read that too and print it out. I carry the papers upstairs to my office/wrapping room. I'm not clear on how to start lesson five, but I can't e-mail Susan back. I don't want to get sucked into the web for an hour, and that always seems to happen on days like this.

Back at my desk, I page through the ads in *Poets and Writers* and highlight the ones I might submit my essays to. I'm having heart palpitations from the three cups of coffee. I read somewhere that coffee increases anxiety; I think I'm addicted to coffee and anxiety both. I like that buzz but it's not getting me where I want to go. I'm starting to not like going in circles. I decide not to take a break to watch *All My Children*. I read a lot and think I may be addicted to that, too. I can't resist bringing home books from the library, though I've got a stack in my nightstand unread, and I'm on a first-name basis with Amazon.com. This month, I've read four books so far—two mysteries and two non-fiction. How much have I retained from them, I wonder. Are they my drug of choice, to help me avoid living out my purpose?

Yesterday on Oprah, Gary Zukav said to think about the feeling you have when you force yourself to stop overworking. When I do this, I feel afraid that I'll disappear. If I'm not always busy, I think no one will notice me. Still I keep thinking, until my inner voice whispers, "Not that many people notice you anyway. So what?" Most people are busy with their own lives and don't care much about mine, but that's okay. I believe we all have come here for a purpose, and some of us are getting on with it, some of the time. Sometimes we notice the other humans, and sometimes we don't.

I start to make a list of places to send my essays but get stuck at three and can't find the essays anyway. I think about how I feel, and I realize I just want to write today. I want to feel the pen in my hand. I want to move it across a white sheet of paper with my words. I want to connect in this way with the other struggling humans on planet Earth in the twenty-first century. I want to write with you.

Last Wishes
By Suzanne Graham
Austin TX

Don't look for me in the ground. Don't plan your family vacations around trips to the cemetery. I won't be there.

I'd ask that you look within, for hopefully that's where I'll be. If there's not a place for me there, then I've really messed things up. It would be kind of like leaving the yeast out of the bread—only one ingredient is missing, but the results are a mess.

I would hope that I've shown you by example all of the ingredients that are needed to succeed in this life, from a strong and loving family, to a good education, to a caring spirit and compassionate heart, to knowing all of the right things—which only you will know—to pass on to your children and grandchildren. If I've accomplished that, then there will be a special place for me in your heart. It will be warm and comfortable, as opposed to the cold and impersonal ground. And one of the great things about this place is that there should be lots of company—all of those who have touched your life in some special way. That's the company in which I'd like to be included.

Love,
Mom

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