

True Words

from *Real Women*



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

Edited by Mary Jo Doig

May 2007

A Letter from the Editor

There is a fascinating word I have loved since the moment I heard it a few years ago: *storycatcher*. Many of you will recognize it as the title of Christina Baldwin's recent book, which speaks to the need to make sense of our lives "through the power and practice of story."

For me the word *storycatcher* conjures up the extraordinarily lovely image of a beautiful, fragile butterfly gracefully fluttering nearby on a warm summer or crisp fall day. I have a strong urge to reach out to gently cup the creature in my hand and keep the moment alive and with me forever, yet I know that's not reasonable. As a storycatcher, though, I am moved by another strong urge: to grasp the moment or story by reaching out for pen and paper, or my computer keyboard, where I can record it. A story I can keep forever—for I am a storycatcher, as is each of us in Story Circle Network.

It requires courage and commitment to tell many of our stories. It takes belief that our stories will be held in respect. It requires a mechanism that allows us to be who we are individually in the context of who we are collectively. Here in the Story Circle Network we are deeply committed to these things. Through story we tell each other who we really are and in so doing, we find the people with whom we belong, those who become our true community.

Baldwin tells us that our stories not only bring us together, they bring us home. We are so gifted in this Story Circle Network place by being able to access what Baldwin states is "sacred common ground for each other's stories."

On the following pages are stories and poems that are beautiful explorations of the writing life, of place and home, of our past and present, of our family, friends, and acquaintances, of looking within, of nature and seasons, and a bit of enlightening travel wisdom.

Kindly know that it has been both humbling and awesome for me to spend time with your words over many of my recent weekends. In the processes of reading, discerning themes, editing, formatting, and layout, I have frequently felt so fully infused with the beauty, power, and wisdom of the words you are about to read, that I have returned to work on Monday mornings feeling as refreshed and renewed as if I'd had a holiday by a solitary seashore—one of my most cherished places.

And, now, dear SCN storycatchers, here are your words recorded for always upon our very own "sacred common ground."

Mary Jo Doig, Editor

With Thanks:

My heart is filled with deep gratitude for so many people in SCN. Jane Ross, editor of Story Circle Journal and Board member, is my cherished mentor. Peggy Moody, Executive Director, is always there in a heartbeat for whatever I ask or need. Susan Albert, who had the wisdom and initiative to give birth to this incredible organization, is an awesome role model for me. Danelle Sasser and Jane Ross kindly offered their highly skilled eyes to proof these pages. And to each writer with whom I have worked: you are the heart and soul of it all for me. Over the years, in my writing circles, in the Journal and now here in the Anthology, it is and has been, quite simply, the deepest pleasure to work with every one of you.

About the Editor:

Mary Jo Doig travels her life's journey with pen or keyboard always nearby. In early 2001 she joined SCN and, finding it both sacred ground and true community, began to tell her stories. She has been a member of e-circle 2 since 2001, belonged to (the then-risky writer's) e-circle 9 from 2001-2003, has been facilitator of e-circle 7 since 2003, and *True Words* editor for the Story Circle Journal since 2004. She works full time as a human services professional and does not work often enough on the memoir she began during her two years of solitude in a tiny mountain cabin. She loves reading, writing, editing, cooking, quilting, knitting and—most especially—being single, proud mom to three great, grown children: Chip, Polly, and Susan.

True Words from Real Women

True Words from Real Women is an annual publication of the Story Circle Network. 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.

Editor: Mary Jo Doig
anthology07@storycircle.org

Editorial Address:

Story Circle Anthology
PO Box 500127,
Austin TX 78750-0127
ISSN: 1093-7528

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Membership Rates

One Year \$35 US
\$45 Canada and Mexico
\$50 elsewhere

Foreign Memberships: International
Postal Money Order *only*, please

Back Issues: Back issues are available either as first-run or photocopies. 1–9 issues: \$5 each; 10 or more, \$3 each. Add postage as follows: \$1 for 1 issue, \$3.50 for 2–5 issues, \$6 for 6+ issues

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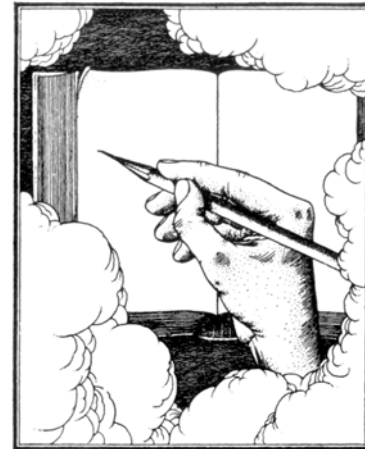
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The Writing Life...



Earth Tones
Sandra Shackelford
 Green Bay WI

I stand like the Colossus of Rhodes, both legs straddling a fallen tree. I look down upon this uprooted sacrifice, choose my place, and sit. Most of the tree's bark is gone. A single scab remains. It is covered with pale, blue/green lichen and fringed around the outer edge in lacy white.

I place my hands upon my knees and turn them palms up. I close my eyes, relax, and inhale. I sit motionless for a long time. My silence is prayer.

When I open them, the sun's intensity stings them. Horse flies and yellow jackets, drawn by my sweat, explore my socks. A curious squirrel watches me. Its beady eyes are full of questions.

Here in the woods I am a sojourner sent on a mission. I reach into my pocket and retrieve the slip of paper each of the members of our writing group received at our last meeting. I read the word. Treetops.

I came here to write about treetops, to be inspired by this church of my childhood. Growing up, Baird's Creek was my school and my playground. I learned many lessons here.

I learned to swim in the creek. I was five when my brothers taught me how. They shoved me in.

"I can't swim," I yelled, my mouth filling with water.

They laughed. Turned their backs. "Well, drown then."

I didn't, of course. I dog-paddled to shore. That day I learned a lesson I still remember. Sometimes it's either sink or swim. And also, sometime, saving yourself requires retreat as well as action—like today, having taken this solo walk through the woods, a slip of paper folded in my pocket, traveling a path others have also traveled.

I look up, amazed at the height of century-old trees, their branches writhing like snakes in Medusa's hair. Through the broken canopy of leaves, sunlight falls on the forest floor.

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I open my notebook and write. Words come quick, skitter like pebbles across the quiet surface of a secluded pond. I write one. Others follow.

moving through
shadowy depth
complexity swims
gasps
arriving breathless
on the surface.

noise
intrudes on
silence
music played by
insect fiddlers
rises and falls
sharp
as a surgeon's blade.

I write with permanent ink, smiling. Nothing is permanent. Neither treetops or the life of the woman who sits pondering such things.

One day all will be
gone
to humus
like trees
and toppled elders
rotting on the ground
gone
like leaves
falling
gone
like sunny afternoons
spent
looking up
gone
like childhood.

Soon this domed cathedral will be transformed. The seasonal miracle will slip on regal raiment in shades of gold and rust and crimson red. Autumn's cloak will cover these beloved woods, protecting the insect and creatures who take shelter here, burrowed in sleep, curled against the cold.

SCN's Mission: The Story Circle Network (SCN) is dedicated to helping women share the stories of their lives and to raising public awareness of the importance of women's personal histories. We carry out our mission through publications, a website, classes, workshops, writing and reading circles, and woman-focused programs. Our activities empower women to tell their stories, discover their identities through their stories and choose to be the authors of their own lives.

Awakening This Morning

Valerie Lima
Fayetteville AR

On January 1st our e-circle facilitator asked if our writing needs were being met. From that I realized I tried to write polished responses to the prompts last year, and this limited my replies.

A response from Joyce was to, "just do it," while Lisa suggested the analogy of a playground, "a place of exploration as vast as our imagination can make it," rather than taking it too seriously. My awakening, just this morning, was I did just that—I was following my father's admonition: "If it can't be done right then don't do it at all."

As a child I was afraid to try new things for fear of being corrected or scolded at. Growing up, I worked on that, seeing it as a constriction that impeded my attempts at life rather than encouraging me to attempt more. I have been successful, going places within and without myself without worrying about doing it *right*.

This morning I realized, as I wrote my reply to my e-circle, that writing in public is fairly new to me and I had not broken free of my father's injunction to it. Not that I thought what I was presenting was perfect, but that I unconsciously didn't want to let spontaneous writing flow out for viewing. In writing for myself and a local memoir-writing group, I start with first thoughts and then polish. With the e-circle I didn't follow through. I organized and mulled before responding to the prompts, frequently never getting around to responding.

So my awakening this morning has prompted me to respond with first thoughts as if I am in a playground running from slick slide to monkey bars to green turtle bobble to swaggering up swinging ladders to turning cartwheels—all while laughing and singing and enjoying myself. Then, helped by comments from my group, I hope to return to *Within Four Walls* and polish the piece in order to resubmit it. This is not a major awakening, of which I have numerous, but a timely one with insight for me that occurred today.

The Language of Stenography

Carol A. Feder
Wimberley TX

It's an unusual language written on a machine with unmarked typewriter-like keys perched atop a three-pronged tripod. A stream of paper silently spills out indecipherable hieroglyphics in blue ink. The symbols appear to be letters of the English language alphabet, but they in no way resemble English language words. It's called a stenograph machine. I am a court reporter who can write and read the language of stenography. The English language is my first language. Stenography, a machine-written language, is my second.

Up close and personal, those written hieroglyphics bring about curious looks. "Do you really know how to read that stuff?"

Throughout the years, designers and engineers have

refined a court reporter's ability to write at speeds of 225 words per minute, and often much faster. Thanks to their inventive midnight madness, I can write the sound of each word, each syllable as I hear it. For each sound, there is a specific combination of letters to reach for, and hopefully hit correctly. Sometimes one key at a time is pressed to represent an entire word. More often lots of keys all in one keystroke. To add to the complicated mix, each sound is written differently with my left hand versus my right hand. One finger slip can make all the difference between clarity and confusion. Reading back through finger slips, for the most part, is not too difficult. Sort of like reading through your own messy handwriting, you can figure it out. I've often made people sound better anyway when reading back their testimony.

As I'm sitting there reporting the job, often dreaming about a warm white-sand beach holiday with a frosty tropical drink in my hand—to while away the day, of course—it's not necessary to fully comprehend whatever obscure, technical, or foreign-language word that I am hearing. But just like standing up in front of the class during a fifth-grade spelling bee, it's imperative that I correctly spell that word. The English language is over-ripe with look-alikes, sound-alikes, same meanings, opposite meanings. Homonyms. Synonyms. Antonyms. A game of Stenography Scrabble of sorts. All to be sorted out and transcribed into an intelligent, cohesive transcript introduced as evidence in a legal case.

To write word-by-word is to write verbatim. To the rest of the world, the term verbatim is a fairly non-confrontational concept. To a court reporter, it means grasping sound-by-sound speech that is wildly flowing in rapid-fire succession for hours on end, and usually in a confrontational legal setting. And that includes speech of incomplete, incomprehensible, incompatible thoughts, words, and sentence structures.

The world of court reporting and its language of stenography is unusual and unique, and quite an open invitation for questions. When I am innocently asked, "Do you really know how to read that stuff?" especially after a day of garbled testimony, I would jokingly love to say, "No, I can't read this, take a look at this, can you read this for me?"

There are beautiful days though when I relax into the rhythm of speech patterns for the job at hand, like playing a silent musical instrument, making it sing and dance and produce as I proudly show off its mysterious performance. It becomes an exquisite extension of my skills, my fingers, my livelihood.

This 28-year game of Stenography Scrabble has given heart, soul, spirit, courage, bones, breath, and muscle to my creative writing. Words decorate my life. Words define my profession. Words color my creativity. It has been a natural transition of capturing other people's speech to capturing my own words, carefully designing them onto paper.

I will forever think, write, and type in English, as well as in stenography. So, don't be surprised if I slip into my second language some sleepy day and write something that resembles *eu pm a wraoeur*. (Translation: "I am a writer.")

Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are

Pat LaPointe
Prospect Heights IL

After two weeks of nearly sleepless nights I was pretty much at my wits end. The crazy dreams and nightmares all seemed to take on the same tone and had so many similarities, but trying to figure out the meanings was driving me mad.

There were the nights that had me reviewing all the activities of the day: laundry, cooking, running errands. There were the ones that had me at my parent's house helping with some project or fixing their financial records. There were also nights filled with reliving some conversation I had with my husband or one of my daughters. I always seemed to be doing something. No wonder I woke up still feeling exhausted.

After a while I came to realize that all these dreams had one, most frustrating image in common. Just before I would wake up I would see a black curtain. As I looked at the curtain I could see it opening ever so slightly, giving a hint that someone or something was behind it. It was most frustrating because of how quickly it would close, leaving me wondering what was there.

One morning, I mentioned these dreams to my best friend, someone who is truly my soul mate. We went over the content of the dreams. She commented that it appeared they all reflected the more mundane aspects of my life.

Then she posed the all-important question: "When was the last time you wrote anything?"

I honestly couldn't remember exactly, but I thought it was about two weeks ago. I went on and on about how busy I had been with tasks that left me little time to be creative.

My friend became adamant that the only way I could rid myself of these disturbing (and often boring) dreams was to begin to write again. I looked at her, somewhat puzzled and asked, "What has that got to do with anything? I don't get it."

She replied, "It's simple. The curtain is you yourself, blocking something important. Behind it is your creativity, your *writer within* and it desperately wants to get out if you'd let it."

Although not totally convinced she was right, I went to work, writing for hours each day for a week. When I last saw the image of the curtain in a dream it was a beautiful sheer blue and was billowing in the wind. There was nothing behind it.

"Storytelling is at the heart of life... In finding our own story, we assemble all the parts of ourselves. Whatever kind of mess we have made of it, we can somehow see the totality of who we are and recognize how our blunderings are related. We can own what we did and value who we are, not because of the outcome but because of the soul story that propelled us."

~Marion Woodman~

Place and Home...



One Dawning Moment

Susan Myrick
Glencoe IL

One yawning and quiet dawn when I was just a girl, I woke to my first gasping view of the high mountains of the western United States. In an instant the American West hooked my heart and forever set it to Mountain Time. I have spent a lifetime returning.

I was just 12-years-old when my grandmother and grandfather included me on their driving vacation to Idaho to visit my uncle—their son—and his family. We left our homes in St. Louis before sunrise on a summer morning to drive the wide-open and speedy roads through Kansas to the eastern edge of the Colorado Rocky Mountains. An imperceptible rise over the 900 miles brought us 6,000 feet closer to the sky. By the time my grandparents' car pulled into a little cabin motel along Highway 24 in Manitou Springs, the day's end had left Pike's Peak inside the ink-black of wilderness.

Having gained an hour during the drive west, the next morning we were ready to leave for breakfast by sunrise. I dressed in navy shorts and red-checked blouse, black-and-white saddle shoes, and turndown socks. My grandmother handed me my red wool cardigan to break the morning chill. Old photographs affirm that it was my last summer without the curves that push and tug at clothes. I look leggy from new growth and immature in an unattended mop of straight brown hair.

My grandmother wore a navy-blue shirtwaist dress and cheerful, multicolored wedgies. She may have made her dress and my mother may have made my shorts from leftover fabric because, in the photograph taken later that day, the fabrics and their textures look the same. A few extra pounds shaped her into a small barrel and broadened her shoulders. Short hair framed a gentle face with indescribable brown. She was no longer a beauty, but kindness had wrinkled her hazel eyes and broad smile into lovely softness.

My grandfather was a quiet man, content in our

company. I do not have a photograph of him because he was the cameraman on our trip, but I remember that he dressed neatly in ordinary-looking long pants and short-sleeved shirts. Photographs of him as a young man reveal the handsome, blue-eyed suitor my grandmother had married. Over the years he had grown plump around the middle on my grandmother's biscuits and gravy. His face, red from broken capillaries, signaled the heart disease that already had started to press against his life. In St. Louis he was a fine and affable driver for the city bus company. In contrast to my lead-footed stepfather, I felt safe and relaxed with my grandfather at the wheel.

I remember stepping into rosy light through the cabin doorway, unsuspecting and unprepared to find an unimaginable landscape rising, in leaps and bounds, to more than 14,000 feet. Pike's Peak dazzled with dawn-reddened light, crisp air, peppermint fragrant pines, and bold slabs of rock.

My encounter with the jagged energy of awe had awakened me to something I did not understand at the time. I only knew that I stood on suddenly steady legs, at the threshold of something that filled me with excitement. For the first time, I felt consciously alive.

I followed my grandparents from the cabin to the car, welcoming my first breaths of crisp mountain air and happy to leave humid and hot behind at home in St. Louis. On our way to a breakfast spot we drove through The Garden of the Gods. We lumbered along a gravelly road in our big, black 1953 Oldsmobile Regency, the first tourists to make their appearance in the park. My grandmother and I sighed in admiration as the rising sun whispered across stunning, monolithic sandstone formations. From the quiet haze of shadow, a Native American figure materialized, wearing a colorful blanket over his shoulders. Either real memory or imagination bred on television Westerns has produced a horse being led by the reins.

Not always at home as the stepdaughter in my family, I felt an immediate kinship to this land. The mountains were giant and intricate, restful and exhilarating, mysterious and familiar. Some inner landscape of mine had found its homeland. Although I could not have known it at the time, I had embarked on an emigration from the flat lands of childhood depression to the peaks of hope.

Passion first woke in me that morning, not in the form of boys, but in the form of mountains. Something moved me that I could not yet identify, something intimate and seductive. My legs yearned to make their way along rushing streams and through the sun-trickled world of the forest. My eyes longed for views from high where, I was certain, if I could just find my way, I would catch sight of my dreams.

I believe that morning in Colorado was the moment my life fell into my own hands. I crossed a threshold, let go of unconscious childhood, and began the journey toward liberation and independence. It was as if a dose of natural beauty had provided a glimpse, an open pathway into the creative and intelligent self within.

Home
Khadijah Lacina
 Sa'da, Yemen

I've been told that the last time the fighting reached our village, they lined up the bodies of the dead fighters for everyone to inspect, to see that they were really gone, and the fighting was over. Thankfully, we were not here yet, but my imagination fills in the blanks all too clearly. But now, war has come again. Several times a day huge, dragonfly-like helicopters fly overhead, and fighter jets leave trails of smoky tears across the innocent blue sky. When I hear the sound of not-so-distant machine gunfire as evening comes on, I never fail to send up a prayer for the safety of my children.

At night, I find that my dreams take on a life of their own. Always the heroine, I struggle until dawn trying to bring small children to safety. Rowing a boat up to the towering cliff of the Titanic, I fight the downward current to rescue babies from the sinking ship. I grope my way blindly down the slopes of Everest, a baby in my arms, as I search for the rest of the children I know are there, somewhere, lost in the swirling storm with me. Or I simply stand against a locked door, unable to reach the children crying in the room beyond. I've never failed to bring the little ones to safety—yet.

I remember a time just a few months ago, when I was bedridden with typhoid fever. My oldest daughter cooked and took care of her smaller siblings. My oldest son hovered about the room, telling me strange stories he read on the internet to cheer me up. My son, Hudhaifah, offered to buy me treats of all sorts, trying to find something that appealed to me when I couldn't eat or drink a thing. The letters and pictures from my four littlest ones, and their frequent forays into my room to "check on me" almost always brought tears to my eyes. Several times a day, sisters from my classes stopped by to ask how I was doing. The neighbors sent food and plates of the big, round bread they bake in the tandoor ovens. One of the girls I am teaching Arabic to told me she prayed for me every time she made her *salaat*. I never felt so much a part of a community as I did then.

The world I live in here seems backward to most people. Camels graze on the tops of lote trees as they lumber off to pasture, ragged-looking sheep run in the dirt lanes in loud, raucous gangs, chickens peck their way in front of us as we walk to class. Tribal women with tattooed faces sell sweets, and children carry water from the huge pumps to their mud houses. Women work in the fields, their veiled heads sheltered from the hot sun and wind by straw hats. Tiny children play in the streets wearing nothing but long shirts and little crocheted hoods. When someone dies, the call is carried through the village, and soon all the men turn out to follow the funeral procession. They pray over the grave, its shrouded occupant still visible.

It is a hard land, but also a heart-soaringly beautiful one. The thought of war sweeping through this beautiful valley, a

blend of fertile field and barren rock, both saddens and frightens me. Yet I find hope in the changeless hills, inspiration in the thundering floods that fill the valley in the rainy season, and strength in the call to prayer I hear several times a day. The exuberance of the village children and the delighted smiles of the elders uplift me. Despite the fears and uncertainties of life in this desert land, I know that my family and I are, indeed, home.

Places
Sharon Tieman
 Austin TX

If I were a place, I would be the Grand Canyon.
 I am both awesome and beautiful as well as harsh and unyielding at times.
 My days are filled with extremes, depending on the seasons and times of the day and night.
 Hot as the barren desert and cold as the river which runs through me.
 My craggy rocks and cliffs may seem very harsh, but they are my strength and determination to endure.
 My beautiful streams and waterfalls are an unexpected oasis and are my source of calm and beauty.
 My dark nights are very black and the shimmering stars are my crown.
 The full moon shines brightly on my desert floor and reflects off my towering cliffs.
 The river sparkles like jewels at my feet.
 I am ageless and timeless. I will go on forever.

Country Remnants from Another Time
Sharon Blumberg
 Munster IN

Several country experiences stand out in my mind for endeared times of days gone by. My grandfather grew up in a small country town called Elizabeth, Illinois, located on the outskirts of Galena, Illinois. When my husband and I were newly married more than 20 years ago, we stopped in Elizabeth while we were vacationing in the lovely rolling hills of Galena, located along the banks of the Mississippi River. In Elizabeth, we lunched at a quaint little diner nestled within the downtown. As I perused the clientele, I observed a number of elderly folks eating and socializing together. Looking back now, I wish that I had asked one of them if they knew of my grandfather. Perhaps one of them did.

As for my husband and I, we both grew up in Miller Beach in Gary, Indiana. This is a place that will always be close to my heart. There, tall golden sand dunes kiss the pale, blue shores of Lake Michigan. But I often yearn for country life, even though I did not grow up in the country.

When I was a child in elementary school, I used to visit a small pond that was hidden inside a cove down the hilly

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street where I grew up. Whenever I wished to collect my thoughts or just glide away from my cares, I would frequent this little piece of paradise. Every time I visited, I would observe nature's most beautiful treasures. Inside the pond were small fish, tadpoles that would dart by my feet, and a variety of plant life. However, the most beautiful queen of flowers that I ever witnessed was the *Spatterdock*. This water lily contained bowl-shaped petals and a yellow, waxy vase-shaped structure for its center. I had to have this marvel of nature, so I made my move.

I can still clearly recall filling up my beat-up, old penny loafers with cold, murky pond water. I waded almost knee-deep to the center of the pond. Once I had claimed my prize, I brought my lily home and placed its stem in a glass of cold water. Even my mother marveled over the appearance of this majestic-looking flower that rested upon the counter.

After I married in 1982, my husband and I raised our family in a home that was surrounded by the last farm in Munster, Indiana. Behind our backyard fence was a postcard view of tall, golden corn stalks and the occasional sight of the farmer's swaying tractor. On warm, breezy summer evenings my husband, my two children, and I would stroll over to the little produce store down the street, which was owned by the farm owners. We would buy a few small bags of fresh vegetables and fruit, which we would munch on along the route home.

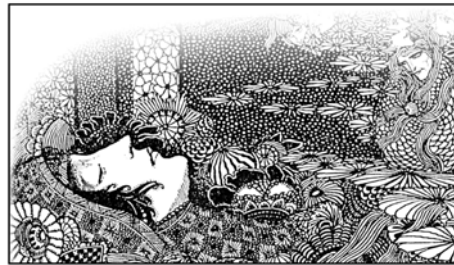
Some years later, the farmer sold the land. In this way, as too often, the soon-to-be-forgotten fields would pave the way for the birth of new subdivisions. As I learned of this news, I frantically wished to capture the remnants of the surrounding country-like structures that still remained. So I dashed over with my camera to take photographs of the half-torn down farm home and farm stand. I did not care how the pictures would look because I had to grasp onto the shadows of a fleeting era.

To this day, these photos rest in peace inside my scrap book of things that I hold dear. Yes, I yearn for those by-gone country days. I may not live within the country, but the country indeed lives within me.

*"Learn to get in touch
with the silence within yourself
and know that
everything in this life
has a purpose."*

~Elisabeth Kubler-Ross~

The Past...



Fire and Ice

Mary M. Elizabeth

Austin TX

As red as my mother's Oldsmobiles, with a sweet, penetrating smell.

"I want people to see me coming!" she said in reference to the cars. My mother often wore red. She was a widow in red.

So her stand regarding Fire and Ice had to be ice.

She told me more than once how much she and my father enjoyed sex. How they lay in bed together on spring mornings loving the roar of flooded Ralston Creek just outside their bedroom window. They had five glorious years of uninterrupted fire before their first child was born.

My father died when she was 36. Fire was replaced by rage trapped deep inside her. I remember her outbursts preceded by a silent, simmering foreplay. Like villagers at the foot of the volcano, I learned to recognize the signs of a pending eruption and get out of the way. After the explosion she was still and impenetrable again. Ice.

I never wore lipstick or make-up of any kind. I was afraid I'd smear it all over my face. I kept my face inscrutable, stoic. I was petrified by my mother's fire and ice.

Young at War

Pattie C. S. Burke

Austin TX

World War II still tugs at my memory and moves me with a sweet nostalgic force. When the war years collided with my teen years, I was old enough to devour the printed news each morning as I ate my corn flakes with only a pinch of rationed sugar; old enough to feel a deep sadness each day when I viewed the published pictures of hometown men who had died; old enough to sit on the snug carpet next to the crackling speaker of our family's console radio and become mesmerized by the voice of Franklin Roosevelt; old enough to march in cadence with our high school band, all of us clad in the stiff blue gabardine uniforms of our Victory Corps. However, I was too young to frequent the Red Cross canteens or dance with men in uniform to the tune of *I'll Be Seeing You*. Yet the romanticism of that music and those times has never left my heart.

On a recent visit to France I began to trace those war years, to scrutinize the truth of my perception. The Peace Museum in Caen brought me into the very womb of war, down a quiet ramp with a display of photographs from World War I and the period of peace that followed. Then the ramp led to a large screen that showed footage of the pain that delivered World War II, complete with all the horrific sounds of bombs and battle. And still, we had romanticism—an exhibit of the sensuous, clinging dresses of the '40s, the cocky felt hats, the Chesterfields, and the husky *auf Wiedersehen* of Marlene Dietrich.

It was the next series of stops that completed my reawakening: the landing beaches and the cemetery at Normandy. That is where I realized how incomplete my comprehension of the horror of this romanticized war had been. It became an emotional reality when I was able to view the sheer cliffs dropping like a granite gate along all the beaches; to experience the dramatic landscape of Omaha Beach and walk over its undulating terrain, avoiding sudden large, deep holes; to see openings to miles of underground tunnels and climb down into concrete pillbox bunkers where enemy soldiers had waited, confident in their ability to slaughter our men, the ones I never danced with.

At the Normandy cemetery I scanned the straight rows of white crosses that became diagonal rows into infinity as I kept walking. In a clearing of trees overlooking the beach cliffs, a small group of people were engaged in quiet conversation. They stood around a large table that was covered with a glass-enclosed topical map of the landscape and the beaches. A large, elderly gentleman was solemn as he pointed to a place on the map, in answer to one of the questions that someone had asked concerning where he had landed that dreadful day on Normandy Beach. He raised his head and stared across those waters filled with painful memories. He just stood there, quietly accepting the cool breeze that whispered through whiffs of his gray hair. We were all blessed to experience the reverence of his silence.

Finally, an older woman in our group dared to respectfully ask him a question: "What were you feeling that day as you landed?"

He never turned away from the water. His answer was a soft monotone. "I don't remember feeling anything. I was so young. I didn't know... what could I feel?"

Yes, we were all so young.

Today, I learned that one of my grandsons, age 20, joined the Marine Reserves. He sounded proud and happy when he told me the news.

"I've always loved the Marines," he said, with the enthusiasm of youth, "and I'm cool with my decision. This is what I really want to do. I want to serve my country as a Marine."

I felt the tears begin to pool inside my lower eyelid, then overflow when he said, "Oh, by the way, please pray that I don't get sent to Iraq."

He is so young, so very young.

Dancing Sandra Simon Austin TX

I was a grad student in New York City, aching for some exercise to balance the endless hours I spent sitting with my books and papers. I had the booklet with *The Royal Canadian Mounties Exercise Program*, but it wasn't working for me. I decided to take ballet. I found a small dance company just a few subway stops north of my campus, and signed up for beginning ballet.

The class met on Thursday evening. As I walked toward the subway, my new pink ballet slippers in a small bag tucked under my arm, images of dancing swirled through my mind. Once, when I was square-dancing, one of the women in our square had made the simple movements magical. She straightened her shoulders, tilted her head up, positioned her arms to define her space, placed her feet with slightly exaggerated, deliberate steps—and suddenly she became flirtatious and saucy.

Around Christmas, a friend and I had gone to see *The Nutcracker*. Probably, we were the only adults in the audience who were unaccompanied by a child. We also saw a few performances by modern dance groups. I thought about the beautiful, formal precision of the classical dancers and the athletic, sensuous, powerful movements of modern dance, and I tried to move like a dancer.

Six students were in my class, all women about my age. I was the only one with no prior ballet experience. We all wore black leotards and tights, and pink ballet slippers. I saw that none of the others wore her hair loose, and I twisted my ponytail up into a bun. As I stood in the dressing room that first evening, watching another class through the curtain, my excitement alternated with memories of myself, cloaked in my childhood clumsiness. I positioned my glasses more securely, and waited for our class to begin.

We worked on a polished wood floor, in a large, brightly-lit, rectangular room with mirrored walls and a *barre*. In one corner was a piano; the pianist played music with a strong beat to mark our steps. I found that I loved standing at the *barre* and performing the stretches and positions. The formality and structure appealed to me, and I loved the feeling when I asked my muscles to work and they responded. I focused on placing my arms and legs, my back, head, and neck—the whole line of my body.

I practiced the positions late at night, when I was sure to be alone in my lab or in a back corner of the library. Forty years ago, women were not fully accepted as scientists at the university where I was a biochemistry student and I didn't dare let anyone know that I was spending time doing ballet. Thursday evenings, when I left for dance class, furtively checking for faculty members, I felt as though I was slipping off to a clandestine tryst.

Soon, we began moving across the floor. The instructor, a small, muscular middle-aged man who had probably

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dreamed of more than this for himself, would outline a sequence of moves for us. We practiced together in two rows of three, our slippers swishing or making soft, patting sounds against the floor.

Away from the wall, I felt unsteady, aware of the huge, bright open space of air all around me. I worked hard to move through the space, remembering the steps in sequence, my arms and legs doing what they should. The voice in my head rattled on as fast as it could—*right-foot-out-left-arm-up, now out-turn slightly to-the-right, then three-quick-steps-left-with-arms-down, then raise-right-arm-and-turn*—and so on. I could barely keep up.

We began doing longer sequences, crossing the floor on the diagonal, alone or in couples. One evening, as we stepped away from the corner and out into space, I lost the voice. It simply vanished. I crossed the floor with my body moving through the pattern of steps. I had no awareness of how I got to the opposite corner—only a sense of air and movement. During those brief moments, I felt freer than at any other time in my life.

The instructor was silent, staring at me. Finally he nodded and said, “That was beautiful.”

It never happened again. I returned to trying to remember the sequences and direct myself through performing them. At the end of the term, I left the class. My ballet affair had ended.

But I had felt the fun of working my body, and wanted to continue that. I found other kinds of exercise. Over the years, I’ve had brief flings or long relationships with yoga, jazzercise, water aerobics, jogging, skiing, hiking, and walking.

I don’t think that my internal voice—the voice that verbalizes, directs, anticipates—has ever again been silent. Maybe that glorious experience in ballet class was an instance of flow, when we become one with what we are doing. Lately, I’ve begun a sitting meditation, as a way of quieting my mind. I sit still, breathing, focusing on the breath, gently trying to hold my focus. In front of me is a small glass oil lamp and I watch the dancing flame.

Bronx 1942
Helene Benardo
Bronx NY

Before she stepped out to meet the world
My mother
Put on her face
The man waited—for—her?
The little girl—I—waited
for my face—
The woman emerged—
Hidden

The First Story

Rachael Hungerford
Williamsport PA

The first story I remember hearing began like this:

“I didn’t want another baby and I, for sure, didn’t want a girl. I already had a son and I thought I knew how to raise a boy. But your father wanted a girl, even when Gordon was coming.”

My mother made her feelings known—loud and clear—to everyone: the neighbors, the family, the grocery delivery people—anyone who asked or tried to congratulate her.

She didn’t go to the doctor until she was about six months along and, when she did, this is how the conversation went:

“Yes, Carrie, you’re pregnant.”

“Well, I thought I was. When am I due?”

“How about the 4th of July?”

“No!”

“What do you mean, No?”

“If I have to have this baby I want it the 28th of June.”

“Alright. You come down to the office about eight o’clock in the evening on June 27. I’ll give you a shot to start your labor, and you can have this baby on the 28th.”

She did go and get the shot and I was born on the 28th of June. When my father came into see her after I was born, she looked him in the eye and said, “There, Pat Herrick, that’s the last birthday present you’ll ever get from me!”

And I was.

But, of course, there were other layers to this story. Questions I never thought to ask until years later.

Why did she get pregnant this second time? My brother is almost 12-years-older than I am. She was 20 when he was born and 32 when I was born. Abstinence was not in her. So she obviously knew how *not* to get pregnant.

What happened? She was dead before I asked the question but my brother knew the answer.

World War II was looming and word from the government was that family men with only one child would be drafted but those with two or more children would not.

My parents had just suffered through the Depression, forced to live in her mother’s house and by her rules, living on the occasional day work my father could find and my grandmother’s salary at the woolen mill. Now, finally, my father had a steady job at that same mill—an income, however small, to depend on. Maybe, just maybe, they could move out and have a place of their own soon.

So the U.S. Army was *not* going to draft my father even if Mom had to have an unwanted baby to keep him out of the war. He encouraged and agreed with this plan though they paid the price of her resentment all the rest of their married life.

There was another layer and another question that wrapped this story: what role did my grandmother play?

My grandmother was a ferocious, strong-willed woman. She threw her own husband out when her children were two and four, moved in with her father, worked caning chairs,

raised her children, helped her son through infantile paralysis, saw to it that both children had practical training for work, and finally she owned the house. She allowed my parents and Gordon to move back into her house in 1930 when the Depression robbed them of jobs and space. But there were rules!

“You all have to be up by 8:00 in the morning.”

“You can’t use the toaster after 9:00 in the morning.”

“Carrie, you have to do all the house work, cooking, and laundry, since I work all day in the mill.”

“Pat, you take care of the yard and painting the house and keeping the furnace going.”

“And I don’t want any more children in this house.” So said Grandma.

My parents had no choice at the time and agreed.

But I suspect, after ten years, my mother—not as ferocious as her mother but equally strong in her own way—had had all she could take of these rules and regulations. First her mother ruled her life in a house not her own and then the Army threatened to take away the only way out she thought she had. I see her thumbing her nose at both her mother and the army. I might cost her a lot but, damn, this was one decision *she* was going to make.

So I was conceived and born and between us, my mother and I kept my father out of the war. Over the years I have learned a great deal from this first story. I learned the strength and determination of women to control as much of their lives as they could. I learned the art of argument and negotiation. I learned the impact of environment—social, economic and human—on family life. I learned to pay attention and how to survive.

By the end of her life my mother knew I was worth it. She did know how to raise a girl.

Inconstant Moon

S. Ramos O’Briant
Beverly Hills CA

*If they say the moon is blue,
We must believe that it is true.*
Old English Proverb

“It was different in my day. Kids respected their parents. My mother and father were wonderful,” Mom says.

Her father was a drunk and a pedophile. By the time Mom turned five her mother was in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the waist down. It happened on the night of a blue moon. No medical opinion rendered; the family suspected witchcraft.

“Daddy worked hard and he took care of mother. He only drank for birthdays and religious holidays,” Mom says.

Then I must have a photographic memory for those holy Hallmark days of Grandpa lit up, his eyes and lips shiny, unzipping his pants and grabbing little hands to rest on the hard surprise there. We never told. The aunts and uncles paid

no attention to the kids hanging around jolly old Granddad.

“It only happened once,” Mom says when I remind her that he molested her, too. “And Mama chased him with a frying pan.”

That’s her story and she’s sticking with it. That was the night of the blue moon and her mama never walked again. No more chases with the frying pan: truth waned with the moon.

“We were happy then,” Mom says. “Life was simple.”

She smiles at her happy-ever-after ending to the story of her life. She’s 83. I still have a life to live, a ways to go, and the irresistible pull of the blue moon to fight.

In Love with Elvis

Helen Rousseau
Kennebunk ME

At fourteen I was in love
with Elvis, had gone to the record store
and paid 50 cents a week until
I could finally take my album
home and listen hour after hour,
alone in my room,
crying over *Old Shep* and imagining
him loving me tender.

How could I not be smitten?
It was 1956 and rock and roll
was young and exciting.
My older brother and I listened
to rocking Joe Smith, a DJ
from Boston. We were up
on the latest hits before
they came to our local radio station.

I bought heart-shaped stickers that declared
My heart belongs to Elvis
and stuck them on my notebook
not thinking more about it,
unaware that my eternal soul
was in peril of being lost, until
my homeroom nun took
me aside and asked: “If your
heart belongs to Elvis, where
is there room for God?”

*“Sometimes a person has to go back,
really back—to have a sense, an understanding of all
that's gone to make them—
before they can go forward.”*
~Paula Marshall~

Antique Gold Coins

Valerie Lima
Fayetteville AR

Originally, I started writing to uncover what lay buried in the mud within me. As a child, there were things I could write that I wouldn't dare say out loud, things needing to be brought out into the open so as not to fester deep inside me, developing into a volcano. My diary was my best friend for many years. I would write as I huddled in my cubbyhole in the attic eaves, a place designed for storage but used as a private space for me. Flashlight in hand, a book to read, and a diary to write in—all comprised my comfort area.

One day, in the eighth grade, the assignment was to write about a hobby we enjoyed and how we became involved in that hobby. I wrote all about being in my grandparents' very old, rambling house, with the rickety staircase going up into the musty attic. On one rainy day I was continuing my exploration of the house. While rummaging in the attic, I discovered a collection of coins in an old, tea-colored and stained box, tucked away in a hidden nook. When I brought them downstairs and questioned my grandfather, I found out the assorted coins belonged to his grandfather. My grandfather added a few more when he found them as a boy, but then the collection was once again hidden away. We looked at the coin collection together and, as he told me about the individual coins, I became interested not only in the history revealed about the coins themselves but also about the history of my ancestors. So I continued collecting coins and relished the feeling of being part of a long line of people who engaged in this hobby.

I finished writing just as the teacher called for the papers to be handed in. I felt good about what I had written.

However, I couldn't sleep at all that night. I tossed and turned so much I gave myself a headache. I agonized. *How terrible! How could I have done that?*

Thoughts raced through my head and collided with each other, creating pain in my head. *What is wrong with me?*

None of what I wrote was true. I made up the whole story about collecting coins, and I had no idea why I did. I didn't remember reading something similar in any of the many books I read. *How could I have written such a lie? Why did I?*

By the next morning I was a wreck and my stomach was in knots. I couldn't eat breakfast and dreaded going to school yet I also couldn't wait to get there to admit to the English teacher it was all a lie. With many false starts and gulps, sweaty hands and a flushed face, I finally told her. None of what I had written was true. I was sure I would at least wind up with a detention and my parents would be told.

Much to my surprise, my usually extremely strict and exacting English teacher said it was perfectly all right. She read the stories and found mine to be well-written so I received an A. The fact I lied made no difference—it was the use of grammar and the way the story was told that was important. She said the story was a far more interesting way to start a hobby than the other students' stories were. And

she did appreciate why I felt I had to tell her the truth.

Since then, the many kernels of writing excitement have popped open to reveal a poem, a memoir, a story, a book. As I delve into memoir writing, I still agonize over trying to dig out the truth rather than use a fabrication. I read of getting to the emotional truth rather than necessarily the factual truth. Does it really matter if the curtains were white or yellow that day 50 years ago or is the important memory the feel and smell of the starched curtain to remind you of your grandmother's living room?

William Zinsser speaks of "inventing the truth," of acknowledging we write of the truth as we know it, not necessarily as anyone else knows it. Bill Roorbach says, "The reader also comes expecting that the writer is operating in good faith, that is, doing her best to get the facts right."

Over the years, writing has become a connector, a healer, a transmission, a memory organizer, a revealer, a storyteller. Writing allows for patterns to be discovered, for healing threads to be woven into a wondrous tapestry with loose ends reconnected, for stories and ideas to be passed on to future generations, for the awareness of not only who, what, when, and where but also why and how and what were the feelings and the lessons learned.

Writing has revealed precious hidden meanings and patterns in a tapestry much richer than I could ever imagine. I have written enough now to realize I am the pot of gold buried at the end of the rainbow, with each memoir or story or poem an antique gold coin, worth more in the present because it is based on an experience from the past. Added together, these gold pieces provide a treasure for my future as well as for those of my children and grandchildren. If I hadn't dug up these memories and experiences, I would have lost them forever. They may be covered with the remains of dirt, and some may be a little discolored and faded, but the glint of gold still peeks through. After a little polishing and cleaning up, these antique gold coins will be worth a fortune.

Harden Not My Heart

Pattie C. S. Burke
Austin TX

i crawled under my
queen anne table
of humiliation
gripped a cabriole leg

that stood so strong
on its lion's foot
its graceful curve
cold and hard
against my cheek

still I clung
until the tears
became mahogany
and petrified my shell

My Home
Carol Rosebrough
 Montoursville PA

My home. How can this be my home? I live here and yet nothing is mine except the clothes and shoes I wear. And they are always too big, as my mother buys them on dollar day thinking I will grow into them. See these shorts? They are so big I have to fold the waist over and keep them in place with a safety pin to keep them from falling down. Nothing in the house is mine, no special room or a book or a toy and not even a doll. I just reside here.

From the outside, everything looks pretty normal. A small brown-shingled bungalow with a half porch across the front covered by a tan-and-green aluminum awning. The steps to the house are concrete and there is no railing for the steps. The floor of the porch is wood, painted gray. There is no porch railing or furniture on the porch. The porch floor is always speckled with black dust from the smoke stacks of the neighboring industrial plants. When you walk on it with bare feet, it sticks to your feet. I hate walking without shoes outside and I don't like to get this black soot on my feet.

The door to the house is unlocked because the lock doesn't work and no one ever fixes it. When you step inside, the sunroom is the first room in the house and there are windows all around, but the awning blocks the sunlight, so you can't really see outside. The living room and dining room are to the left and in the floor between these two rooms is a floor furnace with a metal grill cover. This heats the house during the winter. The floors are wood but covered with big rugs that have flowers on them. The living room has a couch and a lounge chair and a television set. The television set is the prized possession. It is the first television set in the neighborhood. The dark-brown vinyl lounge chair belongs to my dad, though, and only my dad. Beside it is his spittoon. He chews tobacco and sometimes when he misses the spittoon the tobacco juice just falls on the floor. He doesn't seem to mind. He knows my mom will clean it up. It's one of her many jobs.

The dining room has a table pushed up against the wall, but we never eat on this table. The only time it is used is when my dad comes home at night and he counts the money taken in at the coal mine that day. I watch him and all the bills he counts he turns so that the heads are all facing in the same direction. My dad is always mad at my mother about something, and it seems every time he is counting the money at the dining room table he is madder than ever. He screams at her over and over about anything. She just stands there and looks at him with absolutely no expression on her face. She never says a word. She never gets mad back, she never cries, she never leaves, she never talks. She just stands there and he screams at her. I am terrified when he is mad so I try to be invisible so that he doesn't even see me. I don't think I have to try very hard to be invisible. I don't think anyone ever sees me anyway.

The bathroom is to the left of the dining room and, with the door open, you can see right into it from the dining room.

Our house only has two bedrooms and one is on either side of the bathroom. There are no locks on the bathroom door or either bedroom door. My two older brothers sleep in the bedroom to the left of the bathroom. They have two double beds in the room. The only other furniture is a tall wooden wardrobe for hanging clothes. I used to sleep with my brothers in that room, but now I sleep in the other bedroom with my mother and dad. I sleep in one bed with my mother and my father sleeps in the other double bed. Once we go to bed, the only sound in the house is the whirring of the window fan that is on a table in between our two beds and it always blows toward my dad.

Now it is night. I am scared a lot in this house, but mostly I am scared at night. I don't know how I actually get to bed, but after I am there I always seem to fidget and not want to go to sleep. As I fidget, my mother, who is a very quiet person, knocks softly on the wooden headboard and whispers in my ear, "Shhhhh, be quiet, or the boogie man will get you."

Well, that does it. I am convinced the boogie man is under the bed so I dare not move a muscle or make a sound. I am frozen in place.

Then, out of the quiet, comes my father's voice; "Bessie!" Just that one word, my mother's name. Her name just hangs there in the silence. I already know what that means. Without a sound or objection my mother quietly crawls over me to leave our bed to join my father in his bed. I feel sick to my stomach. I can hear my mother cry out, but I dare not make a sound. I double up as if to hold myself together and I put the pillows over my ears so I can't hear my mother cry. I cry, too, but no one can hear me because I cry without making a sound. I am afraid to make a sound. Later my mother returns to our bed and eventually I fall asleep. No one ever speaks of what happens in that other bed.

Shhh
Helene Benardo
 Bronx NY

Nobody shouts at Columbia—Odd—
 Such a behemoth of a college
 Maxine whispers
 Did it start with her name—
 Little Max—after all—
 To New York via Flagstaff and Altoona—
 What's to yell about?
 Well—Damn it—Raise your voice!
 I cannot—She breathes—I am
 little somebody else—
 There is no me—there is
 R's mother—D's wife—
 D is so brilliant—She lights up—
 I am so privileged to do his
 bidding—
 He bids for total acquiescence—I
 am so privileged to research—I
 am so lucky to type—I
 am so honored to hold his
 sandwich while he lectures (He gets so nervous,
 don't you know)
 What more could life possibly afford me?
 I am only little max after all

Family, Friends, and Acquaintances...



Lemon Trees and Pork Chop Hill

Tiffany Benton
Wailuku HI

When I was eight-years-old we moved from the east to the west side of the Salinas Valley and leased an 80-acre parcel including a house and barn. The farmhouse was situated out in the middle of vegetable fields. Crops grew all around us, and country lanes criss-crossed the Valley like a colorful patchwork quilt. Eucalyptus, pepper, fig, and acacia trees, and a tall hedge bordered the yard. Grass surrounded the house, and in front of the living room grew a lemon tree. I would climb up into the branches, pick a lemon, suck on the tart juicy fruit, and daydream.

My sister, Tanis, and I liked playing together. Most days we'd imitate some real life events we had observed and turn them into a game. This was how we came up with *Sylvester and Maybelle*. I was Maybelle and my house was the lemon tree. She was Sylvester and she lived in an old oil drum that Daddy had cleaned out and used as a garbage burn barrel. She had set a box inside, so that when she sat on it, her head was about at the rim level of the barrel. From my tree house, I could see the top of her head with her black curly hair and bright dark eyes looking out over the edge.

At that time, Dad had a farm worker who had just arrived from Tennessee. He had red hair, spoke with a pronounced southern drawl, and we loved mimicking him, adding this accent to our characters. Maybelle would often go visiting Sylvester. There was a stool placed just outside the burn barrel and she would sit there while she and Sylvester had tea and chatted about life.

One day while sitting in her lemon house, Maybelle got a phone call from Sylvester. "Maybelle darlin', why don't ya'll come over for tea and a visit? I have some very important news to share with you," Sylvester said.

Maybelle had been in the middle of preparing a snack, and told Sylvester she'd be delighted to come and would bring a lemon treat. Maybelle climbed out of the tree, crossed the yard to Sylvester's house, and knocked on the door.

"Hello my dear. How y'all been doin'?" Isn't this weather just marvelous?" Sylvester drawled and invited Maybelle in to sit a spell.

"Oh, I'm purely delighted with these fine sunny days. It just does my heart wonders to be so blessed," Maybelle

responded as she handed Sylvester a lemon.

"Did y'all hear about the frightful experience that poor Pearl Mae had at the doctor's office yesterday?" asked Sylvester. (Mom watched the soap opera *General Hospital* every day; so many of our conversations were influenced by this TV drama.)

"Oh heavens no, I hadn't heard," Maybelle said. "I've been so busy with spring cleanin' that I've fairly missed the goings on around town. I truly hope it was nothin' serious."

On and on through the afternoon the conversation went till the tea and lemons were gone, then Maybelle bid Sylvester a good day, and returned to the lemon tree. Mom said that looking out the kitchen window she would chuckle to see the two of us sitting out there in the yard having a great time chatting away the afternoon.

When we tired of Sylvester and Maybelle we looked for other ways to entertain ourselves. At the end of the field, along the driveway, was a sump hole. This was an area about half the size of a football field. It gradually sloped down in the center to be about four or five feet deeper than the surrounding land. It was used to collect water after it had irrigated the vegetable field. Sometimes the sump hole was filled with water, but when it was empty, tall grasses grew there and provided us with a wonderful place to play.

War movies were popular on TV, and we had just watched one called *Pork Chop Hill*. I stood alongside the sump hole trying to decide what to play, when it began to change. Soon the whole area teemed with soldiers. Planes flew overhead and smoke from artillery burned in my nose. Here was the game for the day: Pork Chop Hill.

It was decided that the first person to catch the other while stealing through the grasses would be the winner. Off we went—one side of the sump hole mine, the other hers. I slithered through the tall grasses and ventured a look across the hill to see if I spotted her. No luck. I came across a rock about the size of a baseball and tucked it into my pocket. Maybe it would come in handy later. I finally spotted her crawling along. I retrieved the rock—now a grenade—popped the pin, and tossed it across the hole. I heard a *thunk*, and down she went—a fallen soldier. Terrified, I ran through the grass back to the house screaming, "I killed her, I killed her."

Mom came running in panic. We made it back to the place where Tanis had gone down. We looked all through the grasses but my sister was nowhere to be found. Mumbling that we kids would be the death of her, Mom finally went back inside. I sat down in the grass still shaking in fright. It was then that I heard the chuckling. I looked up and saw a pair of twinkling dark eyes peep out of the canal that ran alongside the sump hole. Chuckles quickly turned into laughter as she watched me.

I was too stunned to run after her, or maybe I caught her and pummeled her till she begged for mercy. Who knows? It was a long time ago. To this day whenever I eat lemons I think of my tree, Pork Chop Hill, and all of our games.

If Only I Could Talk...
Musings of a Hope Chest

Susan Ideus
 Magnolia TX

I am a 74-year-old hope chest, but I'm so much more: a keeper of dreams, a repository of secrets, a receptacle for disappointments, and a safe-keeper of memories, both the heartwarming and the heartbreaking. A graduation gift for Dorothy, she often likened my lovely chestnut finish to the color of her thick wavy hair, her only vanity. If only I could talk, her daughter Susan might understand her mother better.

Dorothy was so practical that when I came to her, she called me a cedar chest, saying she didn't have time to hope, as early on she began to develop the prickly edges of a world-weary cynic.

The day came when she gently set in me embroidered pillowcases, new linens, and even a pretty chemise. For once even Dorothy joined in her friends' giggling conversations. They were planning her wedding and she dared, for a time, to hope.

Being newly married during the Depression was difficult. As Dorothy planned budgets and affordable menus, dreams went to the back burner. As I became dusty and unused, Dorothy's hair faded and began to gray at the edges, as did any hope she might have harbored deep within.

When Dorothy was expecting their first child, I loved collecting tiny clothes and little blankets. Then, *it* happened and those baby things were stored. Now I held the reminders of disappointment. Hope grew fainter and those chestnut locks continued to fade, along with her ability to dream.

The baby things did come out again. So tenuous was her faith in this miracle that, at Dorothy's insistence, the nursery wasn't set up until the last minute. The miracle, Ken, came home and he was a joy. I watched him grow into a happy toddler. Dorothy was at last the wife and mother she had dreamt about; she seemed content.

Soon another nursery was set up but *it* happened again. Once again *it* wasn't talked about, and even little Ken's questions about a baby "brudder" were turned away with little concern for a young boy's feelings. I was shoved into a corner of Ken's room where I picked up a few scratches, but I didn't mind. He was just playing and I was a good launching ramp for his cars.

Dorothy became more embittered and soon her hair completely grayed. Cal couldn't get through to her and he began to hide in a bottle. The atmosphere around me became dark, as words were spoken only in anger or blame. Ken might have been invisible for all the attention he drew. A happy toddler became a shy, sad little boy.

When Dorothy was expecting again I stayed in Ken's room, as though unpacking baby things might bring a curse.

Ken was excited and I could hear him confiding to his favorite bear that he was going to be a big brother, wondering if Mommy would be happy then. What a surprise when Dorothy delivered twins! My buddy Ken had his

"brudder," Jim, and a sister, Susan.

Sadly, the long-barren years had taken their toll. Dorothy and Cal had fallen into the habit of not talking. He continued to drink, never abusively, but to escape from the sadness of a gloomy household. Ken spent a lot of time with the twins. He would make up stories for them, talking louder as the bickering escalated.

When the twins were five, Jim's health took a bad turn. We were all packed up and moved to New Mexico where his lungs would be able to breathe in dry air and winters were mild. Jim's health improved and things were better.

By now, I was a window seat in teen Susan's room. A dreamer—happy and lively and imaginative—she was the polar opposite of her mom and the delight of her dad. She and Dorothy squabbled often through her teenage years. Susan would curl up on me and cry in frustration. *Didn't Mom know what it was like to be young?* Sadly, she probably didn't. Some people are born old but there was no way I could tell Susan that.

The years flew by. Ken and Susan both had children of their own, a joy to their grandpa and another trial for their grandmother to endure. I loved when they stayed in my room and I could soak in the sounds of childhood again. I wished that Dorothy could see what she was missing.

Much too soon, Cal died. For a short while Susan stayed in her old room and again I supported her as she cried. She missed him and grieved for the sad way he had lived.

A few years later Dorothy became ill. Susan was home often that year. She would look through me at night and marvel at what had been kept over the years. Maybe her mom cared more than she showed. Dorothy told Susan that she could take that "old box," meaning me, home with her.

When her husband and daughters came to visit Gram for the last time, Susan asked them to take me back home. Imagine her chagrin when she opened me up to show her girls the treasures I held—and they were gone. She asked Dorothy where all the kids' stories and pictures had gone.

"That old stuff? Your father kept every little thing you kids made. I cleaned it out for you."

What Susan didn't know was that Dorothy shed a few tears going through that "stuff," but she decided cleaning me out was the prudent thing to do. My lock should have jammed as it often does these days and she might have given up the task. Sadly, Dorothy truly couldn't see why those things were valuable.

If only Susan could hear my stories.... Oh yes, Dorothy once had dreams too. Susan was one of them; now she has me to gather up her own memories. I am loved and polished and cared for. I am a 74-year-old hope chest and life is good here!

"Family faces are magic mirrors. Looking at people who belong to us, we see the past, present, and future."

~Gail Lumet Buckley~

Steps from Darkness

Sandra J. Gaylor
Lafayette IN

On September 29, 2004, my twin sister Marcy fell and suffered a spinal cord injury. After the initial emergency surgery, she was beginning to gain some feeling when she developed a blood clot. A second emergency surgery left Marcy paralyzed from the waist down. The somewhat orderly world she had created over the past years had been abruptly shattered. Her dreams for the future were suddenly downsized. After months of therapy, Marcy gained some walking ability. Through those dark days, she leaned on laughter, tenacity and prayer to get her through those murky times.

Marcy and I are on the road again. Her days are a scattershot of writers' meetings, her quilting club, and the never-ending doctor appointments. It is a constant struggle for us as she has to use a walker or an electric shopping cart. My limitation was lifting her walker after my back surgery but, because of her needs, I pushed my limits and, thankfully, I feel much stronger today.

Recently I loaded her up to take the very familiar hospital walkway to see her husband of fifty-one years. He was hospitalized, again, for congestive heart failure. After a long and tiring visit, we left. Marcy was exhausted and leaned over her walker, head down as if praying.

As we reentered the walkway, she raised her head and smiled. "Look, Sandy, do you see it?"

She was pointing toward a hill in the distant like she always does, but doesn't remember telling me. (Some of her medications have shortened her memory bank.)

"Do you see the angel?" Of course it is not an angel, but a huge fir tree, bent from the many windy days, with its branches somehow formed into the shape of a flying angel. "Isn't it appropriate that it hovers over a hospital? It gives me hope whenever I see her flying."

I remember the story Marcy wrote about geese and how they fly in a V-shape, nudging each other and taking turns leading. Today Marcy is leading me in her faith, giving me the nudge to stay in line, urging me to look at the bright side and find those angels.

I believe that whatever success Marcy and I have enjoyed, being twins and best friends, it has allowed us to achieve much more than if we were out on our own. Having each other has been a huge positive in our lives. When I am suffering from the blues, Marcy grabs my hand and draws me back to brighter lights. Of course, I like to think I help her through her dark periods too. It is like having an automatic teammate, one who supports, pushes, and is a constant cheerleader. We've learned that love and faith will brighten and give hope on any short, dark day.

Unforgettable Sheila

Kathy Stanley
Portland OR

Sheila was a great piano player. At the age of three, she sat on the piano and played beautiful music. She only had to hear a song once and she could immediately play it by ear. Never taking a piano lesson, she had her own method of writing music and became the professional piano player at the Royal Sandals Resort in Montego Bay, Jamaica, for several months. A natural entertainer, her charm and infectious delight in her friends and family guaranteed that she was the life of the party.

I remember the black cocktail mini-dress, with the furry feather boa on the hem that she wore in the sixties. The yellow sun-dress in the seventies, with big plastic rings that held the top and skirt together. In the eighties, she wore impossibly high pumps and crisp striped suits that shaped her slim figure. She never gained an ounce and once told me that she gained only twelve pounds the whole nine months she was pregnant with me. My mother was adored by all who knew her, and her illness and death from breast cancer catapulted me into a whole new world of personal growth.

She called me that November to say that her recent mammogram showed she had a lump in her left breast and the doctors wanted to operate. After the mastectomy, she began a course of radiation and chemotherapy, putting on a brave face to the concerned and frightened world of family and friends around her. Her phone call to me was like a wake-up call and to support myself and her through this, I began to meditate.

That Christmas, I surprised her on Christmas Day. She and Al, my stepfather, went to the Vancouver airport to pick up Ernestine and Dick, my aunt and uncle, who were arriving for a visit. Three days before, I decided to make the trip from Toronto and got on the same flight. I could barely sit still those five hours flying west on Christmas Day, longing to see my mother's face when we got off the plane. She had been through so much with losing her breast and the horrible beginning of the chemo treatments.

Getting off the plane, we descended the down escalator to the baggage claim area. I let Ernestine walk ahead to greet Mummy first, and then I stepped out from behind and said, "Surprise! Merry Christmas!"

She screamed and laughed and hugged me tight. We had the best Christmas week, full of fun and family.

Mummy hated the chemo treatments. She felt so ill that she decided to seek alternative treatment after reading about people who had healed themselves of cancer. She heard about people who had been cured of cancer in a place called the Gerson Clinic in Mexico. She wanted to go there and Al supported her in doing it.

She went off on an adventure to Mexico and one of her seven sisters, Gertrude, went with her for moral support. Settling in for two weeks at the clinic, she was her usual self with strangers, charming and entertaining them each evening.

"Trouble is part of your life—if you don't share it, you don't give the person who loves you a chance to love you enough."

~Dinali Shore~

Finding an old, rickety, untuned piano in an attic, she delighted her fellow patients with playing her favorites: *Moonlight in Moscow*, *Begin the Beguine*, the *Out of Africa* theme song, *Love Letters*, and *Those Were The Days*—to name just a few of the over four-hundred songs in her repertoire.

She came back from Mexico fresh with optimism and enthusiasm for the program of healing the clinic had developed for her. I went to see her for a week in the summer and found her kitchen had turned into an organic juice factory. However, it soon became a rigorous and demanding task to keep up with the preparation of the juices and special food she was supposed to eat each day.

Sometime around the next Christmas her spirits started to falter. She had not had the “healing crisis” that the clinic had said should happen and she was growing weary of the time-consuming work involved in following the program. I spent that last Christmas with her; she decided that she could not go on with the Gerson program and sought out some other alternative treatments. She was clear that she no longer wanted to go back to the chemotherapy.

She would not want me to dwell on the details of the past. She did pass away on June 29, 1993, at the age of 58, but her spirit lives on in my heart and in the hearts of her family and friends. Her essence follows me from time to time and reveals itself when I think, *how she would love my quiet backyard and comfortable deck getting filled with flowering hanging baskets and pots of herbs*. She would love a walk down my street in the spring, with the abundance of azaleas and rhododendrons in full bloom. She would love Maizy, the cat who comes to visit me daily from next door, and the hummingbirds, sparrows, and jays who are frequent visitors at my feeders.

She followed me to Egypt one day, when I sat on the top deck of our cruise ship on the Nile, listening to the piped-in piano music playing all of her songs. Most of all, she is there when I put on the tape of her playing, the tape that my step-brother, Glen, made of her music. All the old favorites are there. I particularly love a fabulous duet she did of *Orchids in the Moonlight* with her sister Mary, where some of their conversation accidentally got on to the tape.

Mummy laughs out loud at the end of the duet and says, “I don’t think that was any better,” and Mary replies, “Yes, it was.” And my favorite, that I used to beg her to play all the time, is on the tape—the old Nat King Cole song:

Unforgettable, that’s what you are....

Transfixion
Lavon Urbonas
Rancho Cucamonga CA

Stunned butterfly, pinned
through her breast, strains at stilled wings,
dreams of fluttering.

A Starry, Starry Night!

Claudia Ewers
King City OR

It seems like just yesterday and, yet, it seems like it happened in another time and place and life. Memories beckon me back to a night when the heavens literally opened up to me in a powerful force of sheer majesty and grandeur. If it wasn’t for one very special person in my life at that time, I would not have had this wondrous experience that will reside in my heart for the rest of my life.

Stretched across my bed in a resort room in Sister Bay, Wisconsin, in the late hours of the night, I find myself lazily perusing the local travel guides, trying to figure out my upcoming day.

There are quaint, little gift shops and colorful art galleries to explore. Should we go for Mexican or have that traditional yummy fish boil that makes the long drive to Door County so rewarding? How about a drive to the other side of the peninsula to that peaceful little game refuge that we liked so much when the kids were little, or a ferry ride to Washington Island, or should we just take a respite by the tranquil shores of Lake Michigan and soak up some needed sun? My husband, Blaine, and my 20-year-old son, Mike, really want an all-day fishing expedition so should I be looking into that?

I had lost myself so much in imagining my tomorrow that I had forgotten about everyone around me. Somehow Mike had managed to slip out of the room without arousing the slightest notice from me. He could have been on another planet for all I knew.

I was somewhere between being a tourist who was trying to drink in the pleasures of one of my favorite places and falling fast asleep after a very busy day, when suddenly the door to our room burst wide open. Mike rushed in at what seemed like the speed of light, grabbed my arm, pulled me off the bed, and dragged me out the door. He pulled me down the corridor to the stairwell, grasping my arm even tighter. He yanked me down the stairs and out the hotel door. What awaited me there, in the serenity and peace of a still and windless night, was not only the most enthusiastic young man on planet Earth but an array of billions and billions of stars, shining with such an intense splendor, a splendor that I’d never ever quite experienced before. There were no man-made lights out there that night, only heaven-made ones, and they were putting on a light show that I’ll most certainly remember for the rest of my time on this planet.

My astronomy expert and cosmic guide, Mike, who was also an astrophysics major on break from Carleton College, gave me a remarkable tour of the skies. He excitedly raced with me from one constellation to another. They all seemed to hang suspended much lower than I had ever seen them before. The heavens were literally trying to touch the earth. These very special stars sparkled like lustrous diamonds, but some seemed as large as the moon. I was simply dazzled by

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the awesome spectacle of glory on that very magical night. Then suddenly Mike directed me to the moon, and it looked like it was hanging from a transparent lamp-post, so much fuller than the fullest moon that I'd ever seen until that very moment in time, so much fuller than any other moon that has been a part of my life thus far.

Oh, what a glorious few moments in cosmic time that have replicated themselves over and over in my heart and soul! It seems like it all happened just yesterday, or was it in another time, and place, and life? I can feel the slight chill in the night air and the feelings of peace and excitement all around me. My son's passion and excitement still arouse me. Oh, how I still remember the sights, the sounds, the awe, the wonder, and the fun of that night. They all exist down deep within my soul. Mike passionately seized the night sky on a brisk and clear autumnal night and shared it with me, and it will forever be a part of who I am and the excitement that I have while viewing a luminous, celestial sky.

Memories like these are what I cling to the most when I feel a longing to be with Mike again. He left me nine-and-a-half months later on summer solstice in 2003 to go on an eternal cosmic journey in the skies that he had loved so much. His departure came at a time when he had taken a break from working on the world's largest radio telescope in Arecibo, Puerto Rico. He and two other college interns had taken a walk in a mystical rainforest near the Arecibo Observatory, and somehow another young man and my son were swept over and trapped in a treacherous waterfall on the Tanama River. Mike's spirit flew away at that very moment in time. A lot of mystery still surrounds that fateful day. I have also found that a lot of mystery still abounds in our awesome, cosmic universe, the universe that drove Mike's passion in his short stay on planet Earth.

When I remember Mike, I remember that passion and so much love. I'm also especially grateful for the many precious moments that he scripted so majestically and for how he reached out and shared a lot of them with me. Our majestic and mystical starry, starry night, with the lustrous light of a full moon, will forever reside within me in a very special place, a place so deep within my very heart and soul!

In memory of Colin (Mike) Ewers~12-18-81 to 6-21-03

You'll Never Walk Alone

Pat Turner
Tyler TX

Lying down to sleep last night, I felt the tears begin to burn my eyes. I realized Mother's Day was fast approaching. Consciously I try to avoid it but reminders are everywhere and my subconscious still remembers: Mark isn't here to say, "I love you," and, "Happy Mother's Day."

By choice I will avoid church and restaurants where

families gather. Instead I will choose to celebrate the 31 years I enjoyed being Mark's mother. As a young mother I was proud that he never had to go anywhere, for the first time, alone. I was always there to hold his hand and maybe help dissipate any fears, both his and mine. I remember so well walking into Mrs. Trenor's Day School when he was just four. Too quickly came the day when he was ready to go alone and my heart ached as I watched him walk down that long hall.

Soon we walked together into his first-grade classroom at Grahamwood Elementary School and it seemed so long 'til I could gather with the other mothers in the hall waiting for our children. The day came when he wanted to walk with his new buddies and meet me across the street. I walked with him to school most every day through sixth grade, telling myself it was good exercise. Maybe it was, but I was still holding on a little as well. I even walked with him that first day of junior high school but since there were no other mothers there, I stopped walking him to school. To keep from embarrassing him, I let him go.

Still I was with him as he began each new life adventure: Boy Scouts and summer camp, band and driver's ed, college and his first apartment. I recall feeling both grief and pride as I followed him, driving a moving van to Dallas to be completely on his own. Tears were shed as we said goodbye. Later I felt a mother's pride as I watched him begin a new career and buy his first house, still wishing I could walk with him.

I did walk with him into the rose garden to marry the girl he loved. Now he had Carrie at his side and would never be alone. On June 19, 1997, at 3:30 in the morning, he went to a place I cannot go. Although I held one hand and Carrie held the other, he went alone. My heart aches but I am comforted by my belief that as I let go, God took his hand and he was not alone. He and God will be there to take my hand when my time comes. I will not be alone. Heaven is even more inviting knowing Mark is there to meet me.

Culture Clash

S. Ramos O'Briant
Beverly Hills CA

Mom and I take a break from moving my sister back into Mom's house. Charm is sporting a swollen lip from her latest beating, but that's getting off easy in Charmworld. This is at least her five-hundredth move home from some nasty liaison or another.

My sister says, "I told him, 'That's the last time you'll threaten to kill me,' and I walked out. I'd finally had enough. I tried to get Maya to come with me, but she wouldn't leave her daddy."

Maya is Charm's daughter. As usual, our mom refuses to acknowledge any culpability on my sister's part in her life's

choices. Mom reaches for a cigarette. "Let Maya stay with him, she likes drunkards so much!"

I scoot my chair closer to my sister to get away from the smoke. "Did he follow you out of the trailer?"

"Only to call me a whore and a slut," Charm says. "Maya wanted to go over to her grandfather's, but her dad yelled at her to stay put."

Mom pulls her cigarette away from her mouth with a snap. "She'll find out!"

Smoke billows out of her nose. She's eighty and in remission from throat cancer. Almighty, you wouldn't want to cross her path in a dark alley on a foggy night.

"Do you think he'll hurt her?" I ask. Mom looks from me to Charm, anger giving way to curiosity.

Charm hesitates. She cocks her head in the same perky way she did as a kid, her dark curls settling around her shoulders. This indicates thinking. "He never has, but—"

"He always had you to use as a punching bag," I say. She nods, her curls fluttering. My sister is petite and slim at forty-two. She can pass for a reckless nineteen if you don't look too close.

"It'll be her fault if he does," Mom says, her lips tight. "She could have gone with her mother."

She looks at me, hard, and then stares at a point above my head. Children siding with their mothers is a hot button. I left home and moved in with my father, then my aunt, then my other aunt, then my girlfriend, returning only to graduate from high school. Enough said.

"She's only eleven," I say. "She has her room there, the things she knows, her grandfather across the street. A kid would pick the known over the unknown in a crisis."

"I told her I was going to Robert's," Charm says, looking as if she's about to lead an aerobics class, even though she just spent six weeks in the hospital as a result of her last beating. "She knows him. She likes him." Robert's name has been cropping up recently.

"She knows Roger," Mom says, as if this new guy is board-certified trustworthy.

"Robert," Charm and I say at the same time.

"Whatever," Mom says, irritated. Names are irrelevant to her. She regularly calls me by the dog's name. "It's just like Maya!" She sucks on her cigarette, staring at me, her dark eyes otherworldly with a cataract sheen, but still pinpoint hard and unforgiving. "She's smart. She gets straight A's. She knows what she's doing."

I was a straight A student, too.

"She's a kid. She knows nothing." I look at my sister. "You know that, don't you?"

My sister nods again, but doesn't look at me. I feel alone. Charm's always been the type who says what people want to hear. I'm the zero-perky, reality-prone older sister.

She gets up for a glass of water. "You want some, Mom? Sis?" She pulls her chair closer to our mother's.

Mom blows smoke straight across the table at me. "You always side with everyone else against your family."

I try not to take deep breaths, reminding myself that I can return to a life where cynicism is the most violent act of

the day. "Maya's my niece. I think that makes her family. Your granddaughter."

I look at my sister. "Your daughter."

I scoot my chair back. "You're making her the scapegoat."

My sister and mother look at me, dark eyes distrustful, wide open but not receiving much.

"Let her be," I say.

"Let her go," Mom says. Charm nods.

"Let her go," I say. "It worked for me."

Spilled Secrets

Jane Cadieux

Geneva, Switzerland

From this day forward we are best friends—blood sisters—and we'll live a secret life. No matter what we do, we'll never tell anyone or let anyone come between us!

The afternoon sun of early autumn seeped through the slats of the wooden porch into our hideout. With golden beams falling through our hair, Anne and I knelt on the cracked earth, our slashed, bloodied index-fingers pressed tightly together as we chanted this incantation over sandalwood incense and a plate of peanut butter cookies. It was an innocent promise recited by two ten-year-old girls, soon to be my first bitter lesson and greatest gift.

Anne had moved into the neighborhood and into my classroom three years before. She had curly blond hair, cut boyishly around her face. Her round cheeks held up blue-rimmed glasses that matched and framed her eyes. She looked awkward standing in front of our second-grade class babbling about herself. I paid her a sideways glance and continued studying the more interesting scab on my knee.

I really don't remember when it happened but, by fifth grade, we had spilled our blood and faith into each other for eternity.

We shared everything; our doodling pens, junky trinkets, homework notes. We rode our bikes to the corner store for popsicles and spied on necking teenagers in the park. We drew comic strips and listened to records, did homework over mugs of hot chocolate. We avoided our big brothers and dodged her annoying little sister. But most of all, we shared secrets—lots of them.

After that initiation, we spent every one of our free afternoons together giggling and gossiping.

One day we rode to the five-and-dime and bought a hard-covered notebook which we decorated with stickers and pom-poms. We decided it was time to keep official records of our discussions.

We reveled in new information, ceremoniously writing each new entry while my Buddha incense holder released perfumed smoke into the air.

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“Did you see the way ___ was looking at ___? And where did ___ get those ugly shoes? And ___, she’s so snobby. And that new haircut. Yecchhh!”

We wrote about everyone. Detailed doodles and caricatures illustrated our thoughts. It was a wonderful testimonial to our secret life, filled with the latest news of who was ugly, who was popular, who was smart, who was dumb, who had a crush. The book represented life in new dimensions, relegated to underworld places: under the steps, under our beds, under the porch. It was a world that no one else could enter. It was exclusive to best friends, bound by blood.

But sometimes such closeness can start to feel constricting and it was I who gasped first.

I began to feel uncomfortable. I spent less time with other friends and, when I did, I felt badly about what Anne and I had written. Guilt started to build, slowly at first but gaining momentum as the book thickened with gossip. Suspicion soon followed. *What if Anne exposed me? What if that book of secrets fell into the wrong hands?* Every private feeling was on written record. It began to occupy my thoughts, enter my dreams. My heart pounded every day at school. *Do they know? Did she tell? Why is she giving me a funny look?*

The book took on a life of its own. It was no longer the colorful, bejeweled diary written by two pre-pubescent girls. It was an evil transcript penned by the devil, signed in blood, slowly choking my 10-year-old conscience.

There was only one way I could think of to relieve myself of this horrible feeling. *Come clean before she does it first. Confession cleanses.*

Without thinking too clearly, I committed the first and only sin of our secret life: I told another girl.

The words rolled off my tongue spilling out in a cathartic frenzy. I told her about secret meetings, showed her the book, confessed that though I thought it was a great idea at first, I now had regrets.

There! It was out. The other girl agreed that I did the right thing. For a brief moment, I thought my confidence and place in the social stratum of fifth grade would be restored. Relief should have followed. It didn’t.

The word was out and spread like wildfire. I was pardoned but not trusted. And Anne... she went through fifth grade hell. Not only did she lose every friend in our class, she was mortified. I had betrayed her. She called me up sobbing uncontrollably.

“How could you do this? I never would have done this to you!” And then the dreaded words came: “I thought you were my best friend.” The painful lump grew in my throat as the harsh click of the phone sent a dead tone ringing in my ears.

I didn’t see this coming—too immature to have foresight. Until that moment, I didn’t know what betrayal was, how it could destroy and humiliate. All I knew was that I’d done something bad—to my best friend.

I dug out our beautiful journal wedged between my mattress and box spring, threw it across the room. Picking it up, I angrily shredded page upon handcrafted page. Then the tears spilled.

The next few months were bumpy, laden with school, recitals, birthday parties, rebuffs, apologies, and confessions. Time managed to heal most of the bruised feelings. But things were never the same. No more spying on teenagers, no more secret meetings under the porch, no more sandalwood incense and peanut butter cookies.

A little part of my childhood was shredded along with that book as I look back on the almost 40 years and thousands of miles that distance me from the day I spilled the secrets. But not all was lost because I crossed the threshold toward womanhood with a gift more valuable than a childish manuscript and a slashed finger. Anne gave me that gift.

We are friends today.

Unforgettable People

Judy Watkins
Hillsboro OR

Sometimes life chooses the strangest times to bring joy, unique experiences, and unforgettable people into our lives. In November I spent four weeks in Germany while my husband healed in the hospital there. The two-week riverboat vacation that we expected never happened and instead we spent four weeks in Speyer.

Somehow I feel guilty when I tell how enriched my life was by the experiences there and the people that surrounded me. I met people that will remain life-long friends and I feel blessed by the experiences.

When the tour boat left us in Speyer they had arranged for me to stay in a hotel that was just blocks from the hospital and where the owners spoke English. My husband was in intensive care at that hospital. I felt that all was done for me that could be done before we were left alone under strange and scary circumstances.

The people who enriched my life included these.

The Lutheran minister at the hospital in Speyer is a young woman perhaps in her early 40s. I found her the first week that I was there and was pleased to find that she spoke pretty good English. When she heard my story she made arrangements for me to leave the hotel and move to the *Mutterhaus* (pronounced Mother House, a home where the aging Lutheran sisters live). At the *Mutterhaus* I had a small apartment instead of just a bedroom and the cost included two meals a day that I ate with the sisters. The cost was about a third of what the hotel was charging and the building was attached to the hospital. The minister and I met twice a week and had tea together in the hospital cafeteria. In addition, she invited me to her home one evening to meet her husband, thirteen-year-old daughter, and mother. Her mother baked a cake for the occasion and I understand that is seldom done. I was given a tour of her home so that I could compare the

differences between homes there and in the States. She became a friend that I will stay in contact with.

The woman that assigns the rooms at the *Diakonissen Mutterhaus*, where the sisters live, was a minister's wife and a very friendly person. She took me to my room, and showed me where I would eat the two meals provided, where to take my laundry when it needed doing, and all the other things that I needed to know. Her English was minimal but we managed to get our messages across. She watched out for me, came to visit in my room from time to time, and was always available to me if I had questions. When I left she gave me a candle; the stained glass cup that held it was made in Jerusalem. That will always be a very special remembrance for me.

The priest and manager, or perhaps CEO, of the *Mutterhaus* was a well-traveled man. That building is not just a home for the sisters but also houses the offices for the church-owned hospital. While I was there he summarized his sermons in English just for my benefit. He chose songs to be sung from a hymnal that also included words in English. He visited with me often and for a parting gift gave me a book about a man who was born in Speyer and later, after making his fortune in the States, built not only the *Mutterhaus* and hospital but buildings at Oregon State University (a first edition, written in English.) He is a very special man.

I met a woman who originally lived in England. The bookkeeper at the hospital introduced us to each other because she worried that I didn't have anybody to speak English with. We enjoyed each other's company and went for long walks together. She also invited me to her home for an English meal as she thought that I might be getting tired of German cooking. She called me when I arrived home. She will always be in my memories.

The sisters—42 of them—where I lived were all over 70 and none spoke English. There are very few young women giving their lives to the church in that way today. These women were all either nurses or teachers when they were younger. The people who helped me get there told them my story and anything else important as it came up. They said prayers for my husband's healing; they gave me hugs and let me know they cared. Several gave me little gifts when I left. They were indeed very special people in my life.

The doctors and nurses in intensive care were fantastic. They found people who spoke at least some English to care for my husband. They were concerned about my health and reminded me often to let them know if I needed anything. One doctor loaned me three books from his personal library as I had run out of reading material. He said he reads one book in English each year to help retain his skills in the language. At all times the doctors ensured that I understood what was happening with my husband and what I could expect to happen. I have never met more considerate and caring doctors. I will never forget them.

I have to say about my experiences there that it was a bad situation but, for me, the trip was filled with blessings—too many to count. How thankful I am for these very special people.

Adventure Days

Erin Declan Philbin

Pittsburg PA

When my oldest son, Brendan, was born eleven years ago, I was in a bit of a funk. He cried all the time and I was used to a certain amount of time to myself. After several cranky Saturdays, I decided, in a flash of genius—*duh*—to take him out with me. Thus Adventure Days were born. Sure they were shaky at first, both of us covered in spit-up and crying from sheer exhaustion. I must say, though, he earned more sympathetic glances than I. Curdled milk must look cuter on kids.

Before too long, I learned to leave for home before we were tired out, and then our trips began to go more smoothly. Brendan enjoyed being out and cried much less when he was away from home. For my part, I realized that even a short trip to a craft shop, book store, or coffee shop did wonders for my psyche.

Four years later, when my younger son, Owen, was born, I quickly brought him up to speed. We updated our list of all the best lady's lounges for breastfeeding and racing Hot Wheels and a routine and some ground rules were established: someplace for them, someplace for me, and lunch.

Lunch has always been a work in progress. For years, it was nothing but Happy Meals with chicken nuggets, or Kid's Club Meals with chicken nuggets, and a cardboard crown to break the monotony. After several years of Saturday lunches accompanied by small plastic toys, I made an executive decision: no more fast food.

I decided we would eat at places where there are actual menus, where people cook your order, and then bring it to you. We've now expanded our repertoire considerably. We even eat at Pan Asian restaurants! (Guess what you get if you order Sweet and Sour Chicken with the sauce on the side? Chicken nuggets!) I ignore that the younger one is having nothing but steamed rice and green tea. We pick restaurants where we all can order something, and I turn an occasional blind eye to nutrition. My sons, in turn, say nothing when we make an additional stop at a coffee house or tea shop for an extra hit of caffeine for Mom. It all works very well for us; after all, how many seven-year-olds do you know who love green tea?

Today we had a great lunch. I had a grilled veggie wrap with feta cheese, Brendan had French toast and French fries—very continental—while Owen had a bagel with cream cheese and a dish of applesauce. We stopped at Pittsburgh Cyberconxion for an hour of video game play for them. I settled in with a tablet, pen and a mocha latte for an uninterrupted hour of writing.

The adventure continues.

*"Great opportunities to help others seldom come,
but small ones surround us every day."*

~Sally Koch~

Looking Inward...



Year of Jubilee

Mary Sullivan, rc
Ronkonkoma NY

1957–2007 is fifty years, half a century.

I graduated from Fordham University in June, 1957. I had trained to be a speech therapist, a field so new it was undeveloped. To fulfill degree requirements I had to fill out my major course work with classes in acting, public speaking, group dynamics, choral recitation, and radio. I studied speech pathology and phonetics. I learned how to listen to any language and be able to translate into phonetics every word I heard. I imaged phonetically; I thought phonetically; I wrote phonetically.

Fordham University's school of education (a commuter college) was located at 302 Broadway in New York City, just two blocks from City Hall Park. We called the park our campus as it was the only green site around. Our building was fourteen stories high and contained the business school, the law school, and ours.

Our students ran the gamut from callow teenagers fresh from high school to Korean vets. It was the last year the latter could take advantage of the G.I. Bill of Rights to pay for their education. Thus we were a motley crew.

Several women in my freshman class entered the *Miss Rheingold* competition. I had never seen such beautiful women, their waists so tiny, their dress size three. The boys were boys but the vets had a weary cynicism because of war-warped hearts. Despite all that, and maybe because of all that, we were a class that quickly bonded and melded into a lively presence that moved and spoke as one.

I was exposed to a whole new wonderful world. I did not know that five boroughs composed New York City. I learned to pick a baseball team (the Brooklyn Dodgers) and become a rabid fan. I loved our camaraderie of laughter, tears, and fears shared over lunch in the windowless, dingy, underground room rocked by passing subway cars. It did not deserve to be called a cafeteria. I demonstrated outside the Russian Embassy during the Hungarian Revolution of '56. I volunteered to teach religion to deaf students. I traveled five hours a day to make the roundtrip from Trenton, New Jersey to Manhattan. I grew to be an expert commuter—finding back stairs in Penn Station to get on the train ahead of other passengers and so ensure a seat for myself.

I was happy, active, involved. In the midst of all this excitement I was invited by God to enter religious life. After an intense struggle I responded to that call in September of 1957. What a contrast of life styles! There were 19 of us women, aging from 16 to 39, who entered together. We were not allowed to know each other's first names, where we had come from, our backgrounds, our professions. We lived a rigid rule of silence broken only by spiritual conversations with our superior. As a community we recreated together twice a day.

Our daily schedule, a jumble of short time periods, was punctuated always by a summoning bell and never varied. Unexposed to television, newspaper, or radio, we literally did not know what was happening in the world. I refused to vote as I felt I was not *au courant* to make an informed decision. I railed against the rigidity. I mourned the loss of family, friends, freedom, and home. We sponge-bathed daily using a pitcher and basin. We showered and changed our personal linen only once a week, our bed linen every two weeks.

I hated routine, despised the lack of privacy, and minded not being allowed to read a book or newspaper. I hated having to ask to go to the bathroom. I missed the activism of speaking out or speaking for a cause.

Vatican II changed the emphasis on the exteriors of religious life. We were allowed to wear secular clothes, read the newspaper, watch television, go to the library, drive a car, go out to the doctor. We could visit family and friends, eat a meal with our family, and swim in a public pool.

How did I let go of the hated externals? What changed me? Why am I happy now? God changed my interior. Religious life is a relationship with God, not a set of exterior movements. I now walk the corridors of the convent in which I live and am overwhelmed with the grace of gratitude. God has given me so much.

A woman of prayer, I live with loving prayerful women. I minister to those desirous of deeper relationship with God. I have found my voice again. I write, I pray with words, I pray without words. I am flooded with love.

What is religious life, this life I am celebrating this year of jubilee? It is a life lived with others, for others. It is a life of deep interior prayer. It is an active life flowing out of that prayer. It calls me to make my voice heard on behalf of the voiceless. It calls me to be stripped—to be poor with the poor, loving with the loveless, obedient to the Voice of God Who continually interrupts my life with His Presence and demands my presence with the needy.

How and when did I shift? I don't know. I only know I have been seized by God.

I have tried to conjure up a metaphor that would symbolize what has been and is my experience. I think of a glacier, a humongous continent of ice. It is impervious, sufficient to itself. Warmth begins the ice's transformation. It changes its composition and becomes a body of water. This water services the thirsty, the needy. It melts away until it becomes one with the water, fluid, able to move and change direction as needed. The love of God has set me, as a consecrated religious woman, afire.

*If I Could Better Myself in One Way,
What Would It Be,
and How Would I Do It?*

Leilani Rose
Austin TX

During a guided visualization several years ago, I was asked to picture myself walking toward the house of my dreams. As I approached, the front door opened and I was welcomed by a woman who seemed vaguely familiar—someone I knew but couldn't quite place.

The woman had gleaming silver hair, bright eyes that crinkled at the corners, and a generous smile. Her slightly wrinkled face glowed as if the sun had gently kissed her cheeks and forehead. Her body was trim and fit, her muscles well-defined. She wore thick socks, hiking boots, khaki shorts and a navy-blue sweat shirt. She looked strong, healthy, happy, and serene. She told me she was called Goddess and invited me in for tea.

She told me that I must quit settling for less than I wanted and deserved. She told me that she was my future, that she was me at age 70.

If I could better myself in one way, I would quit settling for aching knees, tight muscles, and short breath. If I could better myself in one way, I would replace physical weakness with flexibility and strength. If I could better myself in one way, I would opt for a level of fitness that would allow me to take long walks on the beach, to hike in the mountains, to dance with abandon to the rapid beat of a drum, and to stretch my body to the sound of a Japanese flute. If I could better myself in one way, I would do everything in my power to look and feel like Goddess when I hit 70.

So how would I do this? I would quit feeling guilty about actions and inactions of the past and simply begin. I would quit feeling a sense of futility about how long it will take and simply begin. I would quit holding off until a plan is in place and the time is right and simply begin. I would quit thinking that you don't start something new on a weekend and simply begin.

I would focus on the next step instead of the end result. I would identify intermediate milestones and reward myself for success along the way instead of punishing myself for each case of falling off the wagon. I would engage in physical activities that I find pleasing instead of those that bore me to death. I would gradually learn to take as much pleasure in my body as I do in my mind and spirit.

I would look to Goddess for guidance and inspiration and I would celebrate my 70th birthday with a hike in the Grand Tetons and a yoga retreat in Costa Rica.

*"When one person heals,
the rest of the world is deeply affected.
We don't heal alone."
~Diane Cirincione~*

Twilight
Marti Weisbrich
Round Rock TX

Light and darkness, darkness and light: combine them and you have twilight. Twilight, that whimsical, magical time between worlds, that time before sunrise or the time after sunset. As I grow older, it is in the twilight times that I find my harmonious inner self.

Both light and darkness by themselves are so needed for balance but in my earlier years, darkness was the teacher. In the times of darkness in my life, the times of raging despair, of fear, of uncertainty, I was tested in ways that now that I am older, I realize were great gifts.

Digging in the dark to reach the light, to find hope, requires an extra sense, the sense that I call my inner flashlight. Many times in my life, I searched for a way out of the darkness. In my twenties, when our twin daughters were born prematurely, I prayed that they would be healthy. They spent three weeks in the hospital and I cannot begin to tell you the feeling of sadness in having to leave them in the hospital after giving birth and coming home without my babies. Trying to find solace in my early thirties, as both of my parents died, within two years of each other, both of them dying in my arms. Letting myself feel joy in learning in my forties that I did not have breast cancer. Several years ago, in my fifties, gathering up the courage to uproot ourselves from all that was familiar to begin an odyssey of living a nomadic existence, searching and finding different states to live in on this journey of finding our great America. Also in my fifties, facing the fear of an accident up in the snow and ice of the Cascade Mountains in Washington and realizing that I did not die up in those forbidding mountains. Going back the following year to the site of the accident and finding closure and letting go of the fear.

We all have this special tool, our personal flashlight, but some of us never feel the need to click it on. We say, "It is in God's hands," or, "It is what it is," or, "Just accept it and move on." I never liked those pat answers for I needed to face each situation and myself—head on.

I needed to look into the abyss, or as educator, author, poet, and playwright Patrick Overton says, "When we walk to the edge of all the light we have and take the step into the darkness of the unknown, we must believe that one of two things will happen. There will be something solid for us to stand on or we will be taught to fly."

I chose to fly, to take that leap into the darkness, using my inner flashlight as my compass. My inner flashlight is a light that took its time to fill my soul, but fill it, it did, starting as a little spark in my brain, gradually lighting my heart and then finally bursting forth into illuminating soul answers.

We all carry moments of light and dark within us. It is what we learn from those times, when one is more prevalent in our lives than the other, that teach us who we are. Elizabeth Kubler Ross has a wonderful quote that says, "People are like stained glass windows: they sparkle and

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shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light within.”

It has been a profound discovery that when I connect with my light within, when I turn on my inner flashlight, rely on my instincts, and listen to the words coming from my head, I wrap around them the words that also come from my heart and soul. It always lessens the darkness that threatens to creep into my life. I said lessen, not extinguish, for I believe in the yin and yang of light and dark. When I do this, I bask in the light within. When I do this—combining darkness and light to get twilight—I find that that time of discovery before and after is paramount to living a life of hope and simple joys.

My Memory Closet

Helen Rousseau
Kennebunk ME

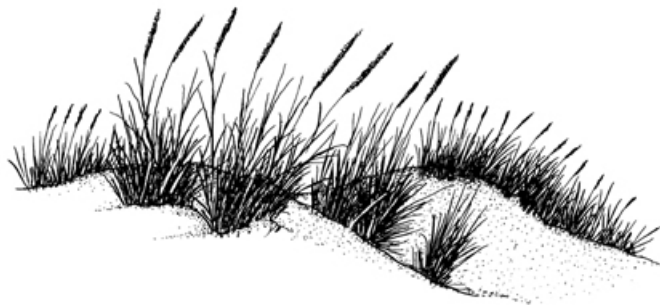
I've managed to live well,
this life without you.
There are days, surprisingly,
when I don't give you a thought.

Yet, hidden in my memory closet,
stuffed in the corners,
and piled on the shelves
are days of pain
that had no end,
sleepless nights
that were a blessing
because of the quiet.
And days of believing
if I could only get it right;

Some ghost dares to open
that closet door and let
memories spill out
taking over my days,
the space I've created,
the peace I have found
and I am once again
faced with your cruelty
and callous disregard
for my feelings.

I choose to confront
those demons that
haunt me, and with grieving
that feels endless, I let go
a little more of what never was
and never could be. Even still,
I want to burn that closet down.

Nature and Seasons...



Who Likes the Beach

Sonja Borstner
Woodlands TX

Ida Irena grew up a countess in the strategic country of Poland until the Russians, then the Nazis, then the Russians again invaded her homeland. She and her mother escaped with what they could carry on their backs and in their hands. Ida has traveled amazing mountains in Europe, Canada, the United States.

Now 89, Ida says in her letter from Clear Lake, Texas, that she agrees with my love of mountains. She goes on to write, “I never understand what people like about the sea. I can't stand the noise.”

I love that sound of surf rushing to see what's on the shore, the hiss of sand animals, the bubble of sea creatures, the crash of water against sand foaming at the mouth, the moist air. I love the sound of bird feet hitting the soft sand, the patter and puff.

For my first 30 years, I lived half an hour from the coast of Southern California and I remember my initial distaste: the rub of sand into my skin where my bathing suit was snug, my first caution and fear of waves taller than I was. I also remember my father holding my hand and walking with me into the waves.

I gradually gained confidence and dealt with undertow and being sucked under the waves, dragged along the bottom, struggling to surface and gain a breath of air. Skinned knees. Ruffled nerves.

I tell Ida I've learned from the ocean:

to hold hands with someone I love when I'm
scared,
to walk into turbulence with calm confidence,
to pull against the gravity of mediocrity that
would pull me under,
to trust that I can surface when doubts drag me
down,
to remember to breathe deeply to gain my center
and my consciousness,
to know that skinned knees are temporary,
and that I can unruffle my own nerves.

A Heron in Discovery Bay

Tiffany Benton

Wailuku HI

I've escaped from work to the house on Discovery Bay. I crawl into the window seat, and pick up an old pair of my dad's binoculars. I'm distracted and bereft of any creative inspiration. Steel-gray waters, cloudy skies, and dripping fir trees greet me. Otters, seals, bald eagles, water birds, and herons fill my viewfinder. I remember walks along the railroad track picking blackberries, red juice staining my fingers. I check the cupboard for the old tea set thinking about parties with Grandma Gladys and her homemade berry cobbler.

Days pass. Time is marked by changes in the tide, weather, animals, and recollections. Curiosity keeps me returning to the window. One clear morning the tide is low as wading birds search for food. Standing perfectly still in six inches of glassy water, a heron scans the squishy muddy floor of the bay. Slowly muscles tense as the bird shifts its weight forward low to the water, parallel to the surface. The moment is opportune and the heron pushes off the sea bottom. Its wings unfold outward and pump against the morning air. The bird rises. Water dribbles off dangling feet leaving a trail of diamonds on the surface of the bay as outstretched wings flap and flap again. In flight over the water, the heron's long steel-gray neck strains and its sharp beady eyes search for shellfish to devour. As the bird's feet were the last to leave the water they are the first to be part of the landing. Webbed toes drop down and the horizontal flight changes to a vertical one. Wings flap slowing the flight then fold inward as the bird lowers itself back into the bay. In slow motion, it walks through the water, and leaves a quiet V-shaped wake in its path.

I'm surprised to find that I'm holding my breath as I watch the patient heron. A flicker of excitement stirs my blood as the idea for a story crosses my mind.

Sorrel Summer

Marlene B. Samuels

Chicago IL

She holds the leaf out for approval—newly sprouted sorrel that grows wild on the hillsides. My mother's excited by the find, excitement she hopes I'll share. She treats me as though I'm older than my ten years. So much of the time I am. We stroll, chatting as tall grasses tickle my bruised legs.

Summer in Canada, my favorite time of year, is quite possibly the happiest for us. We're in the Laurentian Mountains, a few hours north of Montreal by car. "The country," my parents and their friends call the area. It's the warm-weather haven for Holocaust survivors, their unique version of summer camp. The Laurentian villages are replete with vestiges of old Europe. Here everything blossoms overnight. Here, there is so much day, so little night.

My mother's petite hands are rough from sewing, cooking, and always too much cleaning. But with the glossy

leaf cradled between her fingertips they seem different, assuming a refreshed aura as though belonging to a woman who serves tea to friends in the parlor. I notice the delicate bend of her wrist, sun glistening on the leaf, and her golden hair. She marvels at the leaf's symmetry, turning it to admire such total perfection.

From our place on the ridge, I see my father near our cottage—a clapboard shack they rent each summer. He and my brother scurry repeatedly from car to porch, carrying boxes, unpleasant exchanges between them. Their voices are inaudible over cricket chirps and crow calls. I see dust plumes my brother kicks from gravel with each step.

"Here, taste this," my mother demands.

I'd forgotten about the sorrel, preoccupied with the driveway scene. She yanks me back into the moment. Insisting I share her memory, she begins to tell a splinter of her story.

"In Romania, when I was a girl, my mother made soup out of something just like this. *Sauerblaten* she called it—sour leaves. Now I'm sure it was this, wild sorrel."

She smiles so slightly that only those closest to her would recognize it as a smile. It's a spontaneous lip movement that raises her left cheek slightly higher than the right, a gesture signaling that long-vaulted memories are about to be unlocked.

"Sometimes my mother put thin-skinned potatoes into the soup, new potatoes with barely a peel. Boiled, but not too much or the skins crack. Before serving us, she'd drop spoonfuls of sour cream into each bowl. You can't imagine how really wonderful this tasted. What I'd give to have this now, served by my mother."

She continues with softened voice, slowed the way it does when she's falling asleep. My mother seems to be talking to herself. "Oh, you'd love it. Oh, she'd love you."

Her eyes reflect too much sunlight, too much sky. She holds tears in check. Aware of my every swallow, I feel anxious. There's nothing to comfort her or make things less sad while she's remembering another life, one in which she too had a mother. Her face tells it was a good life. She'd been a happy young woman before the war, before words—concentration camp—evoked unspeakable sorrows.

"If springtime could have a taste," she says, "I'm sure it would be wild sorrel soup. I know it because I've lived springtime tastes in Romania, in mountains like these."

My father scrambles to the top of the grassy hill leading up from our driveway, eyes fixated on my lips. The shiny leaf disappears behind them. I smile but his face is transforming into a succession of faces: shock, rage, lonely distress.

"What's the matter with you?" He snaps at my mother in Yiddish. This is a new breed of sound I've never heard from him, laying deep within his chest, a voice dwelling between whispers and growls.

"You didn't eat enough grass in the camps? It's disgraceful what you're doing, behaving like this now, in this place," he hisses, admonishing her, cursing in Polish. My

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father spits vigorously on the ground displaying disgust like the old Jews in our ghetto neighborhood do.

I stop chewing, the leaf inside my cheek begging to be chewed more, willing my mouth to freeze, settle, and relax. Its sweet-sour taste languishes on my tongue. My wish to end my father's distress goes unanswered. Not understanding why my mother ate grass makes me gasp for breath. My father's anger weighs upon me like our fat cat sitting on my chest.

In *eine Augenblick*, an eye blink, childhood pleasures distort into feelings recognizable as shame. My face warms, reddens, and stings with embarrassment.

"Meyer, it's not what you think." My mother speaks slowly, barely audible. "Let's think back before that time, for our children. Remember when *sauerblaten* meant springtime, nothing more? Nothing more! Let's not think about our other times, please?"

My parents share dark secrets between them, ones they whisper to each other at night, in darkness while everything around them slumbers. Sometimes whispers become cries then fade to whimpers. They talk about the secret now.

They reach an accord—one of many they make together, their marriage based upon accords and infinite secrets. They surface in drips leaked unexpectedly at times like this.

Neither of them speaks. There's nothing to say but their silence lacks awkwardness. If there had been any, nature's surrounding hum creates the perfect foil. Instead, each looks off toward a different distance, scanning lush hilltops and aquamarine skies. They absorb it all, but separately—each lost in secret, sad thoughts.

Looking at me together as though they'd forgotten me entirely and remembered suddenly, their faces regain composure. In unison they now smile, taking hold of my hands, one on either side. My father kisses me on my head. As a threesome we begin to walk.

"Come," he says. "Jacob's waiting."

Slowly, we make our way down the grassy knoll and my mother resumes her story about sorrel soup and the taste of springtime.

Summer Lament

Lisa Shirah-Hiers

Austin TX

Spring is the season I like best
In Texas.
The wild, bright flowers,
Green the grass—longed for verdant horizon.
Bold tiny leaves quiver,
Roll like water on the tips of the trees.
The redbuds bloom early
And fields of brilliant blue
Invade even the urban landscape
Painting meridians of highways
Lapis lazuli lush.

But by early summer
Brilliant blue of the bonnets
And scarlet of paintbrush
And the pink of evening primrose
Perish for another year
And the golds and oranges I like less
Reflect the interminable sun.
Then it is only the nightshade
Purple nestled in its silver leaves
That rests my yellow eye
And gives me courage
In the long, lingering, languishing season.

Augusts' Awakening

Susan Myrick

Glencoe IL

August is the month when suntans mature into shades of autumn and it's the pause before time turns its attention to September. It's the month that pulls us from the lazy hammock of summer and demands we attend to preparations for a new school year. August is the month of sewing, of putting together a new wardrobe, and of enthusiasm. August transforms sheets of luscious textiles into skirts (A-line and pleated), dresses (everyday and party), and winter coats. August means stray pins and discarded threads hitching rides on our socks.

My mother and I spend air-conditioned hours at the department store, on the second floor, in the textiles section. We prop on high stools and bend over gigantic-sized pattern books. The illustrations in *Vogue*, *Simplicity*, and *McCall's* are inseparable from the hopeful images I imagine for myself. A particular curve of a hem or gesture of color awakens possibilities, renewing hopes for greater social and academic success.

After selecting patterns, we stalk, as for treasure, long aisles heaped with bolts of cloth. We are in pursuit of perfect fabrics that will complement our perfect patterns. We examine herringbone, zigzag, polka-dot, stripes, checkers, and paisleys. An exciting color or design requires close examination and evaluation—its feel to the touch and the grace of its drape. If a fabric passes the price-tag and easy-care tests, I am free to fall in love with it for its aesthetic qualities.

I am fond of Scottish plaids for school, in combinations of deep reds, soft blues, bright greens, blacks, and sunny yellows. Tartans smell to me of bubblegum-pink erasers and fresh pencil shavings in school-bus yellow. Plaid is as neat as snow-white socks and saddle shoes, as promising as college-ruled paper.

Labor Day means the last picnic of the year and, after dessert, the last chance to chase lightning bugs. Summers' endings awaken me to school-time routines—vigorous shampooing and scrubbing clean in the family tub, curlers in, school clothes laid out, and early to bed. I will wake to yet another dawn of another school year.

The Leaf

Helen Rousseau
Kennebunk ME

As the last flakes of snow
are falling and the wind
swirls them around,
my focus—out this kitchen
window—catches sight of a
brown oak leaf clinging,
in its vulnerability, to
that naked branch
buffeted by the wind.

I see, in that leaf,
what I was but no longer am,
no longer holding on to
what seemed permanent,
knowing when to let go,
looking forward to
transformation.

A Reluctant Rebirth

Jane Cadieux
Geneva, Switzerland

Spring didn't always represent rebirth. From my childhood bedroom window I was forced to watch my winter wonderland vanish before my eyes as backyard skating rinks melted into icy puddles. My giant snowman shrank to a shapeless mound of slush, his rotten carrot nose hanging by an ice thread, his tattered scarf waving in surrender. Streets flooded with run-off from temporary mountains of snow accumulation and snow blowers' flues. Most heart-wrenching was to witness the melt-down of the Olympic toboggan run that my father, brother, and I had engineered one Saturday. It started from the peak of a snow pile towering 30 feet high and curved into our driveway—a 50-yard stretch iced to perfection with the garden hose. We shrieked, we laughed, we thrilled in victory, agonized in defeat. We were alive.

But, damp rain-swelled air began to force even the most resilient outdoor child to retreat indoors. As tree branches trembled in their nakedness like wobbly pen scratches against a blank sky, I pondered what was to come as my crisp winter world receded into muddy pools.

It would be nice to shed long itchy underwear, heavy sweaters and stiff snowsuits, hats that constantly slid down over eyes, soaked mittens, drenched boots, and scarves glued to the face by nose drips. I could just run out the front door...not sit and layer cotton into wool into nylon for an eternity. Parks would sprout swings, slides, and daffodils.

Suddenly I remembered a distant promise Dad made on the toboggan run: "I'll teach you to ride a two-wheeler."

Slowly I emerged from the waterlogged chrysalis of my snowsuit, testing my new unweighted spring legs as they danced airily to the cracking rhythm of a pink skipping rope or took their places at the pedals of a shiny red two-wheeler. Well, okay, maybe spring is about rebirth.

*Travel Wisdom...**A Traveler's Toilet Training*

Dorothy Ross
Davis CA

I hate public restrooms. I hate them so much that I set my alarm two hours before I need to leave the house just to be sure that I get the feeling of relief in the privacy of my own bathroom. However, I do love to travel, so satisfying my most intimate of needs is often the ultimate challenge of life on the road.

On a two-week camping trip from San Diego to Cabo San Lucas, my husband and I traveled in *de gustibus*, our old Volkswagen bus with foldout bed and rudimentary cooking facilities but no toilet. Spoiled by years of hiking among the protective firs of the Sierra, I was not prepared for the lack of vegetation on the Baja peninsula. One fateful night we slept in a Mexican national park on the Pacific coast where we joined a wagon circle of other campers who had also detoured to this spot to watch the annual whale migration. As expected, there were plenty of spouting whales, but unlike the American park service, the Mexicans provided no public toilets and—what was worse—there were no trees either and no place to hide. The other, larger, campers were self-contained while we, unfortunately, were forced to go *au naturel*.

For the first time in my life I had to agree with Freud: I really did envy the specialized male plumbing that allowed Bill to stand there looking nonchalantly out to sea while he sprayed the pebbles. There is simply no way to squat with nonchalance. But I had to do something, and quickly, or nature would soon solve the problem for me. So I rooted around in *de gustibus* looking for something—anything—that could be pressed into service as a port-a-potty. In desperation, I turned my favorite Tupperware salad bowl into my *pot to piss in*.

It was on a raft trip through the Grand Canyon the following summer that I discovered what must have been the Bedouin women's answer to this centuries-old female problem. The first night out, before we bedded down on the banks of the Colorado, the guide barked, "Skirts up, pants down," and we quickly understood his jargon for segregated toilet areas. When I walked upstream with the other women, I observed a simple, commonsense solution to my dilemma. Claire, a white-haired, lizard-skinned veteran world traveler, casually donned a burnoose-like garment, which might have been designed by Omar the tentmaker. Under the cover of this spreading, faded green camouflage she tended to the business at hand quite nonchalantly.

I was thrilled to find a similar, though flaming red caftan in a beach shop in San Diego. I have used it gratefully, if not always gracefully, while camping from the halls of Canyon de Chelly to the shores of the Indian Ocean. In fact, I have gained such a feeling of security from my huge red coverall that I have since thrown away the old green Tupperware bowl.

Me

Lavon Urbonas
Rancho Cucamonga CA

I knew Me once.
Me,
not just
someone's daughter,
someone's wife,
someone's mother,
but Me, my own Someone.

I enjoyed Me then.
Me,
not just
reading the book,
singing the music,
feeding the grandchildren,
but enjoying Me feeling the joy.

I am losing Me.
Me,
now mostly
a rock,
a refuge,
a caregiver.
But I knew that other Me once.

Grand Canyon

Sharon Tieman
Austin TX

My many trips to the Grand Canyon have shaped my life in directions I never dreamed of 15 years ago.

I was 60 years old when I undertook a five-day backpacking trip into the inner canyon. Carrying 40 pounds in my backpack and hiking down the rugged unmaintained Hermit Trail, from the rim to the river the first day, was more effort than I ever imagined. After five days of hiking from creek to creek for our water source, sleeping in a tent, and eating freeze-dried food, I then hiked out in a heavy snowstorm.

As difficult as this was, I felt such joy at what I had been able to accomplish. Suddenly I was hooked on the Grand Canyon.

Since that time I have made four other backpacking trips of five to six days on other remote trails in the inner canyon, and I discovered there that I am a part of that awesome place. I feel so powerful to be a conqueror of the harsh elements. At the same time I am humbled by the thought of how insignificant I am—only a tiny speck in the midst of all the canyon's grandeur.

Story Circle Network
PO Box 500127
Austin TX 78750-0127