

True Words *from Real Women*

**An Anthology of Life Writings
by the Women of Story Circle Network**

Edited by Carolyn Blankenship

An Annual Publication of Story Circle Network



The Organization for Women with Stories to Tell

April 2005



From the Editor . . .

Women live in relationship—in relation to friends, families, and the Divine, in relation to nature, events, and to their own experiences and creativity. In reading through 62 pages of submissions, and in reflecting on my own life as a woman who writes, it was this theme of relationship that emerged for me.

As I mentioned in the Journal, putting together the True Words Anthology is much like piecing a crazy quilt—so many colors, so many beautiful designs! Which to use and where to put them? A crazy quilt has no formal design, so the creator must keep playing with the pieces until a pattern emerges. No one piece stands alone; each one relates to the others it touches, and to the quilt as a whole. The more I thought about this analogy, with writings from 13 states, 28 communities, and two foreign countries, the more appropriate it seemed.

Women's lives are holographic—they can't be boxed up into neat, separate compartments. Our feelings about family may be reflected in our relationships with friends; our experiences in nature are often windows to the Sacred. Most of these writings could fit in any of several categories, so the groupings are arbitrary. The selections seemed to fall into six main aspects of women's relationships: our relationship to ourselves through our writing; our relationships with women friends; our connection to the natural world; those complex and far-reaching family relationships with parents, grandparents, children, spouses, and siblings; our relationship with the Sacred; and the way we relate to major events and life changes.

The agonizing part of piecing a quilt or an anthology like this is regretfully putting away the beautiful, appealing pieces that didn't quite fit. All the stories and poems submitted have passed my eyes many times and lodged directly in my heart. I am thrilled to be able to report that this year, for the first time, we will be able to include on our web site the pieces we could not find room for in print. I encourage you to consider this site an extension of the anthology and treat yourself to even more wonderful poems and stories from the women of Story Circle Network. You cannot fail to be impressed by the talent of our membership. You can find these additional pieces in a supplement at <http://www.storycircle.org/anthology>. This is a members-only, password-protected site to protect the integrity of our members' work; the username is **truewords** and the password is **scn2005**. Happy reading!

—Carolyn Blankenship, Editor

Acknowledgments

I would be remiss if I did not thank all the writers—without whom there would be no Story Circle or Anthology—for allowing me to engage in this wonderful writer/editor relationship. Your writing reflects so many aspects of my own life back to me, giving me a deep sense of connection to these circles around the country and indeed, around the world. So... Moon Writers, Women's Ink, Sunset Writers, Serendipity Ladies, Wild Women, Red Tent Society, Write On! Circle, Campbell Group, Wolfsong, Treaty Oak Circle, Wordweavers, 15-Minute Writers, Spicy Bunch, Write NOW Circle, Sharing Our Stories Circle, Come-When-You-Can Circle, Wild Skies Writers, and yet unnamed circles... I salute you! It has been a privilege to share your journey through your stories and poetry.

To Jane Ross for her thoughtful assistance and proofreading; to Leilani Rose, Francelle Bettinger, and Catherine Cogburn, the proofreaders who make sure your words are in order; and to our Executive Director, Peggy Moody, who coordinates it all, I offer my deepest gratitude. You make it happen!

About the Editor

Carolyn Blankenship is a fourth-generation Austinite who has been writing poems and stories since she was in the second grade. A former member of the SCN Board of Directors, she was editor of the 2002 True Words Anthology and currently edits and designs the Austin Chapter Newsletter. She facilitates the Write On! Circle, Writing from Life Workshops, and Writes of Spring for SCN, and teaches a variety of other programs on personal and spiritual growth. She is the author of *From the Heart: A Manual for Facilitators*. Married to Monty Northrup, she is the mother of two grown daughters and the delighted grandmother of Sophie, Sydney, and Riley.

Story Circle Network

True Words from Real Women is an anthology, published yearly. 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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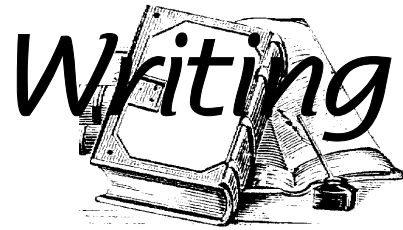
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If you move, please tell us. Unless you send us your new address, we can't guarantee that you'll receive your anthology and journals!





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WRITING MY STORY

Ann Cabot
Austin, Texas

And here I begin my saga,
Time to write it all down.
From my bowels may the words flow to tell
My story of travel, of new homes,
And of losing the ability to go home.
May I voice the truth,
May I find the words to begin and to end this story
So that I may go on, to the next great chapter of my life.

WHY WRITE THE STORIES?

Carolyn Scheider
Austin, Texas

Grandma, what did you think as you knitted your last afghan with your headphones on, listening to your church's Sunday evening service on the radio? How did you feel when you sensed your thin, gnarled hands would soon rest forever?

I've inherited elegant treasures hand-done by women in my family, including tatted handkerchiefs and pillowcases, a quilt, afghans, and other needlework. The treasures talk without words. They show character values like patience and determination. They prove fine motor skills, passions, and pastimes.

I want to ask them all, "Who helped you get started? When? Why?" If only they had written about their work, even little bits, as they went along. Now I write about these talented, special women who impacted my lives in countless ways. But I can only give my point of view. I recall sitting next to Grandma in her recliner as she knitted away. We didn't talk much. How I wish I had asked. But, as a child, those thoughts didn't enter my mind.

I display what I can, then label and carefully store the rest. I question, "Where will they end up? Who will value them? Who, if anyone, will learn the skills?"

On the other hand, Dad's first toy, a century-old top, sits on my shelf. A feature story in a local newspaper gives more detail. Then I listen to his cassettes and read what he recalled about his tops and other life stories. I feel like I know him because he communicated. What a lasting treasure. Someday those yet to be born will say, "That top belonged to Great-Great Grandpa De Jong. He got that from his missionary aunt who brought it back for him from Japan. That was his first toy ever, and"

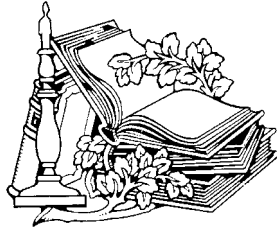
Now, partly because of Dad's influence, I write my own topical life stories—ones nobody knows better than I. I write about topics including my birth day, my homes, my hair,

(Continued on page 4)



holidays, and music. I tell about regrets along with my gifts, glories, and graces. I share how I've blessed and been blessed.

Why do I have this passion for writing down my stories? I have a main purpose—that of leaving a legacy. And with each story I'm learning more about who I am.



WRITERS

Cindy Fisher
Danville, California

I believe writers

Love colored pens and pencils, prefer
A medium or fine point and
Notice the texture of paper.

That writers ...

love the smell of
Books and bookstores
Libraries and notebooks
and
leather-bound journals.

I believe writers ...

Have a burning desire to write
And burning guilt when they don't—

If they're not writing on paper
They're writing in their head.

I believe creativity strikes

In the shower

On a bus

Walking the dog

Having great sex—

Often when there's no pen in sight.

That wonderful ideas 'pop'

On vanilla-ribboned sunlit mornings,

Falling into dreamland and

On cocktail napkins folded up

In last year's winter jackets.

I believe we think and write creatively

When we're prompted by our senses

Smelling garlic, skunks, orange mist, sweaty sex

Touching silk, sandpaper, loose puppy skin,

Wet kisses and babies,

Seeing fireball sunsets, crashing waves, the hand of a lover

Hearing Pachelbel Canon in D, Elvis Costello or

Heartbroken sobs,

Crackling autumn leaves and the swish swish swishing

Of pink taffeta.

I believe that writers must write...

And

When they don't, they deny themselves

And the world

Their gift.

TRYING TO WRITE

Renee St. Clair
Flower Mound, Texas

I was born in 1962; does that really make me forty? I want to giggle every time I say, or even think, I am forty. I feel like I am playing grown-up. Carina at work says, "You are my mom's age." I think, "Surely not." Well, I am only... oh my gosh, I *could* be her mother! Okay, I am getting off-track; the subject for writing group is a biographical sketch of yourself. I have made notes and more notes, and still nothing. My feet are cold and the sound of the fridge humming and clicking is getting on my nerves, coupled with the noise the husband is making as he flips through the paper.

As I am thinking about these noises that are bothering me, the husband comes into the kitchen. He gets his blueberry waffles from the freezer. Slam! of the freezer door, slam! of the fridge as he gets out the butter. I am adding these sounds to my list of irritating noises.

I have a glass prism in the kitchen window; I reach up and tap it. Colors of blue, red, and purple dance around the room. This makes me think of the skating rink in the eighth grade—the disco ball that was turned on during couples skating, that song, "Baby, baby, fallin' in love." What are the rest of the words to that song?

Okay, back to the bio. It says on the topic sheet it can be as few as 80 words. I can come up with a lot more than that. My stomach is growling; I had a plate full of veggies last night—squash, zucchini, corn on the cob, and black and purple potatoes. I thought the potatoes looked interesting at the market.

Still nothing after "I was born in 1962." The cursor on the screen is blinking. I can't think of anything to say. I tried writing with my journal and fountain pen. I even changed the ink from green to purple, hoping for inspiration. Nope, didn't work. Will they all look at me on Wednesday and think, "She should not be in this group if she can't do this assignment?"

The prism colors are now green, yellow, and red. What are the rest of the words to that song, "Baby, baby, fallin' in love?" I can almost smell the Dr. Pepper lip-gloss I carried in my jeans pocket to the skating rink. Maybe I will make some soup with mushrooms, onions, garlic, and spinach. I need to go to the grocery store for spinach. That means I need to get dressed. Wish I could go to the store in my PJs. I read an article in the newspaper on how it is fashionable to wear your PJs out after work. Poorer people in Japan sleep in old shirts, but people with money wore their PJs out to show they could afford them.

Okay, focus here. I remember in Seattle it was chilly and misting rain, and some days we would stay in our PJs all day and watch soaps on TV. If we needed anything, we would throw on our sweat suits over our PJs and run to the store or go get some take-out food.

I wonder how many words I have just written about nothing? 574, and it's about nothing. I am out of time; the cursor on the screen is still blinking, the newspaper is still rustling and the fridge is still humming. But I sure had fun just writing whatever popped into my mind.



GOLDEN CHANGE

*Sipra Roy
Austin, Texas*

I am a brand-new feather added to Story Circle Network! I am Indian. My son brought me to Austin immediately after the sudden death of my husband. Being cut off from my life and my native land, I felt desolate. Fortunately, I developed a friendship with Althea (my Messiah!), a generous and kind American woman, who invited me to her writing circle, the Campbell Group, which I joined. Thanks Story Circle!

Once a lonesome soul
In the lone-star state,
Wandering and pondering aimless,
Sinking into the black hole of nothingness,
Drudging day over night, yet
Time
Stayed stagnant,
Only void pervaded.
Until Messiah came,
Focusing flame on life ahead.
The captive soul from the cage
Wading through memory lane
Came out
Free, unleashing rein!
Blooming heart, melting pain,
Hidden tears turning into pearls of words!
I wish to convey
To each corner of the earth,
To all dropping dry leaves,
The hope of new birth
Awaiting any moment
If you flow in harmony
By erasing self-barrier.
When thoughts gain wings to fly,
The universe turns out to be so great!
But who is this Messiah?
Can you guess, can you guess?
Yes, yes, yes!
It is the story writing circle!

AFTERMATH

*Peggy Lamb
Austin, Texas*

I'm traveling along a rocky path, stumbling my way through a world of grief, shame, and guilt. My hands reach out into broken space, feeling and searching for guideposts. I wish this path was covered with snow and I could point my skis down and fly through white space.

Today has been strenuous, full of boulders and jagged rocks. My brother's eyes peer out from his picture next to the candle that burns in his memory. His eyes accuse me of not loving him enough or not loving him with grace and wisdom. He is right.

I search my past for memories of my brother, sister, and I finding solace with each other. In Pat Conroy's book, *The Prince of Tides*, the three children would jump into the sea and hold hands below the water's surface when the

insanity and violence of their family became too much. What did Richard, Eileen, and I do? I yearn for a memory like that—a bonding of children against the sea of dysfunction. My hands reach out for that remembrance and come up empty and silent. This yearning for a cellular connection to him is both sacred and heartbreaking.

Suicide is a dark and haunting world, with doors that lead into cesspools of guilt. My mind crosses over the thresholds and my thoughts stink like rotting cabbage. I step into the cesspool and scream "*Mea Culpa, Mea Culpa, Mea Maxima Culpa.*" Is that what he wants? I have felt haunting grief ever since my brother came back broken from Vietnam. His suicide adds concrete to that grief.

This writing helps me leave the room of cesspools. It's one of my guideposts, along with my friends, books, Survivors of Suicide, 12-step meetings, and most of all, my partner, Grant.

BITS AND PIECES

*Khadijah Lacina
Sana'a, Yemen*

A bag of bright scraps in gypsy hues
sits next to my needle and thread.
Dusty quilting books full of carefully
diagrammed patterns line the shelf.
I find my mind cannot follow their
one-two-three, this-next-to-that methodology.
Instead my fingers sift through soft cottons
like sand, searching for the next piece.
When touch is satisfied, I allow my eyes
to see what my fingers saw first, and begin to sew.
My poetry breaks free from ordered lines.
I used to think the way to beauty was through order,
understanding each and every little thing.
I tried to string events and thoughts together in clear
paper ring chains, logical, concise little soldiers.
When the line broke, as it always did, I watched
them fall into vagabond hills of color and shape.
And one day I saw the beauty there,
of accepting and embracing,
of tossing them up with eyes closed simply
to see how they would land,
of strewing them behind me in dance,
to glitter and glow on their own,
each a single, precious memory on its own—
unique, out of order, brilliantly alone.
Now I look for beauty in the moment
as well as the memory,
in the piece as well as the whole, the past
as well as the future.
The treasure
of the gypsy
came
through the
freedom
of a soul
in flight.



WE DON'T BELONG IN MENSA

*Cindy Marszal
Austin, Texas*

A bunch of years ago, my live-in boyfriend, Evil Dave, had been hounding me about how much smarter he was than me, mostly by virtue of the fact that he knew how to play chess. Did not matter that I could beat his ass properly in every other game, including backgammon, gin rummy, bowling and putt-putt—he decided he was smarter. So I challenged him to take an IQ test to decide if he was so damn smart.

A girlfriend at work got a flyer from her alma mater saying that they were doing Mensa testing. So I signed up and made Evil Dave sign up, too. Joanne signed up to give me moral support.

Several weeks later the results came in. Joanne passed. I passed. Dave failed. I guess we know who is smarter NOW.

For reasons not belonging in the story, Dave was long gone when Joanne and I both got invitations to join Mensa and be eligible to attend Mensa functions. Joanne convinced me over bowling and beer that we needed to do this to enhance our social lives, figuring we'd meet smart guys.

"I lived with a so-called smart guy. He wasn't all that smart and he was still a nimrod."

"Right. He wasn't MENSA smart. That's got to be better," she deduced.

We signed up and got our Mensa cards in the mail. Joanne put her card in her wallet. I threw mine in a drawer in the bathroom.

Then the newsletter came with the announcement of the next Mensa meeting in downtown Baltimore. It was in the smaller ballroom of a downtown hotel near the harbor. Joanne was all aflutter.

"We're goin.' There's entertainment and a happy hour and food and FREE BOOZE."

Well, heck, there's no arguing with free booze. So we signed up to attend, and that Friday afternoon when we finished our shift, we headed downtown. Since we worked for the federal government, we weren't exactly the most fashionable or professional or wealthy people in town, but we were clean and didn't smell bad.

We got to the ballroom and signed in with the pleasant woman at the front table, then walked through the big double doors. Up until then I'd never seen so many geeks in one place. Joanne and I were both 24 years old, in reasonable shape, and obviously not what Mensa groups are used to having at a soiree. The median age seemed to be about 40. Approximately 80 percent of the crowd was male, mostly

balding, many in shorts, in spite of the fact it was January. I was willing to bet that of the men who DID shampoo regularly, the anti-dandruff variety of hair care product was what appeared in their shower stall.

We veered toward the name tag table where a Mensa-ette was filling out "hello, my name is" tags for people entering the room. She looked up politely through her coke bottle lenses. Before I could open my mouth, Joanne barked "Tiffany. And my friend Winter," pointing her thumb in my direction. I smiled and waved.

The woman dutifully scrawled Tiffany on Joanne's badge. Joanne heartily slapped the sticker above her cleavage and murmured "I don't think we want them to know our real names. Really."

I stopped the scribe in mid-Sharpie and instructed, "That's spelled M-Y-N-T-A-E-R. It's Gaelic."

"Nice touch," Joanne nodded.

We helped ourselves to the free booze. The Mensans choose some decent Chardonnay, but to tell you the truth I didn't know better. What the hell, it was free. Then the entertainment began.

The Master PooBah of Baltimore Mensa introduced the act for the night: a magician. The guy came out, did some sleight of hand which wasn't bad. After two tricks, the crowd got unruly. People started to randomly shout out the secrets to the magician's tricks. The magician became uncomfortable and tried to go on, but the crowd got louder and more raucous. I guess that's what happens when you give alcohol to Mensa nerds who can't hold their liquor. All inhibitions are sloughed off. Nerd mob mentality took over, and the heckling got really out of hand. Finally the guy couldn't take it anymore and stopped.

"I quit! You people are hopeless!" he sputtered. "No wonder none of you ever gets laid! Buncha freakin' losers!" The guy was so furious he was almost in tears. He turned to the master of ceremonies "I'll be back later to collect my props AND my check. I expect to be paid for this humiliation." He left the stage to riotous applause and catcalls. It was unbelievable.

The MC took the mike and asked the group for quiet. "You guys. C'mon. It's getting harder and harder to get entertainment. Alright? Geez. Anyway, let's take a short break so we can set up; next up is Skippy McFarland with slides and a presentation about his trip to the National Mountaineering Society's annual trek and scavenger hunt."

Joanne and I looked at each other and silently decided we'd had about as much fun as we could have in one place and took the opportunity to bolt.

Outside the ballroom, I asked "Where to now?" Joanne suggested "Let's go to the national aquarium, I'll bet we could find somebody with half a brain and maybe some personality."

"I've had enough of brains. Let's go to the Wharf Rat Saloon down on the waterfront and look for some regular drunks with no personalities but infinitely more fun."

"Deal," she said, ripping up her Mensa card and tossing it in the trash on the way out.



MEMORY ROSES
Barbara Patterson
Bratenahl, Ohio



My outings with Nancy have changed. Formerly day-long trips to try on clothes or buy small antiques, they now might be a short afternoon movie or perhaps a modest lunch. And they are much less frequent because we are older and in deteriorating health.

Years ago a typical day would include a visit to Mary and Pat at their dress shop. Each of us might buy a fall coat, then Nancy would buy another pair of black slacks for her next New York weekend and I would buy a purple outfit for work. Nancy might add a Cleveland pin, and I was likely to increase my collection of hand-crafted earrings.

After a half-day with Mary and Pat, sipping from our water bottles, talking about children and grandchildren, offering and getting comments (too tight across the bust, wrong color for your complexion), Pat would ring up our purchases while Mary would tell us about her latest trip to Chile. We'd hide our bags in the car trunk and go to lunch.

Rested, we'd prowl the Larchmere antique shops, Nancy speculating where one of her daughters might place a bench or me buying a perfect sugar bowl and creamer for Anne's birthday. One day I also found a china hand. I hang my bracelets on it.

We bought the bench for Jennifer. It fit in my back seat, but we forgot to close the car door and drove off down Larchmere. Luckily people were out and about, shouting and pointing, before we damaged my car or parked cars we'd driven past.

Another day we found a pair of old, green shutters. We bought this pair together. I hung mine on my condo balcony. Nancy hung hers on her laundry room door.

One day we took Phyllis with us to Larchmere. "We really don't need any of this stuff, girls," she kept saying. Nancy and I didn't buy anything that day. It all seemed used and unnecessary. We didn't invite Phyllis again.

Usually we ended our day with a visit to the bookstore. Richard would see us coming and hand each of us a basket. When the baskets were full, he'd pile our books on the checkout counter. Sometimes we filled a second basket. We would "book review" with Jane. "Good plot, too many shifts in point of view," we might agree, or "Insightful story of a geisha, although written by a man."

One day, returning to our car, we passed Jenny the florist, still open. Her display of lilies of the valley, straw rabbits and pansy wreaths drew us in. Jenny was holding two roses. "These are overbloomed," she said. "You can have them for a dollar each. Normally they're \$4.50. They're called memory roses," she added.

We bought them, of course. Two of us, two roses. Jenny put them into vials, wrapped each in tissue and tied the tissue with paper twine. Memory roses. Perfect for us.

GIRLFRIEND WISDOM

J. J. Zeikus
Austin, Texas

Without the kindness of girlfriends, I would have self-destructed by now. They were there through the childhood years when we would hardly speak to boys, and they were there when we decided boys were pretty interesting and were all we could think about or talk about. We compared notes during puberty and knew who was or wasn't having periods, who was or wasn't wearing a bra (whether we needed one or not), and we knew who had their first pubic hairs.

We pierced each other's ears and dyed each other's hair. We complained about school and parents and boy-friends. We cried on each other's shoulders after every broken heart and we cried some more when we were separated because someone moved away or graduated. We struggled with family values and religious and legal issues when making decisions about sex, birth control, and pregnancies. We bought god-awful bridesmaid dresses to be in each other's weddings, and hosted showers for brides and babies. We wrote letters and made phone calls to talk about problems with money, husbands, and children—from earaches to school grades to a million other parenting questions. We commiserated about having all these challenges and no instruction manual.

We called each other in the middle of the night the first time he didn't come home. We laid out the evidence of infidelity in a desperate attempt to have our girlfriends provide an alternative explanation. We confided our fears about drug or alcohol abuse. And on rare occasions, we might have revealed the secret bruises cleverly hidden by clothes. When one of us felt trapped in a hopelessly bad relationship, we reminded each other that when you hate your life that much, it's time to make some changes. Then we talked about divorce and comforted each other through the sleepless nights, the legal papers, and the division of his, mine, and ours.

We explored new phases of life with increasing confidence, including learning to date again in our middle years, facing career crises and changing careers when necessary, and commiserating about watching the children grow away from us and (God forbid!) start trying drugs, driving cars, and having sex. We cried together about the empty nest—in some cases because the little ones flew away, and in some cases because the little ones never arrived. The nest was still empty, either way.

We talked about where to go from here, sometimes admitting that we were facing the second half of life. We talked about our own sex lives (or sometimes lack of sex lives) and discussed hormones and hot flashes and bodily changes that occur with age.

And then, a rude collision with reality occurred when a lump turned out to be malignant. We celebrated the survivor among us with pink ribbons, and we mourned with indignant shock and anger when one of ours did not survive. It reminded us that the second half of life might have begun

(Continued on page 8)



a long time ago, and it made us want to treasure and celebrate our remaining time. No more black humor on birthdays. Every year lived is a source of joy.

Even with the memories of that death, we slipped back into the easy complacency of life as it is and always shall be—until the next time. This time it might be one of our husbands who dies. It might be mine. It was mine. And the girlfriends rallied around me with words of comfort. “You know, Honey, he’d been REALLY tired for a long, long time.” Or, “Whenever I start feeling cynical about love, I just remember the way he looked at you or the way you cared for him at the end, and I see that love is alive and well and among us every day.” Or, when I complained that I’d lost my best friend, “You can have more than one best friend. You know that; you’ve always known that.” Thanks to my girlfriends, I do have more than one best friend.

We’re a long time past the naïve young women who believed in happily ever after. We know that statistically, women live longer, and that means we’re likely to be left behind when our husbands die. When we think about that and wonder what we’ll have left, we remind ourselves that we have each other. We talk about building a community of women when we’re old and alone. We talk about taking care of each other. After all, who else will pluck our chin whiskers when we can no longer see them in the mirror? Love truly is alive and well and among us every day.



**“LORI, CAN I INTEREST YOU
IN A CUP OF SOMETHING?”**

*Lori Swanson
Fountain Hills, Arizona*

I knew she’d say it. It was her hallmark, her mantra, her inner presence reaching out to me. For those words, I had traveled more than 1,950 miles, and I wasn’t about to say no. Refusing “a cup of something” would have been like venturing out into the coldest, rainiest summer I could remember, would have been like implying that my heart was already warm and didn’t need the gentle fire of a welcome conversation. For the ten years we’d been neighbors I had often shared “a cup of something;” now that I’d moved across the country I was starved for it in more ways than one. Of course I was interested, and I accepted. Talk about being in a time warp! As I sat down, it felt like I’d never left.

The kitchen looked the same except for a new stove, but the coffeepot on it was the same, one of those that still

bubbled and percolated away happily, brewing every pot as it had for many years. The old cabinets, worn carpeting, simple canisters and saw tooth decorations hadn’t changed in seven years—had I expected them to? No, this homey place was a constant in the midst of too much change everywhere else. The prayer list still occupied the top center of the refrigerator door, one of those magnetic wipe-on, wipe-off boards that held just three names at the moment, names that were silently prayed for each time the fridge door opened. And the coffee mug still held the hot chocolate packets in assorted varieties: hazelnut, cinnamon, mocha, fudge. It may have been 1994 or 2004; we may have worn shorts or long underwear; we may be talking about young children or aging parents; it made no difference. Oh, to have been one of the walls of that kitchen—to have been privileged to see and hear and feel the conversations, to have felt the warmth that permeated the room no matter the whim of mother nature outside—the kitchen of MaryAnn’s house was blessed indeed.

She called her kitchen “holy ground,” and it was. There no confidence was ever broken, no tears criticized, no feelings discounted, no emotions denied. Anyone seeking their heart somehow saw the path clearer there; anyone seeking answers could clarify the questions there; and sometimes the answers themselves appeared as the “cup of something” washed away the fog of uncertainty that had accompanied the traveler to her door. And when Janine died, we mourned together there for two young daughters, a father alone, our own fear, our own loss. Holy ground, indeed. A cup of something? You bet.

Yesterday afternoon I’d been reunited with my older son there, a joyous occasion now that he’s out on his own, and it just seemed fitting that we would be brought together in the kitchen that had shared so many memories already. Erik seemed to carry the warmth of her kitchen in his eyes, because one glance from him immediately melted my heart, as his glances always do; he has a sparkle there that he shows only to me, and I bask in that twinkle for months after he’s gone again. I’d brought my younger son with me, a sixteen-year-old who has sprouted into a man before my very eyes. Seeing the two of them together, twin loving giants who I still remember holding on my lap, my life was, simply, complete. I cannot imagine a better memory, or a better place for it to have taken place.

Tonight, I opted for a cup of hot water; dinner had been recent and substantial, topped off with chocolate birthday cake for my younger son and me, both born this very day, 16 and 46 years ago. So I sat across from MaryAnn as we had many times, and we sipped, shared, chatted, laughed, reminisced, dreamed, and planned until the clock reminded us it was simply too late to say another word. I left with Adam early the next day, but I carry that conversation in my heart, as I always have. And I know that another time will come and we’ll be together, and she’ll say, “Lori, can I interest you in a cup of something?”

Always.

**HAIKU**

*Annabelle Bailey
Rocky Point, NJ*

Pods of paint pigment
dare me to capture nature
on sterile paper

RAINY DAYS: BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

*Khadijah Lacina
Sana'a, Yemen*

The rains came late this year, so late that some of the more pessimistic amongst us thought they may not come at all. Coming from the American Midwest, I couldn't understand at first the cycle of the Yemeni seasons. Winter, yes, was colder than summer, and summer a little more green than winter, but the way I understood rain is that it comes whenever it comes, no "season" involved. But here, there are two rainy seasons, one between winter and spring, and one between summer and fall. Outside of these two times, the advent of rain is a strange thing indeed.

And so we watched our neighbors prepare for rain. New layers of mud or plain dirt on the rooftops, plants placed out on ledges, cracks in walls and by windows patched up. Every day bringing blue skies and hot winds... where was the rain?

It seems that this year is a time of remembering for me, of clinging to things past to help me deal with things present. I think back to the rains in the States, how I always rejoiced when the water poured down, beating on the porch windows and gushing from the rain gutters. My heart would sing with each drop, as I turned my face up and felt reborn. Rain was never a time of sadness for me, always a time for joy and celebration.

This year I waited eagerly for the rains to come, feeling deep inside that I needed that cleansing again. As it was a hard year for plants and wild animals here, so it was for me. There are times when I forget that my sister passed away three months ago, when I go to grab a pen and write her a letter, or say to myself that I have to tell Patty about something or other. I have gone so far as to open my notebook and then I remember. Being across the world from her was hard enough, now we are across two worlds from each other. So as I wait for the final acceptance to set in, I also wait for the rains.

Two weeks and no rain...and then one day as I was carrying the clothes up to the roof to dry, I felt that unmistakable breath of air that comes before the rains... cool, fresh, a hint of dirt and green. I mentioned it to my

son, who then told me that they had prayed the prayer for rain at the masjid the day before. Ungrateful me, my first thought was that I wished he had told me before, so I could have hung the clothes earlier. Then I truly realized what he had said, and relief spilled over my soul.

And then the rains finally came. Every day dawns sunny and warm. You could easily miss the clouds as they slowly gather over the mountains before descending over our plateau. The thunder comes first, and then the water, pouring down in great gusts of cool wind.

Yesterday when it rained, I watched the children outside sailing boats they cobbled together from garbage through the runnels of water in the pathways. I watched the men with their thobes pulled up around them striding through puddles of water like they were conquering armies. I watched people laughing as they chased their runaway sandals down the mud street. And I thought to myself that they have balanced the joy and the sorrow of the rain perfectly, and I felt new hope that I, too, will be able to do that, insh'Allaah.

VOLCANO FIRE AND MOONLIGHT

*Ann Cabot
Austin, Texas*

The fiery cinders exploded from the deep caldera. Orange lava rock and shimmering ash crept over the grey, hardened, lava-covered ground. It was late afternoon in Volcanoes National Park. Kilauea's molten mass was creeping across the earth, both destroying and creating. She was laying down earth for the next season of seeds. She jumbled the cold, old rocks in her path as she ambled down the cliff and plunged over the ledge into the swirling sea.

Over the scene, the moon began to rise. It was a buttery-gold sliver that lit the mountain with a silent, curious glow. As the shadows lengthened and the day came to an end, its brightness rivaled Kilauea's own fiery radiance of creation.

MAGIC BERMUDA NIGHTS

*Pat O'Toole
Sun City, Arizona*

Found cruise to Bermuda on second-rate ship. Bonanza!—nearly hidden by small newsprint—but for us the price was right. Our very own "love boat"—and we were romantics, eager to seize a belated honeymoon seven years after the fact.

Bermuda was a moongate postcard with white-washed roofs on pastel buildings designed to store rainfall for future use. Gauze clouds pillowed against tranquil skies... white-crested waves...beaches that dazzled... were sure to banish all stateside cares.

British businessmen—dressed for success—wore long Bermuda socks and polished shoes. Tourists set out in bright shirts and "tennies" (long before the days of Adidas and Nikes).

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Explored this quaint island in fringe-topped cabs.
Bicycles and mopeds were popular too.

Beaming black faces introduced their calypsos.
New sounds thrilled us—guitars and steel drums.
We danced at every chance—couldn't resist it.
Aboard ship the band played all our requests—
Tango of Love...Orchids in the Moonlight (a time
to sway to sensuous music)...Kiss of Fire.

Grateful audience of Eastern Star widows—enthralled
by rumba-motion—kept us dancing for them.
They just "loved that wiggly type of dancing."
Cherished memories of magic nights became
superimposed on thoughts of two tots back home.
A fond farewell, Bermuda! We've been fulfilled
by a wealth of enchanted evenings!



BLACK BIRD'S CALL

*Alyce Guynn
Austin, Texas*

I am ambling
in the twilight
following
the black bird's call
She sings me back home
where my heart
cries out with love
and my soul
shimmers
An incandescent
light reflecting
passion and purpose
Here between
the worlds
of flesh
and spirit
I listen
not only
to the black bird
but to my yearning
It tells me
to pursue
my dream



NEAR JACOB'S WELL

*Louise LaBauve Saxon
Austin, Texas*

The icy waters of Cypress Creek stabbed our bodies
deliciously on the hot August day. My cousins and
I shivered happily in the 72-degree stream. Nature's
umbrellas—the mesquite, pecan, cypress, and oak trees—
shaded us from the sun's blaze as we swam beside knobby
cypress knees. Water lilies on long stems greeted us in our
diving attempts. We would pull them up by the roots,
winding them around our bodies in ways that might have
shocked our mothers.

Only a half mile away from our cabin was the famous—
and infamous—Jacob's Well which fed Cypress Creek. This
perpetual artesian spring was famous because it had provided
water every day for thousands of years and was designated
sacred ground by early Texas Indians. It was infamous due to
a national reputation as one of the most dangerous places to
dive in the entire country. Plenty of stories attest to its
mystery and allure. Many divers lost their lives to that
bottomless blue watering hole.

Such information was difficult for a nine-year-old to
absorb, but knowing that bad things had happened at that
very spot made me feel queasy every time I walked around
the perimeter of the well. The thought of swimming in it
made me anxious and furthered a new awareness that
everything in life is not always pleasant.

After our morning swim, we ate lunch and took naps. If
we piled onto our metal bunks without complaint and stayed
quiet, my mother sometimes put together outdoor treasure
hunts for us. She would hide many little clues. On the count
of "one, two, three," we rushed to the "cactus patch nearest
the outhouse" or to the "honeycomb rock pile north of
Jacob's Well." We would scurry all over the place, each
hoping to solve our set of puzzles first in order to win a prize.

Later we went for an afternoon swim, racing to climb the
giant oak tree and fighting for the rope swing dangling over
the deepest part of the creek. There we swung like Tarzan,
dropping off when our arm muscles gave out, only to swim
back to the ladder and do it all again.

At day's end, just as velvet shadows surrounded us, tiny
lanterns began to flicker all over the country lanes. A hot
yellow flash here and there sent us scooting to capture those
bright jewels. We saved our fireflies in glass jars with
perforated lids so that, without asking, we had nature's
flashlights to show us the way. All too soon, bedtime would
come, and we poured out our neon sequins. In a flutter, they
decorated the yard for a moment or two before scattering,
who knows where, until another night.

For diversion on summer Saturdays, we went to the
town square in Wimberley, just west of the Blanco River, and
stuffed ourselves with Tootsie Rolls and soda pop.
Occasionally, our mothers left us at the cabin to go in for
diversions of their own. My older cousin Rosalind oversaw
my activities and those of her younger brother, Daniel. One
time, my Aunt Martha had baked dozens of cookies for a
piano recital, and brought plenty of leftovers to the cabin. I
ate way too many while she and my mother were in town.
Rosalind kept count but didn't have to tell on me. It really
wasn't news to my mom, because I was sick as everything.

By the summer that I was twelve, I learned that Jacob's
Well really did not have a whirlpool that might suck me
under, but I still held the notion that it was at least three
miles deep. Supposedly, no one has ever found the bottom,
so maybe it really is that deep. With those facts in mind, I
nervously accepted the well's challenge and dove into it one
afternoon, but I did not go down more than eight or ten feet.
The notion of a bottomless well was still in my head, and my
stomach churned as I grabbed for any jagged rocks embedded
in the walls that I could possibly hold on to. Peering up



through the cold blue water, I was heartened for an instant seeing the bright circle of sky framed by the round mouth of the well. Looking down, I saw nothing but the darkening water beneath me that turned almost black. Heart pounding and in need of air, I experienced some panic and anxiously forced myself up to the surface. I swam there only a few other times, because it was scary, not really a swimming hole at all. The confidence gained from facing down and experiencing the well to that extent was enough for me.

Life was relatively simple then. Except for the stories about the drownings, it seemed quite perfect. We went to Wimberley during August to escape Austin's heat and to provide a respite for my mother, whose annual hay fever attacks rendered her virtually helpless. There in the heart of the Texas Hill Country the altitude was at least 300 feet higher than where we lived in Austin, and that difference, or so we thought, stopped Mother's sneezing fits. We would scan the skyline all the way from the city limits and heave sighs of relief once we spotted the Twin Sisters of Wimberley. These small mountains were more like fraternal twins, rather than identical, but were our landmarks and the point at which we could start to relax and let our hair down. My dad dutifully commuted back and forth on the weekends during these periods. I was sad that he had to leave us on weekdays to go to work, but he did not seem to mind. Looking back, I believe that he appreciated his August recess in a different way.

Now as an adult, whenever I catch a scent of scrub cedar on a hot August afternoon, or see knobby cypress knees surrounding a clear blue stream, I think back to that earlier time. Remembering, the tension in my neck loosens ever so slightly.

RAINY DAY WANDERINGS

*Katherine V. Gannett
Cedar Falls, Iowa*

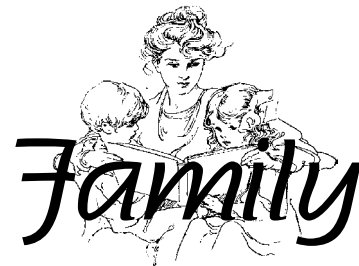
A lacy water curtain falls from the eaves.
Thunder cascades through gray clouds
like sheets of tin sliding from a roof.
I sit at the computer in the morning gloom,
wearing my green flannel plaid nightgown,
bare feet crossed at the ankles, resting.
It was not raining when I arose from my bed.
Why have I not dressed, as I had intended,
gone for a walk to empty my mournful head?
Compulsive habit, searching for email
from Orkney, California, Texas and Florida,
keeps me seated while the coffee brews.
The rain begins as a fine, drizzly mist.
Living room window view may be green trees
and swollen, muddy creek, but I am gone,
reliving rainy days in other places,
moving backward in time:
like Stromness, Orkney on a mid-July morning,
walking through clammy drizzle clinging to the ground,
obscuring glimpses of sea between stone houses
set down on crooked streets comprising ancient
slabs of slate and newer slabs of concrete;
like the cedar rainforest near Drain, Oregon,

where banana slugs and leopard slugs reign
on earth as red as rust. The stream is rusty, too;
like the beach at Moss Landing, California,
where the Pacific Ocean slides in, slapping and hissing,
depositing kelp, driftwood, and shells,
while tiny bubbles boil up through tan sand.
I'm restless, boiling inside, surging
like the sea with huge swells of emotion.
I need a cliff to slam this mournful
sadness and loneliness against, to watch it
dissipate like spume in the sun.

BEDTIME

*Tracie Nichols
Lansdale, Pennsylvania*

The fireflies seem to be swimming
our air is so rich with water.
This night exhales the greenest scent I've ever known.
Sweat tickles, sliding down my chest
as my shallow, slow, breathing
encourages and discourages the droplet, in turns.
Hard to sleep.
Harder still to move.
Musing is what remains.
My mind coils and uncoils lazily
around thoughts, memories, and dreams.
Flowing past ideas too ambitious.
For this prone moment
breath in—breath out
eyes closed, body slack.
Old conversations chatter.
Images form and dissolve.
Smiles and tears weave together
blending this moment with
all of the others
drifting away on cricket song...



IN BALANCE

*Doris Anne Roop-Benner
Richardson, Texas*

"There's a merry-go-round. Would you like to get on?"
"Oh, I haven't been on one of those for 70 years."
As we stood in the middle of that noisy, cotton-candy-
smelling theme park, I wondered why I had brought my
grandmother to this kid place for her 90th birthday. But when
I saw her perk up at the idea of riding the carousel, I knew
this was a good idea.

You see, Grandmom lived all her life in balance. She
never did too much of anything, whether it was eating,

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drinking, sleeping, or playing. She felt that moderation was the key to her longevity. And who could fault her logic? She had been sick only a handful of times and went to the doctor when she absolutely had to—like to get new glasses or replace her hearing aid batteries. She never wanted unnecessary fusses made.

Grandmom really loved jewelry and wore it all the time. But she wouldn't wear the "good stuff" for fear she'd lose it. So she kept her few pieces of "good stuff" in a small case on her bureau and had a drawer full of costume jewelry, which she used to accessorize all her outfits. And, of course, no outfit was complete without a hat and gloves.

Each birthday I'd try to do something different and special for her. On her 80th birthday, we asked if she'd like to fly from Philadelphia to Dallas to stay with us for awhile.

"I've never been on an airplane, or thought about going on an airplane. As a matter of fact, I was born before there were airplanes. But I'd like to come. How bad can it be?"

She came. She enjoyed it. But she would only stay a week. Had to get home to her plants.

When she was 85, I gave her a pantsuit for Christmas. She laughed out loud when she opened the box and said, "I've never worn pants in my life. My mother said ladies don't wear pants." But she wore them because they kept her legs warm and then bought more.

At 97, she still lived in a second-floor walk-up apartment in the city—alone. She enjoyed her independence and could do almost everything for herself. But, my Dad, who was 81 at the time, was afraid she would fall or worse and no one would be there to help her. So, he found a good nursing home for her. She said, "If you send me there, I'll die."

And she did—at 98 ½. No problems, just her decision to let go and enjoy her much deserved rest.

But on that day at the carousel—she did what she always did for me—she said "Let's go."

ANCESTOR DUST

*Reda Rackley
Carmel Valley, California*

Mama was buried under the old magnolia tree
Twenty years ago.
I watched the black box slip deep into the moist earth.
Throwing the red clay: one shovel, two.
She disappeared.
I disappeared.
Years passed.
Returning to the place of my birth
Stirring the ancestral cauldron.
Searching for my existence in the bone yard.
I returned a woman to my mother's grave.
I cried woman tears.
Tears deep from my womb missing my mama.
I was the last of eight children.
Her bones were weary when she birthed me.
She was an old woman, dying very young.

I COME FROM A LONG LINE OF WOMEN

*Reda Rackley
Carmel Valley, California*

I come from a long line of women...
Who sniffed earth's dark dank scent
Crawling on all fours smelling wet fecund fields of desire.
I come from a long line of women...
Who danced the fertile dance sliding bellies upon earth;
sensing, flicking tongues licking luscious life itself.
I come from a long line of women...
Who bled on the earth mixing blood with mud
Growing woman's mysteries hidden inside abundant thighs.
I come from a long line of women...
Whose stories are carved in fine etchings
of worn earthen skin.
Smiling crow's-feet proudly worn with labor cries
of first born son.
CreVICES cut deep upon brow, mourning second son
killed in the Vietnam war.
I come from a long line of women...
Whose wildcat ways will kill to keep stories alive
dancing between lips, hips, breast and thighs.
I come from a long line of women...

ICE CREAM

*Mahani Zubedy
Austin, Texas*

The trick is to let them have it whenever they ask. Just straight away bee line for the nearest store, stop the car, give them the money if they haven't taken it from the bag already, and sit and wait for them to return, unwrapping and licking. Don't say: "Wait till we get to the store near the house." Don't say: "Oh, we've passed the store already," and if you *have* passed it, turn around. Don't tell them: "You guys have had too much ice cream," or, "You don't need ice cream everyday," and never, never think that they cannot have ice cream because that is how life is, that you can't have everything you want every time you want it, because you can. Well, you should, so let them believe so.

When I was a kid in Malaysia, I didn't get what I wanted. We were poor, my father didn't care, and my mother believed that life is not for getting things you want. Poor people don't get what they want because things cost money. But nobody told this to my even poorer cousins, and it didn't stop them from happiness and going to school with sixty cents tuck shop money, or riding bicycles that were second hand but still the "in" models, like the one P. Ramlee rode in the opening scene of *Ali Baba*. First you see his head and shoulders with a flowing cape, sand dunes in the back ground, and you thought he was on a camel. Then you see the rest of him and you realized it was better than a camel, it was the bicycle you would never own.

My mother taught me that some things in life you plain don't get: bicycles, dolls more beautiful than a princess with curly, cascading hair, dresses with three layers of petticoats already sewed on, a husband who's always by your side, and heaven on earth. "*Bukan senang*," she would say, "It is



not easy.” You must suffer. You must bite on yourself and everyone around you, especially the ones you love most. Bite and keep biting. Bite on your little brother’s arm and see the red “O” formed by miniscule droplets of blood, spurting. Bite on the inside of your own lips. Bite your nails and pull them back till they bled.

Have a cigarette—at first, butts your father handed to you to throw away because he was too lazy to get off the couch, then a full stick you bought with the five cents you stole. Gold Leaf. Matterhorn.

Ice cream? No ice cream.

When I was thirteen, I had a dollar and something cents. Enough to buy a brick size bar of Wall’s ice cream. I had dreamed of a day when no one was home, had saved that dollar and something cents to know what it would be like to eat one whole bar of ice cream without sharing—all by myself. I bought. I ate. I got a cold that lasted a week.

On Eid Mubarak, the culmination of the holy month of Ramadan when Muslims visit friends and relatives and eat as if making up for the month they fasted, Mak bought us a durian popsicle each. During the lull between the arrival of my eldest uncle and family for breakfast right after prayers, and the rest of the relatives that begin showing up a little past lunch, we sat sucking durian ice cream. Mak, me, Mazna, Hussein and Rosli—all of us except Abah, who was at the house of wife number two. Creamy, yellow, thick and yummy durian ice cream. One year I decided on chocolate. At the last minute, I threw the durian back in the box of rising cold and picked the chocolate—same size, same brand, same price—but it wasn’t durian, and it was the last year we ate ice cream on Eid Mubarak.

Why not let them have ice cream? Let me say that my children can eat all the ice cream they want and it will not dent our checkbook balance. So, why say no? Why deprive them of cool sucks and creamy licks that soothe parched throats and lift the anticlimax of the end of school. What better way to celebrate that time of day? What else is there to do in the car for the forty-five minute drive (which should only have taken twelve but for the traffic). How else to face the traffic on a hot afternoon?

Play God. That’s it—because I want to play God. That’s why they can’t have ice cream. God says: “Today no ice cream. So there.” And today, even if you beg God, she will not relent. God is not happy today, God screams: “No! How many times must I tell you N.O. No! What is it with you? Everyday after school you must have ice cream.”

“So mean,” my daughter hisses.

Yes, I brought my baggage. Don’t we all? I got married and had kids so I could right my wrong childhood. Hah! Guess what? I’m repeating the cycle—with a twist. My mother had no idea what she did to her children, not a clue. Me, I know. I know precisely the mental agony I’m inflicting on my children (and myself, incidentally). Ha-ha-ha! I know. But you think by knowing I can prevent it? I can’t. You could say, looking at the bright side, I’ve evolved a step from my mother, but where does it put my children? Does it help them? Will they be better adjusted? Will they make better citizens of this planet? Will they come to more than me?

“I’ll get you durian, Mom,” my daughter says as she rushes out the door, note in hand, followed by her brother and sister. I stopped at the store near the house.

BLUE MOON BURDEN

*Tracie Nichols
Lansdale, Pennsylvania*

In this month of two full moons
my husband’s father dies.
Half-way between one moon
and the other,
he slipped away.
Grief tumbles
surges
pours
from this man I love.
Home gone, anchorless,
he lands in me.
My arms grow longer
spanning from moon to moon.
Making a home
for this man and his grief.

A QUIET DINNER AT HOME

*Erin Declan Philbin
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

It is 5:55 p.m., and my husband has a wild look in his eye. “I have five minutes to get to work. Do you think you could make dinner?”

I pull my head out of the book I’m reading. “Sure, honey. I’ll fix something for myself.” *Or not*, I think, slipping back into the book.

“But the kids haven’t eaten yet,” he wails. “Can you make them a sandwich?”

I am indignant. “Of course I can make them a sandwich! My God, I was starting dinner for my mother every night by the time I was nine. I baked cakes; I could roll out my own pie crust. Just because I haven’t cooked much in the past eighteen years, (OK, not at all) doesn’t mean I can’t make sandwiches for two kids!”

Chris dashes before I can change my mind. I take a deep breath and straighten my shoulders. I know that the kids can be a little picky, but this is one dinner that is going to be a glorious respite from the stresses of our busy day. I check the supplies. Yes, we actually do have bread. There are two choices: french bread or kaiser rolls with sesame seeds on top. Feeling rather proud of myself, I offer the children a choice. Not surprisingly, the choices are different: Brendan, the french; Owen, the kaiser.

The actual making of the sandwiches is not difficult. Brendan only eats ham sandwiches. He never ate any sandwiches at all until last year, and he’s nine. I was so happy at the time, I actually took a picture of him eating it. A ham sandwich for Brendan is basic. It means ham and bread. That’s it—no butter, no mayo, no mustard. The sight of a piece of lettuce makes him weak. “Somebody put a salad on my sandwich,” he’ll whimper.

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Cheese is a very tricky issue. He will eat individually wrapped slices of cheese, but only “on the side” after his sandwich is eaten. If someone accidentally puts the cheese on the sandwich, the ham needs to be wiped off with a napkin or the corner of his t-shirt, whichever is cleaner. Fortunately, I am well aware of the ham requirements, so I am able to assemble the sandwich with confidence.

Owen, my five year old, does not eat ham. He only eats peanut butter sandwiches. Just peanut butter; jelly makes him cry. I offer him a choice of toasted or untoasted roll. (I tell him that toasted peanut butter sandwiches are my secret recipe.) He opts for the untoasted. The second sandwich is assembled. In a flash of genius, I open two individual servings of applesauce, and voila! I call the boys to the table.

I pour them each a half a glass of milk. (There’s no reason to get cocky.) Owen won’t drink white milk, just chocolate, but no worries. I add the Nestlé’s Quik without being reminded. I whip out my \$5.00 whisk from Pampered Chef and stir the milk briskly until it has a lovely foamy top.

Owen howls, “I don’t want this. I like to stir the milk myself. You stirred it too much. I like it chunky!” Brendan virtuously offers to drink the chocolate milk but adds that he was planning on drinking white milk because it’s better for his bones and doesn’t have so much sugar. I try to smile my thanks as the drinks are traded.

Brendan takes a bite of sandwich. He sticks out his tongue while he chews. I ignore him. He starts to bob his head like a chicken. I ignore him. Finally, he asks, “Is this bread stale?” I can’t chew it!”

“The sandwich was fine when I made it!” I snap. “You were the one who chose the french bread,” I remind him. He adds a small coughing/gagging sound to his increasingly violent head thrusts.

“All right,” I yell, grabbing the remaining kaiser roll. I slit the roll and transfer the meat, hands shaking slightly. Brendan re-opens the roll, and drags the ham slices across the edge of the plate to remove any offending french bread crumbs. Sandwich re-assembled; he begins the painstaking process of picking off each sesame seed. I count to ten, to twenty, to thirty. No good. “What the hell are you doing?” I snarl.

“You know I don’t like sesame seeds,” he responds.

I take a cleansing breath, close my eyes, and imagine myself at the beach. The sun is warm on my face. The waves are rolling in and out, in and out...

Owen calls me out of my happy place. “Just to let you know,” he says. “I don’t like sesame seeds either.” My breath is coming in short gasps. I turn to the sink looking for the knife I used, God, was it only two minutes ago? I can’t find the bread knife. I can’t find any knives at all. I’m left with a black plastic utensil that was left-over from a package of take-out. I attempt to hack the tops off both rolls.

I hand them each a spoon to eat the mangled mess that were once sandwiches. “Thank you, Mom,” my kids say in unison. I walk away. It’s just another quiet dinner at my house.

CONFESSIONS OF A GUILTY MOTHER

*Bonnie Watkins
Austin, Texas*

Guilt. One of life’s many double-edged swords. Good guilt, like a gadfly, can nudge us on to correct a personal fault or right a moral wrong. Bad guilt, like a spider, can poison us from moving on in life, past events for which we have no real responsibility. Whoever first coined the phrase “guilt trip” knew that the journey can be long and tedious.

Children are sometimes accused of knowing how to “push my buttons,” referring to irritating their moms. (And who came up with that apt phrase? Why don’t people go down in a famous record book for making up these marvelous phrases? Or inventions? Who invented liquid paper? Or the safety pin? Or Saran Wrap? Well, maybe that one is credited—was it Mr. Saran?) Despite children’s propensity for pushing buttons, mothers must surely get their revenge by being Houdinis of Guilt. With sleight of eye, a skillful Guilt Monger Mom can shoot a subtle look at her children and wither them with an attack of conscience. Beyond that, we surely each have Mother Tapes that play our own mixed tape, “It’s okay. I’ll do it myself.” “Don’t bother. I was getting up anyway.”

On the other side of the sofa sits the Book of Guilty Mother Stories. One afternoon I was taking a Sacred Sunday Afternoon Nap when I was awakened to the strains of “Terrible shot!” on a basketball video game the boys were playing. They added a lot of shouting to the hubbub. In a flash, I jumped up from bed and raced into the family room to shush them. The closest “weapon” I could find was a pair of socks lying on the floor. Undaunted, I grabbed them up and attacked from the rear. They never knew what hit them. “Who is this crazed invader? Does he want money? Oh, now I see. It’s Mom gone ballistic. What? She’s hitting us? She never hits us. And what’s she using? Socks? Hey, those soft things can actually hurt with a good enough snap on them.”

Brian, my older son, says that his very first memory in life (the one that you would want to be when you mopped his feverish brow or took him to Disneyland) is when I was cutting his hair and snipped the top edge of his ear so deeply that it required a trip to minor emergency for, thankfully, just a butterfly bandage, and not stitches. No money saved on that haircut. And, a lifetime of guilt gained.

Phillip, my younger, has his own memories too. “You wouldn’t be able to sleep if it were broken,” were my words to him after he stuck his hand in the middle of the basketball court amid a mess of big boys’ feet trying to recover the ball in that famous non-contact sport. He slept. It was broken.

The list is much longer, but you get the idea. Surely now, if you’re a mom, you’re either the Tenderhearted Mother who is wincing in pain at the memory of your own chapters in the Book of Guilty Mother Stories, or if you’re older and more jaded, you may be the Warped Humor Mom who is laughing now and crowing, “That’s nothing. I can beat that one.”



MAKING A HERO

Pat Turner
Tyler, Texas

The windows were open and the starched lace curtains tied back to catch all the air the big attic fan could pull into the house. Mother and I had recently washed the curtains, dipped them by hand in the heavy starch solution, stretched them on the square wooden frames with all the prickly little barbs to hold the lace tight, and set them in the back yard to dry. That day in July 1949 the air was hot, but any air was welcome.

Daddy and I were filling up his “coin changer” as he prepared for work. Daddy put on an official looking uniform with a badge and hat and went off everyday to drive a big city streetcar—very important stuff in the eyes of a seven-year-old. He often let me help him put the coins in the changer, a magical machine he wore on his belt. Why, he could even reach down and count out just the right change without looking. Daddy was my hero. He caught the mice that terrorized me in the garage. He chased fire trucks and kept danger away. He put on an army uniform, went off to rid the world of “Japs,” and returned wounded from the battle. Daddy drove the streetcar because E. H. (Boss) Crump, the influential mayor of Memphis in the 40s, offered every returning soldier the job of his dreams. Daddy learned easily how to maneuver the big streetcar, make change without looking, and even control the two long arms which connected the car to the electric lines overhead. Disconnecting the arms and turning the car around at the end of the line was quite a tricky operation. Powerful electricity ran through the lines and sparks flew when the driver worked the cables from the ground. Daddy must have been eager to return the car to the barn each night.

Daddy was a big man, tall and dark with a shock of curly black hair, which usually hung over his face. That day in July he wore his uniform pants and a white undershirt. In my memory, I see him standing in the door dumbfounded, as a man in official-looking black read the divorce decree. Surprised and confused, suddenly he appeared almost frail. Pain was evident on the face of my hero. Perhaps because it is too painful to watch your hero broken, memories fade from there. It has been my experience that life-altering events occur in split seconds we wish we could snatch from time. This event changed my life and now appears in bas-relief on my wall of memories.

More than 50 years later I cling to a trust in my very first hero. Only a few years ago, as another of those life-altering events played out in my life, I felt myself safe again surrounded by his big bear Daddy hug. My world was falling apart with the death of my son, and my hero was here when he was needed. Perhaps this is what makes a hero.

MOTHER'S WOMAN-LESS WEDDING

Libby Bertinote
Austin, Texas

The stage was set. A woman sat at the piano in one corner of the large hall. Festive ribbons adorned the aisles of folding chairs. An old wind-up Victrola played a funeral march for the guests gathered to witness the solemn occasion. Popeye came first, stomping down the aisle carrying the ubiquitous can of spinach. “I yam what I yam! Well, blow me down!” he bellowed. Then came Goofy, followed by Olive Oyl, Maggie and Jiggs, and Alley Oop. Character after character marched down the aisle dressed in their best comic strip costumes. In 1938 in rural Alabama, comic strips were equal to today’s TV. The audience hooted and hollered as the characters interacted with them.

Then came the father of the bride, carrying a rifle and scanning the auditorium looking for other suitors who might be hiding in the audience. The best man, a city slicker whose colorful outfit looked more like a New York gangster, wrestled the reluctant groom to the altar. The frightened groom, a slight man in bedraggled clothes almost escaped into the audience a couple times.

But then came the *piece de resistance*. Her waist was more than ample. Everything about her body was more than ample. The smiling, bountiful woman was dressed in white lace as she waltzed down the aisle to the tune of “The Old Gray Mare, She Ain’t What She Used to Be” belted out by the pianist. Awaiting her at the altar was the tiny nervous groom standing with the preacher. A Sears Roebuck catalogue provided the text for the ceremony. A spittoon nearby was used frequently by the flamboyant preacher.

The preacher, wearing a tuxedo with tails, intoned: “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here to mourn the loss of a dear soul . . . oh, er, excuse me.” He fumbled through the Sears Roebuck catalogue. The father of the bride came over to help him look for the ceremony. The wedding party was distracted by another attempt by the groom to escape. Finally the preacher began, “Dearly beloved we are gathered here to celebrate the union of these two individuals.” He continued through the ceremony, “If there is a person among us who knows just cause why these two may not be joined together . . .” Loud wailing and protesting interrupted the ceremony. “No, you took her from me! She is mine!” cried out a poorly dressed, balding man. The father of the bride looked at him and then at the groom. He finally nodded to the preacher who resumed the ceremony. The rejected suitor wept and loudly blew his nose.

This was a magical event for a seven-year-old growing up in the 1930s. For me it was unbelievable to see my mother in charge of the whole play. She planned it, recruited neighborhood people as actors, engaged the community hall, and directed the show. In this rural place in the 1930s, an all male, woman-less wedding was an anomaly and a special treat. Local males did not dress, ever, in women’s clothes. Mother had created an atmosphere that induced working class men to join the troop, boisterously and joyfully taking part in the wedding. Even my Dad wanted

(Continued on page 16)



to be part of the ceremony. Usually shy and withdrawn in large groups, he played the role of the rejected suitor.

In my experience, Mother was always just Mother—cleaning, cooking, and taking care of my ill brother and baby sister. My brother had died several months before, resulting in frequent visits to the grave site in the cemetery. The old country cemetery did not have the loving care seen in some places. The dead were not disturbed by lawn mowers. Tombstones sat in lonely silence, covered in vines and brambles. Relatives of the dead had moved on or died. The dates on many of the tombstones reached back to pre-Civil War times. Mother couldn't bear to leave her only son resting in such a neglected and sad place. She decided to raise money to get the cemetery cleaned up. Months of planning, cajoling neighborhood men and friends to perform in the ceremony, and putting together a production ensued. Mother had help from her friends and my dad, but the creative ideas were her own.

The show was held first at the Community Hall in Whistler. It was an instant success and the performance was repeated. Then people in the nearby town of Prichard requested it. There was talk of going to Chickasaw but the players and Mother had the money they needed to clean up the Whistler Cemetery and there was no energy to do more.

Mother never did venture into show business again but she had done enough to impress her oldest daughter.

Thanks, Mother.

IDENTIFICATION CRISIS

*Sandra J. Gaylor
Lafayette, Indiana*

When my twin sister and I were eight years old, we had a fight with a girl on our school bus. Bonnie Mae squelched the fight by yelling at us, "My mom said you girls were adopted!" Whooping mad and indignant, we later told our dad and mom what that awful Bonnie said. Then we learned the truth. Mom was ours, but not dad. He adopted us when we were nineteen months old.

They told us they had purchased their own farm about fifty miles away and hoped to move there before spring planting. They also admitted that they desperately wanted to move before we heard of the adoption. I wondered just how long it would have been before we found out if Bonnie Mae hadn't blabbed that day. Secrets have their way of leaking out, like a slithering, slow snake—and they bite! The hurt came at a tender age, but I know, for me, it would not have hurt any less had it come when I was older.

I felt my safe, rosy-colored world had turned upside down. Adoption was a lot of baggage for this eight-year-old to handle. I needed time to smooth out the disbelief and devastation. My dad wasn't mine? I continued to run to him, hug him, and kiss him goodnight, but there seemed to be an invisible wall of lost trust I had to run through, and frankly, my legs were about as sturdy as my Raggedy Ann's cotton legs. Adoption and moving away from our friends

were just two bits of major bad news. I kept wondering if there was more. I was also wary of being neglected because of the arrival of my twin baby brothers, but must admit, I never felt treated or loved any differently.

Like a wrecking ball, real issues swooped down out of the blue and leveled me. Losing Dad in my mind had robbed me of my ability to feel close to him again. I also felt that my adoption robbed me of my grandma and grandpa, aunts and uncles. My twin and I looked so much like most of Dad's family, and now we're told that we're not even related? We favored Dad's sister, Aunt Mary, so much that we could pass for sisters. And she wasn't even our biological aunt?

I let loose with a barrage of questions. So who was my *real* dad? Where was *his* family? What had been my *real* name? Mother was quick to answer most of my questions, but briefly. I knew she was honest, but she never elaborated and left me vaguely dissatisfied. Mother said she was married at the time of our birth, but divorced our dad shortly after. She showed me a teeny-tiny, faded snapshot of him, but she had no photos of his family. It was hard to see his features and guess at his lifestyle from a clipped 2x3-inch picture. I might never know who my biological father really was, or what happened to him.

I felt terribly alone and kept asking myself, "Who am I?"

NEVER IN A MILLION YEARS

*Lisa Shirah-Hiers
Austin, Texas*

Never in a million years—at least in the last five—could I have imagined what an absolute joy my daughter would become. Her infancy passed in a kind of sweet, dreamy, exhausted haze. Then the torment began.

This child didn't do anything by the book. She didn't walk when she was "supposed" to. She waited until 17 months, then perambulated in as weird a way as I'd ever seen—on her knees, like a supplicant pilgrim. I was sure there was something terribly wrong, even when the pediatrician assured me kids all do it their own way. I thought he was hiding something until one day another mother ran all the way across the grocery store shrieking "Oh, mine did the same thing! I thought she was the only one!"

She wouldn't sleep. All my friends' children fell into a deep slumber that lasted at least two hours every afternoon from birth through the beginning of kindergarten. Their blissful mothers read books or wrote them, took baths, did their nails, surfed the web, or took naps themselves. I, on the other hand, had no relief until I put her to bed at 8 and—too tired for anything else—collapsed in front of the TV. The only rest period I was ever able to impose was an afternoon orgy of kiddie shows during which she would somersault off the couch, create play dough menageries and villages all across the dinner table, paint several dozen watercolors and do her best to (a) break or muddy everything we owned and (b) break or



muddy herself, the dog and me. Meanwhile I tried to clean the house, myself, the dog and somehow answer e-mails, write bills, and get dinner going. (No wonder I was tired!)

She wouldn't eat. Sarah would take one bite of hotdog and a sip of milk and announce "I'm done." Forget vegetables or even fruit. Peaches were "icky." Pears were "gross." Apples were "sour." Lovely seedless green grapes that other children gobbled up with gusto were "too chewy." My aunt got her to eat them—by peeling them. I couldn't bring myself to go quite this far. It was too close to my vision of myself as bonded slave answering the whims and demands of a three-foot-high empress. I was sure it must be my fault. I'd probably screwed up somehow when I introduced solid foods. Had probably given her the wrong things at the wrong times. Then I checked the Gerber chart lovingly preserved in her baby book. Nope. I'd done it just as Gerber told me to. Rice cereal (which she spit out.) Peaches (a favorite for about two weeks.) Pears (the same) Chicken and rice (she'd eat one-third of a jar.) Green beans (forget it.) It was clearly her—all her—and not me.

I alternated between fury at her ferocity and depression at the dictatorial (well, actually, Nazi) tone I had to take to get her to cooperate at all. But somehow, with heavy doses of medication, therapy, and less useful books and advice, I persevered.

Fast forward to September, 2004. Sarah enters kindergarten and morphs into the child I was supposed to have. This one's favorite song is "The Rules of the Classroom." This one chants "fussing is a bad way to make friends" all the way to gymnastics lessons (my solution to her attempts to break her neck vaulting off the furniture). This one teaches me the first verse of a song about the two sounds "A" can make, then says "Mom, what's the next vowel?" Vowel! I didn't know what a vowel was until high school. This wonderful impostor yells "Lights out!" promptly at 8:30—a signal to me and her father that she is ready to go to sleep. This child spurts out amazing sentences like, "Sorry, I got carried away." And, "It's OK, Mom. I'll let out the dog." Who the hell is she?

Never was a child better mannered, more brilliant, more compassionate, more cooperative, smarter, sweeter, or more delightful. This one—who I had been sure was destined for juvie hall—this one puts the lids back on the play dough, dumps her dirty clothes in the hamper, and carefully places her school shoes behind the door so we won't have to search for them the next morning. This one wipes her OWN butt (that took all summer) and reasons like a Harvard law professor. Today she asked me if she could watch Disney's *Dinosaur* while she ate breakfast. Now, I do stick a video in her bed-room VCR every morning, in spite of my Mother's dire warnings about the effects of television viewing on young minds. I do so because it's the only way she will wake up. But I always, cleverly, select videos with many short episodes so there are natural breaks in which I can peel her away and out the door. I told her "Well, sweetie, I always pick videos with lots of short shows because I worry you'll fuss when it's time to go." She looked at me with a penetrating stare from

her mysterious gray-and-ever-changing eyes and replied "Well Mom, all I can say is, did I fuss today when it was time to go?" Who is this masked stranger? Who cares. She's all mine.

I know, or have been told, to enjoy this domestic bliss while it lasts. The hellion is due to return sometime around her eleventh or twelfth birthday. I am hopeful that her complete disregard for the ages and stages of development will garner me a few more years of peaceful coexistence before the fireworks begin. But Lord only knows. The only thing I'm sure of is that, whatever comes next, it won't be boring.



THE BUGGY

Pat Turner

Tyler, Texas

The buggy—shiny and black
 The horse Nell—shiny and black
 The button tufted seat—shiny and black
 The bridle, harness, and reins
 I sure don't understand.
 Giddy up Nell!
 We're going to town!
 Grandmother and me!
 We have brown eggs to sell
 To the tall city houses.
 Nice people invite us in
 To meet this little girl
 Who comes with their friend.
 Grandmother—tell me about
 Uncle Ed and Aunt Sara
 Who wave from the neat white house
 As we go by.
 Now, how many children did they have?

Grandmother—tell me about
 That big house on the hill
 Where no one lives.
 Is it really haunted?
 How did that woman die?

Grandmother—tell me about
 The man who lives in the house
 Covered with yellow brick tarpaper.
 Is it true he can't stay awake
 And falls asleep in his plate?

Grandmother—tell me about
 How you and Grandpa ran away from home.
 Tell me how the preacher stood on the road below
 And you sat in the buggy
 Ready to go!



EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

*Cindy Fisher
Danville, California*

We follow arrows to the out-patient surgery department, winding our way down the hospital-green corridor. A blond-haired woman cloaked in a pink smock, whom I assume is the receptionist, is busy. She glances up, then ignores us. Mom rattles something under her breath, turning her back as she hobbles to sit. Knowing her impatience, I'm unsure if the comment is innocent or the result of a fearful, cranky old woman preparing for cataract surgery. We sit. Finally, the automation begins. Mom's name is announced, Kaiser card run through the machine, information slapped to the front of her chart, Dad's check for \$40 stamped, and we're told to have a seat.

Again, we park ourselves in the waiting room. I imagine someone putting instruments in Mom's eye and my body recoils. The backs of my legs tingle and my stomach clutches with anticipated pain. Then, above the chatter, I hear, "Catherine Scott, Catherine Scott." Mom turns to me and says "It's about time!" in a sarcastic voice, her eyebrows raised.

She uncurls her lanky 5'9" body to follow the nurse. I kiss her peaches and cream cheek and squeeze her hand. My "I love you" hangs in the air with a wink. She heaves a frightened glance over her shoulder and disappears behind beige metal doors.

I am fidgety and restless, pacing past the pharmacy to the window overlooking the empty, rain-slicked courtyard. I flip through *Redbook*, *Newsweek* and *People* magazine while I wait. My backpack, full of work, remains unopened although it screams for action; it won't let me rest, not for a moment.

Forty-five minutes later Mom reappears, patched and beginning to swell. She has tangled with the eye surgeon and lost; a white gauze pad covers her right eye with ribboned strips of tape securing the egg-like protector. I immediately wonder if she's still allergic to the adhesive which causes her tender skin to fester and bubble. She is weak, the ordeal more traumatic than either of us expected. I am reminded of her fragility and her eighty years, her arthritis, slow walking, stomach ailments, and osteoporosis; saddened as I remember the vital, happy woman she used to be.

We sit again as I rifle through my purse searching for car keys, which appear to be nowhere. Cherry red wallet, lipstick, and mascara don the empty, rose-colored chair next to me, along with phone numbers on folded scraps of paper, crumpled Costco receipts, but no keys. What a mess. It reminds me of the disarray in the rest of my life.

Admonishing myself for misplacing the keys, I leave the hospital and sprint across the wet parking lot to check the car. Cupping cold hands against the window, I peer in, hoping the keys are in the ignition. No luck.

Back inside, a new receptionist is perched at the desk. She is watching me curiously and tells us in a Lucy Ricardo voice someone has just given her a set of keys which dangle from her bony index finger. Could they be ours? We are

lucky. I thank her and jog to the car again, plopping purse, backpack and pain meds on the back seat, and drive a little too fast to the front of the out patient-department. The nurse has wheeled Mom through the automatic doors and they're waiting under an aluminum overhang. I cautiously ladle her into the car, buckle the safety belt across her too-thin body and we are off.

Black thunder clouds hang ominously in the sky as we drive home and yet, the sun peeks through like shards of glass. Mom and I make small talk about her surgical ordeal; she is already in pain even though her eye should still be numb. She's concerned about infection, or her eye being lopsided. At eighty, she is still vain! I guess we always want to look good—even at eighty. Then the real litany begins. The eye conversation was just a warm up. She complains that no one likes old people, that cold and rainy weather make her thin bones ache, that Dad's not feeling well, that she needs to remind him to take his medications and that she has to remember everything else and, by the way, their homeowners' dues just went up again. I find myself annoyed and feeling guilty. I am a prisoner in my own car. My emotions are fiery kittens scratching and turning. My desire to be compassionate seems to be locked inside a part of me I can't access right now. These conversations are tiring and they sting.

As we slog toward my parents' home, there's a dazzling rainbow off in the distance. "Look Mom, look at the rainbow over there," I say, pointing. She glances past my finger. "There are no rainbows, Cindy. Not in my life anyway." We drive home in silence.

LEGACY

*Aletta Bond
South Hamilton, Massachusetts*

Lately I have been thinking about legacy. The dictionary defines this word as something handed down from the past, from an ancestor—an inheritance.

However, I have been thinking of legacy in a different way. Perhaps it is has something to do with creeping up to that 50 mark. Perhaps it is also due to the fact that my children are reaching adulthood, and are moving on and out, and I am trying to look at them and find out what I have accomplished with them. How do they see the world, AND how do they see me?

I have thought of this often since my father passed away last summer. He had struggled for the last five years with cancer and knew he was terminal. During the course of those five years, I finally got to understand my father, in bits and pieces, through tears and laughter. For the prior forty years, my father seemed to me a distant, larger than life figure. He was loud and boisterous, he was important, and he was just plain big! For most of my life, I did not know quite how to talk to him. Perhaps it was his aloofness or his quick temper. But one thing I will say about him, he always made sure we were well taken care of, that all our physical needs were met. As I grew older, I could not put my finger on why I did not have a tangible relationship with him, why I could not just sit and "shoot the breeze" with him as others



could. Time spent with him seemed superficial and empty. Needless to say, I was unsatisfied with how our relationship was progressing. There were so many times I tried to raise the subject with him, but I squandered too many opportunities because I did not have the courage. It wasn't until he was diagnosed with cancer the second time around, that starting a conversation with him became a necessity. I could not let the unfinished business linger. Through many starts and stops, I finally started asking the questions. It turns out that he never thought he was aloof and distant. He truly believed that being a father meant providing for one's family, making sure everything was taken care of, and thus, he was a good father. He had done his job!

Now, I was trying to raise my own four children. They were all born in quick succession, so life was extremely busy. The only way I knew how to tame the chaos in my life was to be extremely organized. I thought that if everything was tidy, I would be lauded as having been successful. I always made sure the kids were well taken care of, from the time they were awake to the time they went to bed. At that time, I did not question or think about how or why...I just did, and kept my family and house spotless! Boy, was I starting to resemble someone? I felt that the most important duty as a mother was to make sure the kids were fed and clothed. I went through the motions, but I did fail to learn something important from my own childhood. I apparently thought it more important to make sure everything was in order, than to run through the sprinklers, kick a soccer ball, or bake cookies with the kids.

At the time I did not realize I was following my in father's footsteps, that I was just looking at parenting as a duty, not something to love and be passionate about. We definitely had the same mindset, I just did not know it. One day, I thought about how my children would remember me, what they might reflect back on. Would they want to be with me later in life? Did they pick up on my own reticence to spend time with my father? Did they sense my level of discomfort with him? Children are extremely perceptive. I did not want them to distance themselves from me as I still continued to do with my father. I started then and there to make the changes necessary to recognize my parenting as a labor of love and my passion.

I know now that in life it is not important to seek perfection. I don't believe any one of us is perfect, but I do believe we should never give up in trying to do better than we what we think we might be capable of. For me, that means letting go, and letting the little bits of life get in the way. It means realizing that things do not always work out the way you may want. In the big picture, it does not matter.

I was finally able to see my father through my children's eyes. They did not share the same fear I had of him. To my children he was "opa." I saw my son sit on his lap and share an ice cream. I watched my other son play in a golf tournament with him. I delighted when he carried my daughter around on his shoulders. He enjoyed just spending time with my kids—he wanted to be with US!

This is the clincher isn't it? We all, ultimately, want to love and be loved in return. I am thankful for every day I have with my children. I see them growing up so fast. Sometimes

we cannot change who we are, but we can change how we go about life and how we see things. My father was able to enjoy his children later in life, through his grandchildren. I saw him love them, and how they loved him in return. In the end, my father's legacy was one of love, the most important one!

WANT TO SING WITH ME?

*Tricia Stephens
Carrollton, Texas*

It's a law of nature that all things sing, just like everything is constantly moving. Molecules can't sit still or quietly. Babies sense the music in life around them and move along with it. Kids continue to hear and feel it even if adults tell them otherwise. It's when teenagers get busy working on social (or sometimes anti-social) skills that they start tuning out what they hear and feel. Many adults refine the skill of denial to an art by keeping busy doing activities, earning money, spending money, and resting each night in a stupor so they can start all over in the morning.

But good old Mother Nature keeps right on pumping out her melody no matter who's around. She knows that even adults who have completely shut out life's song will periodically come back. Maybe the catalyst is the birth of a child, the death of a loved one, or the realization of one's own mortality. Whether the music begins as a hum or a full blown Broadway show tune, molecules are happy when moving in sync with the music, because as long as the person listens, they are a part of something bigger than themselves, and a feeling of peace reigns.

Falling out of sync can be like falling off a diet. At first it's a conscious decision to break the rules; then, as you continue rebelling, the memory of what you left begins to fade. You forget how great you felt and start trying variations of what got you in trouble to begin with.

The holidays are great times for singing because people are often remembering important times and strong feelings from the past. Scenes pass before the mind's eye like movie clips, and the music that accompanies them draws out all those warm, cozy feelings that had been so lovingly packed away. Out-of-tune melodies and humming are just as impressive as professional operas or big musicals because all music is on equal footing when you factor in emotion that gives a song its depth.

The singing in our house got loud during the last year's holiday season. We started out with quiet little tunes just before Thanksgiving, and then added prayers on our way from Texas to Idaho to visit our nineteen-year-old daughter, Mauri. We hadn't seen Mauri since she left six months ago to start a program for young adults struggling with emotional issues and we all wondered how our reunion would go. We chased away our worries when the five of us admitted to each other we felt afraid and talked about how much we wanted to see each other. While driving into the mountains to sled, we filled the car with Christmas songs that vibrated through us and filled the air we breathed.

When I had a little time alone with Mauri, I tried to find

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the harmony we had shared in the past. The melody would start out as I'd remembered it, and then it wasn't the same; a new melody was taking its place. I had to tell myself to enjoy the song Mauri sang and let go of wanting the old tunes back. I was a little jealous because our two young sons could keep singing many of their old harmonies with their sister. My relationship with Mauri is changing from 'adult to child' to 'adult to adult', something I want, but is new and doesn't yet feel comfortable.

I happily watched as Mauri and her step-dad sang. I had watched many times over the last few years as they have started songs only to stop part way through. Now they were letting each other sing and even joining in to help one another.

We all had the unanticipated gift of Justin's songs since his three-year-old jabber has become understandable English. Mauri had missed much of Justin's journey from baby to toddler so this was a new gift of love for them to share.

Arriving home we sang a victory chorus. This was the first vacation we'd shared with Mauri that was peaceful. The year 2004 had started out bumpy, but now that we'd seen a measure of peace on our daughter's face, energy flowed again and it was time to decorate our house for Christmas and continue celebrating with thanksgiving.

Sometimes we sing off key, sometimes we sing over each other, and sometimes we sing when others want us to be quiet. But the times that we sing together and the sound is returned to touch our heart, makes any price a bargain. Singing can be any sound of love that produces special times when our emotions flow freely—we are free as babies again, giving and receiving blessings—we are connected.



OH, HOW I WISH I WAS BONO!

*Dee Stover
Hillsborough, North Carolina*

What a strange thought coming from a woman who is on the back side of middle age, overweight and arthritic. A used-to-be-middle-class (our household has been Bushwhacked) wife and mother, a child care provider and, not a soccer mom, but a football, cheerleading, baseball, track, and drama mom! Now, a Bono wannabe! How could that happen?

I am reminded of the words to a beautiful hymn, "*Here I am, Lord, Is it I, Lord? I can hear You calling in the night. I will go, Lord, where You send me. I will hold Your people in my heart.*" I don't know much about Bono except what I

see on CNN. My kids had to tell me that he was the lead singer in U-2. One of them even gave me a CD. Now, let me tell you that U-2 is pretty good, but I don't want to be a part of a rock and roll band, I want to be Bono! I want to have the clout to be able to say to the Prime Minister of Canada, "Do the right thing!" and get \$150 million in return. I want to be able to appear before Congress and have them actually listen to me. (I have a sign above my computer that says, "*Don't ever confuse net worth with self-worth.*" Well, I'm not confusing the two, but I surely do know that, without the first one, you can't do much with the second.) It is because his voice speaks for so many, is heard by so many, that I wish I could be Bono.

I can't tell you how Bono first "discovered" the continent of Africa. Most of us don't pay much attention to newscasts about famine and AIDS. If we do, we say, "Such a shame," and go on about our own business. We might even send a check to some aid organization so that we can feel good about "helping with the situation." Or, we might send a shoebox full of toys and candy at Christmas. That is what I did, and that is when I had my epiphany! A shoebox with a doll and some hair bows, candy and a ball, changed my life when it went to a little boy named Emmanuel in Burkina Faso, West Africa.

Technically, it wasn't even my shoebox. It was filled with goodies chosen lovingly by Kaitlin, one of my day-care children. She wanted to write a note to the child who would be receiving her gift and so we did. She wished the child a Merry Christmas and wrote our return address in the off chance that she might hear back. We had no idea where that box would go and we certainly didn't imagine that a little boy would get the Barbie doll and hair bows in that GIRL box. It was, on my part, an exercise in teaching kindness, generosity, and selflessness during a holiday season where American children are often wrapped up in the "gimmies." Imagine our shock and surprise when an envelope came to us from West Africa. (We had to get on the computer to find out what and where Burkina Faso even was!)

The letter was from Emmanuel's father, Pasteur Larba Victor Sawadogo, of the village of Maceono. He conveyed his little boy's thanks for the gift and he told us about their village and his church. He included pictures of all of the family. We wrote back to him and began a two-year friendship which still goes strong today. His letter was one of thanks, but it was also a plea, a reaching out, in the hope of finding help and support for his people there. Over these two years I have discovered a man of such faith, a man who truly talks to God, who shares his wisdom and his prayers with a white woman half a world away. He knows my heart and he feels my pain and my struggles and he prays for me. This is a man who daily sees famine and the terrible epidemic of AIDS. His villagers walk miles to a water station to bring back jugs and jars of clean water. They lack food and the basic supplies that we so take for granted in this country. Their lives depend on rain and the duration of the rainy season.



Victor and I must rely on translations of our letters since he speaks only French and I speak none. A part of me wishes that someone else had received that first letter. Why? Because I am not Bono. I don't have a voice that can be heard.

So, what about Africa? What about Victor? I send gifts when I can. I no longer do Christmas shoeboxes but send to Victor's family instead. I send a few dollars with my letters since American dollars can get him many of the things that they need. Postal rates to West Africa are very high and often I pay more to send a box than the contents are worth. It undoubtedly would be better to send the money instead. But the point of the boxes is to say, "I care." To say to the children that they are valued and special and that someone loves them as God loves them. If I had not received that letter, just think what I would have missed! I am truly grateful to God that He gave me the incredible gift of Victor Sawadogo. Africa became real, became personal, when I accepted that gift!



IN THE FLOW

Jackie Sedwick

Bellingham, Washington

I am truly 'in the flow.'

My kitchen was afloat when I came downstairs
The sound of rushing water greeted me;
images flooded my mind.
The connector for my water filter
had disengaged.

Interesting.

I sopped and squeezed,
sopped and squeezed,
emptied and mopped.

I was alone in the damp quiet.

Is this how I do life?

I soak up all the information and experiences that I can,
and then I squeeze, "filter," retain only that
which I choose (I think),
and throw out the rest.

This cycle goes on endlessly replaying itself.

I think I'm learning something;

I believe that I am in control.

Then one day I encounter a word, a phrase, a look,
and up bubbles a piece of the refuse

I thought I had discarded.

It must have been stuck in the corner of
or under a mind flap.

It's water, only water.

My floors are clean, the fan is running,
my cabinets will dry, my pantry is rearranged.
I created all this just to clean my pantry?

My feet are water-pruned but dry,
the cats are fed, my sweatshirt is still on backwards,
my cup of tea is hot and smells wonderful.

Meditation takes many forms.

Life is good.

FALLING . . .

Mary Sullivan

Chicago, Illinois

I fell into a sea of black.

Here's how it happened.

I had just been at an assembly of all the Cenacle Sisters in the North American Province of our Congregation. We had come from New Jersey, New York, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Missouri, Texas, West Virginia, and Vancouver, Canada. We gathered in our Warrenville, Illinois Cenacle—about an hour's drive from the city of Chicago. Our four days of meetings were intense. We pondered the acts of our general chapter that had taken place in Rome just two months before. In depth, we pondered the meaning of community and how we are to live out community with each other. We discussed. But most importantly, we faith-shared—we spoke from our hearts, from our experiences of each other, from our prayer, from our relationship with our God.

Most everyone else flew home. Some drove. I, alone, went by train. By now I know the routine of train travel. I arrived an hour and a half ahead of my 10:30 evening train. I sat in the stuffy waiting room and worked on a crossword puzzle. Then all the senior citizens who were 62 and older (yours truly), families traveling with small children, groups who were together, and the disabled were invited into the next stuffy waiting room.

I put my puzzle book away and waited. When the next call is issued one must move swiftly from one's seat, through the room, along the tracks to one's particular coach car. Swiftness is the key to a good seat—or at least a seat somewhere in the car that one prefers.

This time, however, was different. The conductor firmly allowed onto the train only those who were traveling together. He wanted them to be able to sit with each other. It was a good idea. He assigned numbers and carefully checked that the groups stayed together.

He turned to me after his careful selection. "Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Here's your number." It was eleven.

I pulled up my suitcase and dragged it down the aisle. And that is when I fell into a sea of black. There were twenty-three Black Muslim women. They had just attended an Islamic convention and were on their way back to Philadelphia. I, a lone, white woman, was in their midst.

"Hello. I'm Mary."

My seatmate replied, "I'm Barbara."

That was the beginning of a community experience I had not expected. I had just spent five days pondering community, praying community, attempting community. Suddenly these women adopted me into their community. Throughout the whole trip they kept an eye on me—Did I feel sick? Did I have enough to eat? Was I in any kind of need?

Barbara told me her Muslim name. It is Tauhaedah, which means to believe in the oneness of God. She and I together praised God for the beautiful sunrise—I from my Psalms and

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she from the Koran. We spoke of peace and a loving God. We spoke of sharing and loving and trying and struggling. I felt as if the assembly was still happening to me.

At Philadelphia, Tauhaedah and I embraced and said good-bye. But it wasn't really a good-bye, for I had fallen into a sea of black. I now carried my Cenacle Sisters in Christ and my Black Muslim Sisters with me. We truly are all community.



HOLDING ON

*Cindy Yarbrough
Lakeway, Texas*

"I had a dream and I want it to be real," Mom said, her voice quivering.

Less than two months before, my dad had died unexpectedly. Since his death, I had begun calling my mom two or three times a week. Frequent phone calls were new, but shared grief had united us. Still, I dreaded the calls. Each time I picked up the telephone, I doubted I could muster the energy for a conversation.

"What was the dream?" I asked.

"I couldn't sleep all night," Mom said. "When I finally dozed off, I dreamed Clif was curled against me. We used to spoon like that."

"Uh huh," I said, unable to say more.

"My back was to him and his arm was around me." She fell silent and I could hear her crying.

"Oh, Mom," I said as my own tears spilled.

"I could *feel* him," she said. "He told me everything will be okay."

"It was a message from Daddy," I said, pretending I believed it.

"Do you think he came back to comfort me?" she asked.

"I do," I answered, and in that moment it was true.

"I could *feel* him," she repeated.

Maybe it was Mom's longing that had brought Daddy to her. Only two months after my dad's death, my ability to feel and smell him had faded. Although a sensory longing for him struck at unexpected times, my senses refused to cooperate. They insisted on real-time responses.

After Mom and I hung up, I sat on the bed with the bedspread pulled over my legs and floated back in time. I recalled the warmth of Daddy's strong, lean body when I curled in his lap as a child and sucked my thumb. I saw his crooked smile as he leaned down and whispered, "Taste good?" The scent of his Old Spice aftershave had soothed me almost as much as my thumb had, but I couldn't call up the scent. I pulled a shirt of Daddy's from my closet and sniffed. Nothing.

I'll have to buy a bottle.

That night I shifted on the bed so my body touched Bill's. "Uh oh," he said, code for sexual arousal.

"Don't say 'uh oh' at 10:30!" I scolded. We laughed.

We held hands for a few minutes. I concentrated on the feel of my hand tucked inside his larger one. This, I reminded myself, is fleeting.

STUCK IN THE FIFTIES

*Joyce Boatright
Houston, Texas*

I looked at Harleys today, and I signed up for a motorcycle rider safety course. For the first time in a long, long time, I felt alive.

There's a secret I've been harboring, maybe not very secretly, which is the feeling that my life is over and that nothing exciting is going to happen to me anymore, except someday I will die. I'm embarrassed to tell you this. During my mid-forties and into my mid-fifties I talked about feeling stuck. My marriage was over, my kid was grown, my job had peaked, and so had I. So at fifty-five, I decided to stop having birthdays until I hit sixty. I thought it was just too cute to stop at the double nickel. But even then fifty-five sounded old, and the truth is, I've been pining for my youth. I've felt aimless and afraid. No matter how I whistled in the wind, hopelessness scratched my back and sent shivers up my spine.

Today, I'm fifty-eight. I'm old. I'm diabetic. I'm scared. All the fun, exciting times I've experienced are relegated to memories and it's someone else's turn to be the pretty one, the smart one, the fearless one... the woman with great spirit. I'm stuck, and I don't like it. I want back my health, my energy, and my fearlessness. So I signed up for a motorcycle rider safety course to learn to maneuver a Harley, instead of riding on the back. When I die, I want to know that I died living, instead of watching from the sidelines, ruminating about the good old days.

This, then, is a turning point of some significance—even though, whenever I really do die in about thirty or forty years, this period will probably be distorted as my "midlife crazy." But I don't care—I'll be dead, so let them talk—just please, God, let them have something juicy to say!

FIRST DAYS IN DENVER

*Ann Cabot
Austin, Texas*

I stand again before a strange bread shelf
Whispering ... it's OK, it's OK,
Holding back the tears.
Bread! You'd think so common a thing
Would be the same in every place.
Why is this moving so hard?
Why is even the bread, lowly goddamned bread,
so strange?

I call up something from deep inside me
Something strong and brave
And reach out to the loaves
Looking for a new friend.



A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY: A QUESTION OF HAIR

*Louise McCormick Gibney
Washington, DC*

Whenever I think of the 60s, I think of hair. This critical time when I grew to adulthood was epitomized by the style of our locks: wild, free, untamed, unruly, and undisciplined. In 1966 I was young, newly married, full of hope and anger, and painfully naïve. As time has passed into the 1990s and beyond, my visions—along with my hair—have shortened.

Like many others of my generation, I was a student radical in the Age of Aquarius. With my waist-length hair streaming behind me, I marched, I protested, I sat-in, and I argued. I believed the System could be changed—immediately. I truly believed America's *status quo* was dangerous and should surrender to the power of thousands of young voices raised in tumultuous protest. I saw my short-haired and balding elders as stodgy, tired, and insensitive. Impatient for social justice, I envisioned a new world, created by the young. I embraced the Afros, pigtails, mustaches and beards of my peers as talismans of our unique vision.

Then the decade—and I—grew older. I birthed one child and adopted another. I returned to school. I divorced. I saw the escalation of the war in Viet Nam, the assassination of our heroes, and the need to feed my own hungry children. Suddenly, the very System that seemed so evil held the power to rescue me.

I cut my hair to shoulder-length, bought a suit, and got a job. I saw my friends in the Movement (no less dedicated but just as hungry) come in off the streets and enter offices. I felt my anger mellow under the influence of a growing economic comfort. My fury diffused as I encountered harsh realities about business truths. Mothering my young sons, my tedious but dependable job, graduate school assignments, and volunteer social works filled my days and competed for my energy. I seldom slept.

The 1990s moved the nation's climate sharply to the right. My body rounded. My hair turned from dark to silver, streaked with white—memories of past crises. Now, it's my patience that grows short. While my political dreams remain as committed to change as ever, my friends and I engage in vigorous debate over coffees, not police barricades. My social involvement is more individualized. I do counseling; I don't organize protests. I rediscovered my lost artistic voice and jumped back in wonder each time my work or my writing sold or was appreciated.

Now the new millennium is upon us. Times and I have changed further still. I discovered my faith in the future in the voice of my greatest gift—an inquisitive, trusting grandchild. I worried for his future and tried to regain my hope as I tearfully watched the Twin Towers and countless innocents fall to the ground. I marched through a presidential election, unique in its divisiveness. I saw warring factions of religion face off against each other, all in the name of God. I trembled in my boots and wavered in my dreams. Yet, I am an American, dedicated to my county and its twin goals of love for its neighbors and equality for its peoples. I remain steadfast. I hope and pray my land will rediscover the strength and courage of our pioneer days. What is my alternative—will I have to shave my head?

RESCUE...NOT

*Doris Anne Koop-Benner
Richardson, Texas*

Several years ago, I was a CPR Instructor. When I taught, my one regret was that I couldn't tell the students an inspirational story of having saved someone's life. I didn't realize how desperate I was to have this Good Samaritan tale until one day when my husband and I decided to go to the lake.

As we pulled into the parking lot where our boat was in storage, I spotted a man lying on the ground with a helpless-looking crowd gathered around him. I sprang from the car and rushed toward them like Florence Nightingale coming to save him.

Everything suddenly seemed to be happening in slow motion as I approached them shouting, "Don't worry because I know CPR!" They turned to me as one and yelled (almost in unison), "THAT'S JUST GREAT, BUT HE ONLY HAS A BROKEN LEG!"

Embarrassing? You bet your life!

THE COLORS OF PASSION

*Deirdre McEwan
Terrace, BC, Canada*

*Dedicated to my daughter, Rebecca,
who seeks out every possible color of life and dances
between the changing hues.*

Tonight I was driving home from having brought my daughter the Victoria's Secret blouse she purchased on eBay. It was too big, so I had tried to alter it to fit her, as she was going out to a friend's birthday celebration. Yes, it was a long drive into town, and yes, I was exhausted and it was cold and rainy, but hey, don't you remember what it is to be 19, wanting to feel and look remarkable, wanting to see that reflected back to you in someone's eyes? So, I spent two hours carefully chalking the pin line we had fitted, adjusting tensions and stitch lengths for both chiffon and satin in a very vibrant spring green, that new-leaf green I so love each May, the month she was born. It was a difficult alteration, but I think I got it just right—not too tight, but snug enough for confidence and feminine enhancement! She was so excited when she came out to get it from me, so full of enthusiasm, that I was glad I had ignored my aching lungs and exhausted body and just made myself do it.

Before leaving the house I had hurriedly dressed, looking for something cozy because it was so cold and windy. I found a soft pink turtleneck I haven't worn in over a year. After the delivery, as I was driving through town, I was just passing by our poshest furniture store, when I saw it—a delicate pink balloon blown out into the dark intersection, barely touching down. At first I was startled and slowed the car to a stop, half expecting to see someone chasing it—a child perhaps—but it was much too late for that. I watched as it was lifted on invisible currents, dancing and whirling, then gently blew down the street, away from me into the shadows. I felt this sensation of wistfulness, both for myself and for my daughter who is now a young woman, just about to launch out on her

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own. I remembered the pink softness of her first little nightie, the embroidered rosebud on the corners of her crocheted bonnet. Then I felt as if I were watching some aspect of myself being taken from my life by forces beyond my control, this invisible force that had suddenly lifted my pre-accident life from me and left me sitting here, gripping the steering wheel, frightened and wondering what of myself remains. Seeing that pink balloon drifting into the darkness, I felt as if I were watching my hope for bringing forth my own passion spiral away toward the train tracks and the darkened oblivion of lost dreams and broken abilities.

What remains of my passion? Truthfully, post accident, I'm not sure. Most days find me just hanging on. I'm still praying for my children to find their own way, and hope to be around to celebrate the journey. Each day now, I stretch my consciousness away from fear toward simple mindful living. There is a quietness to my life now, a necessary simplicity in this tiny cabin beside the lake that brings me the rest I so need, with my companions of swans, Canada geese, my two cats and little wee dog. The pink balloon of what I thought my life passions were just blew across the intersection of my life...should I have gotten out and tried to chase it down? Driven the car after it? I could have videotaped it and lived in a state of constant rewind, an option that I suddenly realize with startling clarity I have been doing over and over in my mind. I see in this unexpected moment of epiphany that I have allowed that car to crash into my life over and over again.

Perhaps this pink balloon, so ethereal and incongruous in the cold night air, with its unpredictable, lilting, wind-breathed path, has been blown into my life to remind me of the only possible way I can keep the remaining embers of my passion kindled: by letting go of the past and simply riding the precious currents of each and every spirit-breathed moment of now.

Somewhere tonight my daughter is dancing and laughing, full of life and looking achingly beautiful in spring green, while I wipe the tears from my cheeks and offer my softest pink prayer of gratitude that although my life is no longer what it was, I am still here at the intersection of what is and what is becoming.

THE TEXAS CITY DISASTER OF 1947

*Sue Bilich
Austin, Texas*

"Susie, it's time to wake up. If you don't get out of bed you'll be late for school."

"OK, Momma. I'm already up and ready to eat breakfast. Is Jerry up yet?"

I'm from Texas City, Texas. That's where I spent the first 18 years of my life. I'd say my family and I were pretty lucky on April 17, 1947, because that's the day my town of 35,000 people blew up. All of the major radio networks and newspapers around the world carried the story: FRENCH SHIP *LE GRAND CHAMP* EXPLODES IN TEXAS CITY, TEXAS, KILLING OVER 500 PEOPLE. That's how I remember it.

I was 12 years old and my brother Jerry was 10. My parents, Charlie and Celia Lerman, owned Clarks Department Store (named after my uncle who owned the store before my father bought it). Daddy had already gone to work. The store was on Texas Avenue, only a few blocks away from the docks where the explosion happened. I remember how the black cloud of smoke with tinges of blue and gold billowed above. The blast was felt at least 50 miles away. People said they could feel windows in their homes and business rattle.

When Momma was driving Jerry and me to Danforth Elementary School that fateful morning, I asked if we could go watch the fire. Momma said no, and it's good that she did. The school was overcrowded, so Jerry and I were in the morning sessions while other children attended the afternoon sessions. During World War II we were taught how to save ourselves if there was an attack and our city was bombed. Everyone thought that it was possible because Texas City is a port city with oil refineries, the tin smelter, and a sulphur plant, and German subs had been spotted in the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean. The children were taught to hide under their desks if there was an attack. Everyone in the city was told to draw black curtains at night if there was an air raid siren. It wasn't uncommon to hear sirens from fire trucks because little fires were a common occurrence in refineries. April 17, 1947 was different.

The French ship *The Grand Camp* was not allowed into the Houston Ship Channel because its cargo of deadly fertilizer was smoldering. Instead, the cargo ship was diverted to the port of Texas City, where it exploded. When the ship blew up, a chain reaction occurred. In our school the black boards blew off the walls. I was in a music class sitting at my desk one minute, and an instant later I and everyone in the room was under a desk. My teacher was very brave and knew just what to do. We left the room single file and walked down the hall to the far staircase. The one next to our room had collapsed and we couldn't go down it safely. Once all the children were out of the school, we waited on the playground for our parents to pick us up. I don't know how, but Jerry and I found each other and Mom and Dad found us.

I'm from a very big family—there were 27 of us (aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents). It's all a blur now, but somehow Daddy and our uncles drove us all to Galveston where we stayed with his sister and brother-in-law. Daddy and Mom went back to Texas City and worked as volunteers in the high-school gym, which had been converted to a morgue. They helped identify people, since both my parents were very active in the community and knew a great number of people.

The store that my parents owned was completely destroyed, but they were able to retrieve blankets and sheets to hand out to anyone who needed them. It took years for people to get their lives back together. My parents rebuilt their store, but every time a fire siren was heard, people literally went outside and looked toward the refineries. On the fiftieth anniversary of the Texas City



Disaster, people from all over came back to attend a dedication.

Though both of my parents are dead now, they were an inspiration, not only to me, but to so many people who lived and grew up in that town. I go back to my high school reunions (Class of 1953), and even though so many of my schoolmates have passed away, there is still laughter and hugs and kisses. We're so grateful to have lived in a time like "Happy Days," and everyone still remembers the day our town exploded.

POWERLESS

*Mary Sullivan
Chicago, Illinois*

Dish TV has two remotes
one for power, to turn on and off
one for control, to change channels
It takes a while
to learn and understand
the difference
I push the wrong one
the screen grows snowy
sound rasps and grates
Frantic I push buttons
No change
the picture and sound still lost
My older brother sits before me
weak, cowed
measured by a dispassionate social worker
Confined to a wheelchair
bound to an oxygen tank
he says, "I'm scared, Mary."
So I stay
sit beside him
listen to the rasp of the machine
There are no buttons I can press
to change, to control
to restore what once was
I am powerless

DANCING LIKE NO ONE IS WATCHING

*Mary Ann Reynolds
Austin, Texas*

It happens. One day you want to live your life again. When the pain and despair of incomprehensible loss have run their course, or at least moved over on the bench enough for you to feel something else, you realize that it's time to give yourself back to life.

I remember this choice every time I walk into a dance studio. I practice ecstatic dance. There are no techniques, just a variety of music and rhythms in the form of a wave. It's about surrendering to the dance, letting myself be danced, becoming the dance.

Others come for their own reasons. For me, it's about moving to music for 90 minutes because I can and because it gives me pleasure. It's about letting my body instinctively, creatively, playfully, seriously respond to the music with all I've got.

I don't care what it looks like. I don't have a so-called dancer's body. I am 51 years old and a grandmother, and if hearing this inspires even an inkling of a thought about how I should be acting my age, I cheerfully invite you to stuff it! If you could be in my dancing body, you'd know better.

The most fun comes when I dance like no one is watching. You know what? No one is watching! They are all doing their own dance and are too engaged with that to be watching me! I invite you to imagine a song with a four/four beat. *Bam-bam-bam-bam*, over and over. What would you do with that? Let me tell you, dear ones, I can do a lot. I can bump and I can jump. I can spiral and twirl, slither and slide. I can dance with my fingers only, or with my entire body, everything in motion, holding nothing back.

When I dance, my identity becomes fluid, and I know no limits, and I channel what comes up for me, in that moment. Now I am a voodoo priestess at midnight, triumphing over evil spirits. Now I am Gene Kelly, dancing in the rain. Now I am a rowdy cowgirl, two-stepping with my pardner around the floor. Now I am Zorba, on the beach. I am an Arabian belly dancer, Cinderella at the ball, a high-kicking showgirl, a whirling dervish. I am a flower blooming, a breeze, thunder; I am a planet, an atom, a quark.

My life fills up my skin, from head to toe, from fingertip to fingertip. I am centered in myself. Sometimes grief comes up during the dance. It flows through me, and then it's gone. Will it ever end? I don't know, but I'm thankful there's something else.

Dancing lets me experience a whole lot of life in a relatively short period of time, and when the dance is over, I am exhausted, exuberant in spirit, and ready to center myself in stillness. Mostly I am grateful. I have been lucky enough to let life use me up just one more time.

HAIKU

*Annabelle Bailey
Rocky Point, New York*

Attic memory
lithe woman in yoga pose
now steps gingerly

MY PICTURE SHOW

*Lucy Ann Albert
La Mesa, California*

Yesterday I had a party at my house. One of my guests was studying a photo on the wall. "Is that you?" he asked, pointing to my wedding portrait. I'm in my silvery satin dress, looking radiant as only a bride can.

I smiled. "Why, yes," I said, miffed he hadn't recognized me. Was I that changed? Didn't it look like me? That picture was taken 50 years ago.

We studied the photo together, and I marveled along with him. Was that really me? I looked foreign—ethnic they would say nowadays. I never felt ethnic. I always felt very American. But looking into those large, dark eyes, I saw a foreign sadness, too. No, I decided, that wasn't really me. That was a young woman long ago, who now lives only on my wall.

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I have many family photos on my walls, arranged to show my three children at various ages, stages, and occasions. I chose a different space for each child, and selected the best snapshots to document their growth.

My daughter Vivian is shown from her chubby start, through an awkward adolescence to an exhilarating adulthood. She was like a filly chomping at the bit.

Alan, middle child, 19 months her junior, was close behind in every scene, handsome and self-contained from birth.

Larry, who came along five years later, was always struggling to keep up, to belong. Their inner worlds were so different from one another.

Vivian was continually striving to attain the natural composure and confidence of her brothers. "I wish I always knew what I wanted, the way they do," she would complain to me.

In the narrow space opposite my entryway is a composite of my children and their spouses, all in their 40s. Vivian gazes thoughtfully aloof; her swarthy husband Moshany is typically excited, almost angry. My two sons are laughing, standing side by side with large mugs of steaming coffee in their hands, their identical stance and gestures revealing the family resemblance. Alan's wife, Carolyn, has her head thrown back in a pose of unusual abandon. Those photos most resemble my kids today, so it pleases me to see them as I enter or leave my house.

In my hallway, a series of full-length shots of Alan and Carolyn show them before they were married. We were walking barefoot in the sand along Del Mar Beach, and even in these photos you can feel the rhythm of their togetherness. Both have short black hair in the photo, but now Alan has lost most of his, and Carolyn's is gray—so she dyes it.

I had photos of my youngest son Larry with his girlfriend walking along the path in the Arboretum. When he visited me later with a different girlfriend, I took the earlier picture down. Three girlfriends later, that space is still reserved.

I have a montage of Vivian taken when she was 28. She would often visit me in the house I moved to after I left her father. Seeing her one morning looking so fresh and alive, I was startled by her beauty and vitality and wanted to keep that forever. She put on a new red and white striped sundress, and we sat out in the back yard, talking and laughing while I snapped pictures. The photos were all so different. I couldn't decide which was best, so I kept them all together in one frame.

I have a formal family portrait of my husband, me, and our three children taken thirty years ago. That photo started me on the course of my divorce. I took one look at my false, simpering smile, and was horrified by what I had become. I looked empty, a vacant matron satisfied with a mere shell of myself. I felt as though I had poured out all that was me in the process of nourishing my kids and my husband. That's when I began a steady and determined search for my own identity.

I look at these photos now and marvel that I really lived through all that. I wasn't aware of all that was happening then; I was too much a part of it. In the swirl of everyday family life, I only saw each day, each season, not our growing selves. The current of life swept us all along. I view these pictures now with wonder. Is that what it was like? It looks different on the wall—distant, effortless, like stills from a silent movie. There's no pain, no anxiety there, only rewards and satisfactions.

Beneath the photos, I have a plant in my hall, a croton, with large yellow and green striped leaves. As it grows, the bottom leaves drop off, and three new ones emerge above. I can tell when it's dry, because the leaves flatten out sideways. After I water it, they turn upward again. But I've never seen them move. Once I decided to watch closely right after I had watered it. But the leaves wouldn't move as I watched, and I grew impatient. Passing by later that day, I clearly saw those leaves reaching upward again. Why is change afraid of being watched?

Peering into the faces in my photos, I recall the emotions behind them, which the camera doesn't reveal. Larry was a sulking toddler the day I took a beautiful shot of him gazing pensively off into the distance. As a teenager, Vivian was angry when her picture was taken and hid behind her thick blond hair. I now treasure the Polaroid of my two sons wrestling on our living room floor. I loved to see them scuffle as I had scuffled long before with my brother. But my boys were out for blood. My photos are a thin film, which my flow of memories keeps seeping through.

FINDING ORDER IN MY CHAOS

Robin Edgar

Charlotte, North Carolina

The other day, an acquaintance told me that, when she gets stressed or needs to unwind, she shuts her dishwasher door and proceeds to wash the sink full of dirty dishes by hand. Somehow, she said, the one-on-one contact with the suds and grease helps her to relax. Reverting back to this childhood chore, the automatic scrubbing motion becomes a form of meditation. Although she may not have always been so keen on doing it as a child, she now welcomes the instant peace of mind, or perhaps mindlessness, that it brings.

When my friend mentioned it to her sister, it turned out that her sibling did the same thing, only she pulls out the ironing board, because that was her designated family chore. This got me thinking about what I do to bring order to the chaos in my life. The first thing that came to mind was my underwear drawer.

Whenever I have too much to do in a short amount of time and do not know where to begin, I throw my hands up in the air and pull out my underwear drawer. Dumping it on the bed, I sit down by the disorganized heap of helter-skelter straps and spandex and begin to take charge, one item at a time. Sorting my bras and panties by color, I fold them neatly back into the compact space like pieces of a puzzle.



Much like a mathematical equation, the amount of time it stays in its newly restored order depends on the amount of chaos in my life. If I am sailing through my day, my lingerie stays, for the most part, in sync with my even keel. On the other hand, if my world starts spinning with too many appointments, classes, and dinner dates, I find myself running from room to room, trying to remember what I went there to accomplish in the first place. The clean laundry is shoved in a last minute attempt in the direction of my dresser and, once again, my underwear drawer reflects my chaotic state.

Before long, I realize that it is time to sort my dainties again and all is right with the world. It is good to know I have this system to fall back on, although I worry I might feel the need one day to straighten out someone else's underwear drawer. That is where I'll "drawer" the line!



MY FIRST BUSINESS VENTURE

*Diana McDaniel
Austin, Texas*

When I was a child growing up in a small Central Texas town, one of my greatest pleasures was accompanying my mother to Schreiners department store. Schreiners had a wonderful fabric department and a whole table full of fascinating pattern books. Since my mother made all of my clothes, I loved to have some input into what I would be wearing. After choosing a pattern, we would wander among the bolts of material, looking and doing a lot of touching, until we found just the right fabric.

One of our excursions during the summer of 1948 opened up a whole new world to me. I discovered a new section of the pattern book—dolls and doll clothes. I was about eleven years old at the time. Since I grew up standing beside the sewing machine, watching my mother and grandmother construct things for themselves and for me, I had been sewing simple things for a couple of years. However, I'm sure my mother had her doubts when I announced that I wanted to make a doll and doll clothes. After all, this was a lot more complicated than making a simple pair of shorts or hemming a dish towel. However, she humored me and we spent a great deal of time thumbing through the pattern book deciding just which pattern to buy, then picking out what we would need to complete the project.

With the aid of my mother and grandmother, I struggled through the process of constructing and dressing that first doll. And, since that was so much fun, it led to another shopping expedition and another doll. Soon I had created and dressed baby dolls, little girl dolls, brother and sister dolls, and stuffed animals.

One of my favorite dolls was "Little Lulu." A popular cartoon character of the 1940s, Little Lulu's outstanding feature was her long dark sausage curls. This was before the days of hair spray. The pattern recommended using gum arabic as a stiffener for the yarn curls. After some pondering and several telephone calls, we finally located gum arabic at the local pharmacy and Little Lulu's hairdo was complete.

Our house was beginning to get a little crowded with the addition of all of these dolls. It was also becoming apparent that in order to support my doll habit, I needed some income. My father owned an appliance store next door to our home. I don't remember who came up with the idea, but before long there were my dolls tucked among the washers and dryers in his display window. They actually sold, which was quite a morale booster for me. I felt such a sense of accomplishment that I immediately went out and bought more fabric and manufactured more dolls.

As so often happens with small ground-floor businesses, however, I soon discovered that I was just breaking even and sometimes even going in the hole, which I found really discouraging. My father, who as the owner of a small town business could empathize with my cash flow problem, invested \$10 to help my little business along and once again I went into production.

I don't remember just what brought a close to my venture. I suppose junior high school with all of its distractions—girl friends, social activities, and boys—began to consume more of my time. At any rate, the doll business gradually came to a halt and I went on to other things.

One of my dolls, thanks to my mother, is still in the family. She is an antebellum doll—a cloth replica of the popular china doll. For years she sat atop the big GE radio in my mother's back bedroom. Now she sits on the couch in my study.

Sometimes I wonder if somewhere there might be one or two of my dolls still around. Many years have passed and the little girls who played with them are probably grandmothers now, just as I am. My antebellum doll may be the only survivor. Perhaps, though, there is another grandmother somewhere who will chance upon an old doll packed away in a box or trunk. If so, I hope the doll that I had so much fun making will cause her to pause and reflect upon carefree days in another time and place.

A MOMENT OF INSIGHT

*Linda Jones
Austin, Texas*

There once was a woman who stayed mad at her own mother for most of the time she was growing up and even for 20 years after the poor woman's death. And, let me tell you, there were plenty of really good reasons for her to be mad! But still, she'd been there, done that. She was ready to move on.

Then one weekend during her fifty-fifth year on this planet she went to a writing retreat that was about examining lifelines. The exceptionally skilled facilitator guided the

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women though some powerful imagery exercises. One was to tell their name and the name of who they came from (their mother) and the name of who they came from (their grandmother), and so on, for as far back as they knew. This woman knew only her mother's name. That's as far back as she could go. She was sad.

There once was a woman who rode home from that retreat through the deliciously beautiful Texas Hill Country. She stopped to enjoy a bubbling creek by the side of a country road under the sparkling clear blue sky. She took deep breaths of the cool, crisp, and refreshing spring air. She sat down on a warm rock with her legs bent at the knees and drawn close up. When she looked down, the sunlight was reflecting off the water such that it looked like the creek was flowing out of the root chakra at the base of her spine. She lifted her face to the sun and felt the warmth of its kiss pour into her being through the crown chakra at the top of her head, and through her body, and then into the water to connect with the earth in an endless energy flow. As she felt the universal life force that originates in the heavens flow through all the chakras of her body and on with the creek she felt the unmistakable love and support of all her nameless maternal ancestors.

There once was a woman who reveled in these few moments of pure joy—the joy of being alive—and feeling the love of all those who came before her revealed in Mother Nature—who is indeed the Mother of us all.

PORTRAIT OF ELLIE

*Arvinell McClaren
Austin, Texas*

Her face has all the character lines
That one face can possibly hold
Her hands are arthritic and stiff;
Disease has added to the toll.

She sits slumped motionless in her wheelchair;
While a spot in the near distance holds her stare.
Suddenly, there's a small movement in that direction
Her eyes brighten and she becomes aware.

The pace of the action picks up quickly
The movement increases to a splash
The fish breaks the surface of the water;
Determination now consumes her face.

With a purpose that therapy cannot emulate,
She struggles with the fins and removes the hook.
She starts to envision that fish on her dinner plate
And holds him up so the world can look.

The years that bring weathered lines to a face,
The problems and pains that young humans fear,
Cannot lessen the vitality renewed in the heart
Each time a fisherwoman rolls out to the pier.

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