

# TRUE WORDS

*from*

## Real Women

An Anthology of Life Writing  
by the Women of Story Circle Network

Edited by Mary Jo Doig

Layout by Robin Wittig

*An Annual Publication of Story Circle Network  
The Organization for Women With Stories to Tell*

### **May I Have a Word With You?**

Mary Ann Parker, Sugar Land TX, w-ecircle I

When I write, I roll a word around in my mind as if I am tasting it. Reading a word, speaking a word, hearing a word, or writing a word can be as breath-taking as holding a lovely piece of glass to the light. I delighted in my baby's first word. The first word a child reads for himself brings a sense of accomplishment for him and encouragement from others. Of course, we find meaning as we begin to string words together in thoughts and sentences, and the words used in the craft of storytelling are amazing tools, but a single word when considered alone can be a source of amazement.

My English teacher in high school loved the word "murmur." A musical friend's favorite is "alleluia." Author and world traveler Francis Mayes says that two of her favorite words are linked together: "departure" and "time." Poet Molly Peacock says she first fell in love with the word "joy" because it had a circle inside! I love the word "lullaby."

I fell in love with poetry because I love tasting the words and looking at them as light shines through.



Letter from the editors:

*A large circle of talented women birthed the Anthology you are about to read. The poems and stories in the following pages have brought me smiles, sadness, joy, and laughter as I have, always feeling privileged, given each several readings. Some pieces took much courage to write, others record simple beauty of everyday moments, and all reflect the rich truths of each woman's life. Some have intersected in ways with my own story and I know that you, too, will find parts of your story here.*

*A little more about this large circle. First, it begins with you, our SCN authors who have generously gifted us with your life stories.*

*Next is Robin Wittig, to whom I send a very long Word document (think 52 pages of size 10 font) with carefully selected and edited stories and poems. When she sends me her layout, I never fail to enjoy the magic Robin does with arranging and illustrating your words. Following my final edit, I return the document to Robin. She makes those changes and the Anthology is ready to go to press in Austin.*

*None of this word-passing back and forth from authors all over the country to me, to Robin, and exchanges could happen without the extraordinary talent of our Executive Director, Peggy Moody, integral to the circle I speak of. Peggy created, maintains, and continually upgrades the internet place we all know as [www.storycircle.org](http://www.storycircle.org), the vital center for so much of what we do.*

*Our Board of Directors and our current president, Pat LaPointe, work quietly in shaping and moving us forward in our evolution.*

*And last, yet really first and foremost—bringing us back full circle—is Susan Albert, Story Circle Network's founder, who understood the deep need for and importance of women telling their life stories and decided, more than a decade ago, to create this unique organization.*

*Picture the hands of each of the above women, along with so many others past and present, joined together in commitment to women all over the world to encourage us to share our life stories, and you will feel the essence, the heart and soul, of Story Circle Network.*

Enjoy!

Robin Wittig, layout

Mary Jo Doig, editor



## Story Circle Network

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

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**Missed Issues:** We try to ensure that the *True Words Anthology* arrives in your mailbox each year. If you miss an issue, send us a note and we'll mail you a replacement.

**Change of address:** If you move, please tell us.

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**“Only I can tell my story.” ~J. Simmons**

## Story Harvest—Collective Resilience

Julia Simmons, Ennice NC

Write the things they tell you not to write.  
Identify a thread here or a thread there.  
Bare thread, but not thread bare.

Collective resilience.  
Start starting, start—expect  
To be surprised.  
How juicy that is...

It's really okay.  
Develop spiritually.  
It's all about integrity,  
Phenomenal women.  
Rich stories I have yet to meet,  
The other people in the stories.  
Proud devotion of the day.

And Marcie links me to the world.

Collective resilience is the mask of human experience  
I delight  
Together women trust safety.  
Saying out loud,  
“That story brings tears to my eyes—why that one?”

My daughters knew I needed  
To be open again.  
Bring it together.  
We are ripe peaches: bruised, sweet, juicy.  
Wisdom, suffering; none have escaped.

And there it is.  
The wonderful experience of being able to hear  
And you listened.  
Common threads of my peers stir the pot.

Amaze with power.  
“Hope” is the word I'll take away.  
It's given me that itch  
I'm ready for the intensive now.  
“Ain't nothing to it, but to do it.”  
Deeper writing, clarifying filter.

Circle women talk heart to remind:  
Younger women don't have to re-invent all the wheels.  
Pass on rocket powered, turbo charged short cuts.  
Only I can tell my story.  
The first life to save is my own.

*Poem created by the author from the collective closing comments to Harvesting our Stories, Facilitated by Liz Dowling-Sendor and Anita McLeod, September 8, 2012*

## Why I Write

Cathy Scibelli, East Norwich NY

At the age of nine, I decided I was going to be a writer. What prompted this career choice was that I fell in love with mystery novels about this time and read every one I could get my hands on, from juvenile mysteries such as Nancy Drew to the more adult stories of Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie.

I thought it must be wonderful to plan mystery stories and create interesting characters. I distinctly remember looking up from one of the books I was reading one evening and announcing I was going to be a mystery writer. My mother, true to her practical nature, scoffed without glancing up from her crossword puzzle, "Don't get your hopes up. Hardly anybody gets books published." My father, on the other hand, looked up from his paper and vowed to buy every one of my books.

While I continued to enjoy reading these mysteries for several more years, I didn't try to make up any of my own stories during that time. Since all the books I read were written by adults, I thought I should wait until I got older to start writing. My first foray into writing turned out to be a letter to the editor of a newspaper. One night I overheard my parents talking about the issue of prison reform. I became incensed as I learned that prisoners were allowed social gatherings to watch television at an hour that was past my bedtime, and given recreation times during the day when I was stuck sitting in school being lectured by nuns. How could criminals be treated less strictly than I was?

Our local newspaper featured a "Teen Letters" column, so I decided to write a letter about this grave injustice. I was so confident about how well I had argued my case that children should have more rights than these "coddled" prisoners (I remember finding that impressive word in my thesaurus) that I told my parents I was sure my letter would be chosen for the special honor of being "Teen Letter of the Week." My mother patiently explained to me that the paper received many letters each week, and I should be happy if mine just got printed. My father said he was sure my letter would be chosen and he was right. Along with the honor came a check for \$10! I decided that journalism was my calling.

The next year when I entered high school I joined the school paper and began writing the small feature articles assigned to underclassmen. But the factual writing style was

boring and I hated having to do interviews as I was very shy.

However, I enjoyed writing stories and essays for my English classes and received a lot of praise from those teachers, so I started to think again about pursuing more creative avenues for my writing bug. I daydreamed about following in the footsteps of Hemingway, having an office hideaway in the tropics where I would invent fascinating stories to enthrall my readers.

Those daydreams dissolved when my father developed lung cancer and died at the end of my freshman year and our financial situation turned dire. My mother's sober view of life became the dominant force in my world and the idea of pursuing a writing career, with all its inherent risks and uncertainties, was buried deep in my mind, further out of reach than the stars in the nighttime sky.

I became a secretary, got married, and did all the practical things we're supposed to do as adults. Occasionally I would play with some writing and get a few articles published. But I was always sure to let everyone know that writing was just a fun hobby. I had grown out of my childish dreams; I wasn't like one of those nuts announcing to the world that they were working on the next great American novel.

Then one day I was diagnosed with a late stage breast cancer. Suddenly, my practical philosophy seemed meaningless. What was the point of always following the safe road in life if it meant you just went along existing day to day until you died?

I read somewhere that having a life-threatening illness often helps people find their authentic self. It certainly made me realize that what I have really wanted since that day I was nine years old was write. To write stories that would entertain and make people forget their troubles; to write stories that would make people laugh and cry and see things in a way that they never had before.

And now I have even more to write about and a stronger urge to do it because I want to share with others what I've learned about not just surviving but thriving, and to tell them not to wait until they get a wakeup call to start doing what they really want to do in life. So I write.

## Grade School Gift

Amy L. Greenspan, Austin TX  
Austin Reading Circle, w-ecircle 4

I write poems with a pencil wrapped  
in green and purple thread  
sealed in place by silver glitter-glue

This pencil's lived beside my bed  
for more than twenty years  
Its small creator grown and wed  
Her gift far more creative  
than she knew



## I'm Back

Jackie Crowley, Austin TX

There are words in me  
I can't speak yet but  
*I'm back*  
How can I tell  
Well I bought a new blouse  
Painted my toenails  
Turned up the car radio  
And signed up for a poetry class  
I feel alive again  
After open heart surgery  
*I'm back*  
Maybe the words will come now

## The Discount

Deborah Lazarus, Milford PA

On a particularly brisk fall day after school, my feet lead me toward Martin's Department Store in downtown Brooklyn. I need a new dress for that church dance on Sunday. Something that will really knock the boys out. After all, I'm thirteen and I've got boys on my mind most of the time.

Pulling on the heavy glass and metal doors at the entrance is hard enough, but squeezing through the second set of doors, those tightly segmented revolving jobs, terrifies me. So do the elevators that make my stomach do a reverse one and a half while ascending to the 8th floor. I prefer taking the escalator where a smiling security guard in a red-blazer greets me on the main floor. I hop on the moving stairs, several sets of them, before I reach the junior department.

I've already been over what I have to do, a dozen times at least, since I entered the store. Rifling through the petite dresses, size 5, I find a few I like and want to try on. I've also managed to tuck one dress carefully inside my coat while looking around to make sure I'm unnoticed. As I stroll over to the dressing room, I see that I'm blending in well, not calling attention to myself in any way. I feel nervous, like the first time I rode a bike, reeling with excitement, but sensing the potential dangers with every turn of the wheels. If I make it into the dressing room with a ticket for the number of dresses in my hand, I will have surmounted the first challenge.

The attendant examines each dress slowly and thoroughly, finally looks up, smiles, and hands me a "3" ticket for the three dresses she sees in my hands. From that point on, I quicken the pace: try on my dresses, make my choice, leave on the one I want, and adeptly dress again over it. An internal dialog clicks on in my head. *It's okay to steal as long as it's not from another*

*person. Stealing from another person hurts.* Like when my sister steals money from my mom's pocketbook. Now my mother keeps it locked in a closet with the key around her neck. Or when the friendly-looking boy runs up to me at the bus stop after school and snatches my red wallet, dangling from my unsuspecting hand. *Sure, it's okay to steal from a store,* I tell myself. *A store doesn't have feelings,* I repeat to myself as I hand back the unwanted merchandise to the nice lady attendant, giving her a smile.

The escalator repeats those same words back to me in first person, "I—don't—have—feelings," as each step flattens out and disappears underneath. The same security guard looks directly into my eyes as I descend toward him. My eyes shoot back, *You don't own this store. I'm not stealing from you.* He opens his mouth to speak. Does he know?

"Watch your step, young lady, as you get off," he draws.

I'm out of here, now! Two sets of doors to go and I'll be triumphant. Through the revolving glass doors, I miss the jumping off spot and have to go around again. Now I'm through the last, heavy door that appears like a barricade wanting to hold me inside as people rush in the doors. Finally, I'm out on the street and no one has stopped me. I dare not turn to look back. Only the guilty would do that. I feel sweat around my middle. Is it a release of tension or the two dresses I'm wearing?

Hurrying home to take off the shameful prize before supper, I make it to the dinner table just at six o'clock, neither early nor late. I fold my hands in front to say grace—and to thank God that I got away with it one more time.

"...a map of my journey from there to here..."

~ R. Armstrong

## Address Book Eulogy

Ronda Armstrong, Des Moines IA

For eight years I carried it, grateful for its devotion and dependent on its knowledge. The pocket-sized address book contributed more than practical data; it acted as a cohort in caring. It held precious pieces of life, connections valued and nurtured. Most days I consulted my constant companion while addressing a letter, a postcard, or a carefully-selected greeting card for a special occasion. Through countless changes the little book tethered me to lifelines offered by these relationships.

Years ago the little book oozed with vitality from its shelf at a mall store. Bright-colored shoe icons danced on its pale-yellow cover while it boldly proclaimed, "Friends Never Go Out of Style." I discovered it was an item of a Hallmark series titled "Stories—Live Stories, Share Stories," sealing my decision to buy it.

Now its loose pages spill from the split binding, crumpling in my purse or scattering on the desk. The faded, torn letter tabs create havoc, along with sections crammed full, ones that long ago gave up on order, new entries squeezed into any spot of white space. Scrawled notations fill the two dangling covers, a

sundry of information about hotels, restaurants, or hospitals, some now obsolete. I could repair the book temporarily by wrapping a rubber band around the pages and its covers. Rather than do so I turn to the inevitable.

Faced with farewells I flip through it, stopping at names and places that trigger stories, memories that line up and wave their blessings while parading by. Hometown friends. College buddies. Social work school classmates. Neighbors. Dancers. Church family. Writing group members. Family and more family. Memory after memory, a summation of life.

I glimpse at who moved, who died, whose life changed in other ways. A rising number of significant people died during this address book's tenure. The telltale cross outs without updated entries remind me: my husband's parents, the last of my parents' siblings, several close friends. For some I flash warm smiles. For others cleansing tears flow.

Some names stare back—ones who slipped from my life, now long gone, their mail returned stamped "Address Unknown." Could I locate them now? (Cont. on pg 6)

(Address Book Eulogy from page 5)

Bubbling underneath the question, “Do I want to?”

I resume paging through the book and its memories, confirming vast changes precipitating additional entries. More doctors to address new health challenges. Additions of colleagues after my husband and I retired, now friends we consider family. As my sister grew older in another state, I noted her neighbors and friends who had keys to her house. When my Aunt Esther died, her responsibility for keeping family members connected fell to the shoulders of my generation.

Ready to take the next step, I pull out a new address book, one given to me. Even in our technological age with electronic mail, cell phones, and a gaggle of gadgets to manage communications, my commitment to carrying a handwritten address book doesn’t waver. Though the number who carry personal address books dwindles, its presence motivates me to follow what I believe: regardless of varied communication options, people still long for personal touches of caring and handwritten words to celebrate life’s best and to mark its challenges.

Moving forward, I ask, *Who are the ones to keep?*

---

## Soul Healing

Sandra Heggen, Kempner TX, w-ecircle 6

My husband left me decades ago for another woman, one he’d supposedly gotten pregnant. My biased opinion is that she forced his hand by telling him that so he would feel impelled to leave me and cleave to her. I still believe that his original intent, as much as he might have cared for her, was to stay married to me. The affair would remain his secret.

When I didn’t immediately give him a divorce but stated my determination to try to resolve this, well, she “thought she was pregnant, but she wasn’t.” But the affair was out in the open now, and he apparently didn’t trust me not to make him pay for it if we stayed together. I’m not sure if that says more about me or about him. After all, we tend to judge others by what we’d do in similar situations.

While he was subsequently stationed in Viet Nam, my almost daily letters didn’t change his mind. He tried to get a divorce in absentia by not notifying me that the hearing would be in Chicago in a couple of days and here I was, in Texas, with no lawyer. Thanks to my priest, that was fixed.

Since there was no no-fault divorce at that time, I had a pretty good chance of winning the case. Only once I got there, I realized that while I could keep him married to me, I couldn’t force him to trust me or to love me. I came back to Texas a single woman again.

She immediately got pregnant for real.

Only a few months more than a year later he was killed in a plane crash. In the meantime, though, I’d heard tales of her running around on him. I don’t know whether she was or not; it was as likely as not to be rumors. Then again, who knows? They’d already proven they were both people who would cheat, so maybe so.

Shortly after the divorce I was commenting to a man at work that I sort of felt sorry for him, if what I heard about her was true. He replied, “Don’t feel sorry for him. He got exactly what he wanted.” Food for thought. I had to chew on that for a while. Just desserts?

One by one, I complete neat and well-spaced entries on the fresh pages. That done, I initiate my new companion into service by tucking it into my purse. I don’t pitch the old one. It deserves more honor than tossing it in the trash, like an insignificant object of little value.

Instead, I slide it into the desk drawer where my older address books rest. Although I bury the book, this artifact of life—stories and memories about the people, the places, and the events from this period of personal history—takes its rightful place in address book heaven.

The nostalgic journey reflects celebration and gratefulness, as much as it heralds farewells. A clearing out, an honoring of stories, frees me to enjoy present life feeling stronger and lighter.

We all have things we keep. Address books, and the memories of the people in them, embody part of what I keep. They chronicle history, a piece of my story connecting me with the stories of cherished people and places. Like a legacy, each address book lays a path for the next, a map of my journey from there to here, a textured testament of personal spirit, a fitting reminder of the folks chosen to travel in the palm of my hand.

Did he really get what he wanted? He got a son, one that I could not have given him. But was his life the one he’d hoped it would be? He might have loved her, and she, him. And, of course, his death made her a courageous military widow. Not the sort of thing one aspires to, but I know she accepted the mantle.

But I believe, for my soul’s sake, I need to come to a resolution. It’s clearly an unhealed wound, though not a devastating one anymore, but something that still requires treatment.

It’s time. My soul needs healing and I’m going to work on that.

---

## Worse Than Rain

Annabelle Bailey, Southbury CT, w-ecircle 4

I listen to the gentle showers tapping the house gutters and I watch fat, cheery raindrops bead up on the deck

Eight days straight  
I’ve listened to rain pelting the house gutters  
raindrops less cheery now more ominous  
big ponds in my yard with nowhere to go  
unwelcome swimming pools in my basement  
a soggy, sour smell

Forty years ago I held your big hand in mine  
reading poetry in my softest voice  
my tears temporarily banked, I moistened your parched lips  
with water

Sunlight filtered through hospital window blinds and danced  
across your bed when your hand fell away from mine

# Ugly Duckling to Howling Wolf

Rhonda Wiley-Jones, Kerrville TX

I was dropped by the stork on the wrong door step, a daughter and later a sister in a strange place—in a place I often felt out of place in. Mother and Daddy read folktales to us from the Book of Knowledge Encyclopedia that crowned the bookcase headboard in their bedroom. They read my favorite, *The Ugly Duckling*, to me so many times they had it memorized and soon I was “reading” it to my younger brothers from memory. I was decades old before I looked in my pond to see my reflection and saw a swan’s grace.

I was never trouble. I was a good girl. I stole a role and made it fit, then decided to make it my own. I played my script from the cards dealt to me. I functioned in apprehension, afraid of being found out. But I was never trouble.

I lived with an itch just beneath the surface. I felt ground down sometimes; disconnected to the place I called home and the people who were my community. Over time I was born again and again and again until I was plumb pagan in their eyes. But I was never trouble.

Today I move quietly into the world, fresh, redeemed, and reborn with a passport in hand that ensures my travel to other landscapes and places, people, and cultures. I reclaim my birthright to become the disruptive creative force I was meant to be. It’s time I become trouble.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes in *Women Who Run with the Wolves* reminds women to run with the wildness within them. Natalie Goldberg challenges women to write hot and deep and wild and crazy, while Allen Ginsberg shows us how to rail against the injustices of life in his poem, *Howl*. They each call forth that place where we are natural and nurtured, but wild.

That natural core is where I find I alone exist, uniquely me, bound by nothing but the primordial essence of God, Mother Earth, Spirit Wind.

I learn to dash naked through the virgin forest to howl at the moon. To dance on the Wind, skirt the Stars, and land on Mars all in the twinkle of an eye. To imagine the world before it was breathed into being. To move the world with the ease of Atlas. To write deeply because the whole of the universe resides in me.

I grasp the call to howl when others have denied God ever existed to let them know He is still there for them. To howl when a child fades in a mother’s arms because love does not feed the little belly. To howl when some take the truth and twist it until they recreate the facts, spinning logic on its heels. I howl when *one nation under God* is torn asunder because we don’t believe in *with liberty and justice for all*. To howl when I realize I am a stranger in my own family. To howl when life bears down and I must beg for strength to soldier on. And to howl when I put myself into the world with the joy and fear of being exposed each time I put words to paper.

It’s time I become trouble.

As threads of insight appear over the years, slowly evolving, I collect them in journals on the shelf, in boxes stowed beneath the bed, and in crevices in my mind. I weave them together on the warp of my life to construct the fabric of a re-created self. I join the scribe inside me to set down my tales of exploitations in the world. When and as I do, the spirits of far-away places greet me. What have seemed to be random experiences became a tapestry. With each escapade I create something rich and full and beautiful.

The chronicling of my journeys carries forth lessons I garnered along the way on a universal scale—for me, for anyone called by the spirit of adventure to leave home. At each sojourn’s end I reminisce with treasures, memories, or souvenirs. The first treasure is always the *story*, evidence of where I’ve been.

I bring myself home evolved to live among those that remained at home to garner their own lessons close at hand. I forgive them their indifference, those who stayed behind either unable or unwilling to trek to parts unknown.

This is why I sally forth into the world, not with a goal in mind, but a purpose to discover the unknown. In the discovery is the surprise for which my souls yearn; but the journey is requisite for me to own the lesson. Had I ignored the seductive summon and remained at home, the swan would have remained a secret and the wolf silent.

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## Waking

Andrea Savee, Lakewood CA, w-ecircle 15

I lived at the edge of a wild garden once, like a stone, cast away. A castaway, stone cold shoulder turned to the warming weather of the world. But I am no longer immune to the tracings of leaves against my surface, no longer unanswerable to the call of the wind through new openings and over old crevices. From this fitful granite sleep, this disenfranchised grief, I will rally like the red tailed raptor above me, rising rising rising in the thermals. I will pluck up, endeavor, and dare again to tumble amidst and wrangle with the flowers and the weeds, first with one and then the other. I am willing. I am willing.

You can watch Andrea’s YouTube video version of “Waking” by visiting the following URL or by typing in her name in the YouTube search menu: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Jupw6B5rp8>



## “The Times They Are a Changing” (Bob Dylan)

Ardine Martinelli, Tacoma WA, w-ecircle 6

My twenties were a decade of rebellion and anger. Raised in the 50s, I was a “good girl” following all the rules. I was so busy being whatever others wanted, I didn’t have a clue what I wanted. Some of this stems from being raised in an alcoholic home. I was the peacemaker, the pleaser, trying to avoid conflict at all costs. Some of it came from the rigid values of the 50s. My gender defined my role. I was to get married and have children. The confluence of these two powerful forces created the perfect storm within me. I believed my only worth was based on caring for others and keeping the peace.

When I graduated from high school in 1960, I had no idea the world was about to change. The Sixties not only was a decade of change for our country, but one of dramatic change for my family and me.

As my friends were preparing to go away to college, I assumed I would go to junior college for a couple of years, and then begin working as a secretary until I got married. What a surprise it was to my parents, and me, when, after two years of junior college, I decided to follow my friends and go away to college. This decision was not based on a desire to learn, but more on a fear of being stuck in Sacramento, as a secretary, for the rest of my life. I still remember hearing my parents fight about sending me away to college. My father yelling, “I’m not wasting money sending a damn girl to college; she will only get married.” My mother calmly said, “She will go to college and that is the end of this discussion.” Sitting in my bedroom, I felt, for the first time a deep anger rise within me, and a feeling of “I’ll show you.”

My college of choice, San Francisco State, plopped me right into the hotbed of change—the Bay Area in the early Sixties. I walked around school in a daze for the first six months. Students were arguing with teachers! I never talked back to an adult or disagreed with one. Here we were encouraged to form our own opinions. Opinion, what was that? I never had any of my own.

My youth was spent following the rules, being invisible, and not causing any trouble. It finally sunk in that adults were not always right. We could disagree with them, and furthermore, take our disagreements to the streets. I felt euphoric when I

realized there were different viewpoints about sex, politics, religion, materialism, and other burning issues of the day. After a couple of years of phenomenally expansive education, probably more out of the classroom than in, I became “anti” anything regarding the establishment.

Upon graduation from college in 1965, I knew I had to leave California if I was going to grow into my own identity. I couldn’t have put words to this at the time, but I now know I would have suffocated had I returned to Sacramento under my mother’s tight hold. Moving to Portland, Oregon, I lived for many years the dichotomy of wanting to please friends at any cost, and at the same time, developing a strong voice for change in our country. Although I was developing a very strong professional/external voice, I had a very weak personal voice.

I was becoming more and more angry at the political scene, so in 1969, I quit my job and hitchhiked throughout Europe for several months. I couldn’t stay in a country that had killed three of my heroes and elected Nixon for President. The gift of Europe, for me, was coming to the realization that I was not running away from my country, I was running away from me. Wherever I went, I brought me along: all the pain, doubts, fears, and questions about who I was and how I wanted to live my life.

I entered graduate school upon my return from Europe, and began experimenting with alternative lifestyles. I lived in a commune for a while and then moved into an open marriage arrangement with another couple. All of this experimentation was an attempt to find my own sexual identity removed from messages of the Fifties. I was a young woman, raging at the world, and taking inordinate risks.

I am still surprised that this timid, fearful young girl became such a strong voice for change. I know this decade of rebellion made me who I am today. I still question the *status quo* and continue to be an activist for social justice. Thankfully, I have learned more appropriate ways to work for change. It wasn’t until my 30s that I realized I needed to deal with the rage and anger within me, and quit taking it out on the outer world. I have had a lifetime of learning and growing. Today, I know that I find my truth, and my voice, through living and experiencing all of life.

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## Ten Years

Khadijah Lacina, Columbia SC, w-ecircles 4, 10, 14 and facilitator of 3

Ten years since I last saw my older sister, Shaakirah. Ten years since I saw her daughter, then a blond haired whirlwind rushing through our house on a one night visit on their way to Morocco, just months before we moved to Yemen for a decade. Ten years since my sister and I had one of our long conversations, which covered every subject from Islaam to baby diapers. Ten very long years, in which our family was whittled down by the loss of our sister Patty, and my father, Ray.

The timing couldn’t have been better. As we approached the Charlotte airport the cell phone rang. My daughter, Sukhailah, telling me that her aunt had called and said they were in the baggage area. A few minutes later, I called my sister, and they were waiting outside for us.

“You look for them, I’ll do my best not to run over anyone,” was my husband’s injunction. I craned my neck trying to see them, thinking that it couldn’t be too hard to spot two women in the Islamic hijab, one of them veiled, and a kind looking man with a long gray beard.

“There they are!” said my husband, who, of course, spotted them before me while managing not to crash into any pedestrians. I looked, but still didn’t see them. Then, I saw Abdul Ghani, looking trim and distinguished in his suit coat. And next to him was my sister.

Never one to worry too much about my dignity, I began waving madly as my husband swerved over to the curb. I leapt  
(Cont. on pg 9)



## Time Traveling

Arlene Roman Howard, Rancho Mirage CA, w-ecircle 14

It was time to get the trunks out. I was going traveling. Where was I going? I was going time-traveling.

For the past month, I have been revisiting being a new mom all those years ago in preparation for becoming a grandma. Out came the two cedar-lined trunks that were buried deep in my closet. Amazingly, I found the keys and opened them. I sat on the floor and started pulling out the clothes. There they were: my daughter's precious baby clothes. "Oh my gosh!" I told Wimsey, my cat, who came in to see what the commotion was about. "Look at all the clothes my Mom made for her granddaughter: the pink, yellow, white, red, green and multicolored booties; the darling pink, white, yellow and multicolored bonnets; the pink, yellow, white, green and multicolored sweaters; the two pairs of mittens for her wee little hands; and the bright red knitted bunting that kept my daughter warm her first winter."

Mom knitted and crocheted as fast as a 100-words-per-minute typist. "Click click," sang her needles. "Oh Mom, you were so clever with your hands. I hope you can hear my words of thanks now because I am sure I never said how much I appreciated all the gifts you made for Allyson and for me."

I continued the excavation. There were several yellow sun hats my husband's Mom made; a yellow knitted sweater, booties and hat set from Aunt Lily, my Dad's favorite sister; and a darling pale yellow dress she wore home from the hospital. I laughed at the lopsided blanket I crocheted when I found out I was pregnant. Hey, it was my first attempt at crochet. Even now I prefer knitting! I found her first bathing suit and sun top that she wore on her first sailing trip on the Chesapeake Bay when she was just a month old. As I reached the bottom of the trunks, I



(Ten Years from page 8)

out of the car and grabbed Shaakirah, hugging her hard. She felt like I remembered her, sweet and soft and like home. I vaguely heard my husband greeting hers, then leaned back to look at her eyes. Same blue eyes, crinkling in smile, peering out from her veil. I hugged her again, giving her another squeeze.

Whatever deep, thoughtful thing that would have been said had this been a movie never got said. Instead, my sister said, "You've gotten taller!" That was when I realized that she was right. Instead of looking up at her, as I had for all of my life, I was now looking down. We both looked at our shoes, to see if that could be the cause (it wasn't) and when I looked up I saw my niece, Ayesha.

No longer little, no longer blond, but still resembling my sister enough that their relationship was very clear. I hugged her to me as well. We climbed into the car, and I waved goodbye to Abdul Ghani as we headed for home.

uncovered two handmade lace baby bonnets that belonged to my husband's Uncle Harry, who was born in India in 1911 and a blanket from my dear friend, Mrs. Watson, who learned how to crochet just to make a blanket for my daughter.

My daughter's baby clothes filled me with sweet memories. I sorted the clothes. All the knitted things and crocheted clothes were put into a bag to be hand washed. The other items I sorted into two groups: those that needed to be pre-soaked to remove the stains and those that were okay. I moved a table into my bathroom so I could dry the knitted and crocheted clothes on towels. My husband put up a clothes line. After a double wash and double rinse, I hung the clothes outside on the line to get some whitening from the sun and to make them smell fresh. I used two full boxes of OxiClean.

My daughter wonders if these clothes will be clean or nice enough for her baby. "Do they smell funny?" my daughter asks me. I used lots of hand-me-down baby clothes for her. She wants all new things. Oh how I wish I could say to my Mom, "Remember the clothes you knitted and crocheted thirty-five years ago? I am getting them ready to be worn by your great-grandchild." I so hope they will be used." If not, that's okay (not really) for what a pleasure time-traveling had been as I washed and folded all the precious baby clothes. I needed to take the trip. The only thing it cost me was a few sweet tears.

Epilogue: My grandchild, a precious baby girl, was born in late August. A week later, my daughter put her baby into the laced-trimmed yellow pajamas that she herself had worn when she was a month old. Grandma, that's me, smiled as tears ran down her cheeks.

Shaakirah and her daughter spent a whole, blessed month with us this summer. We did a lot of remembering, laughing, singing, and dancing. We went shopping, ate junk food, stayed up late talking, and caused our children to roll their eyes at us just as we used to roll our eyes at our mother.

One of the first things she told me was that I reminded her of our sister, Patty, now. So funny, because I always thought Patty was so wonderful, so vibrant, and I can't see her in me at all. It was nice, though, and brought our beloved sister close again, for awhile, anyway. We measured ourselves—I had actually grown an inch, she was right—and did our best to solve all of the world's problems in the little time we had together.

Ten years may have passed, but within ten minutes of being together, it was like they were the blink of an eye.

## An Afternoon with Mr. Morgan

Helen (Len) Leatherwood, Beverly Hills CA, w-ecircle 6

Mr. Morgan was a retired Episcopal priest who lived a few houses up from my family on East 9th Street in my hometown of Bonham, Texas. He and his wife, Anna, must have been in their mid-70's when I was young. They both had white hair, and they walked with the stoop that comes with advanced age.

Mr. Morgan had an office on one end of his house with a private entrance. When I was five or six, I often visited him there and when I arrived, he'd open a large closet where he had several games stored. He would allow me to pick which game I wanted, and then he and I would proceed to play either checkers or chess or my very favorite: pick up sticks.

For the game of pick up sticks, we'd settle on the floor of the office. I don't remember any difficulty Mr. Morgan had sitting on the floor though now I can imagine it was a good deal more difficult for him than for me. Once we were situated on the rug, Mr. Morgan would put the pile of brightly colored sticks on their ends. In anticipation, I would wait for the moment when he released them and they fell in a tangled jumble on the floor. The object of the game was to carefully remove one stick at a time without disturbing any of the other sticks. Mr. Morgan and I spent lots of time carefully teasing out those red, green, and yellow sticks from the pile, each taking our turn when the other caused a slight wiggle. I remember his hand, liver-spotted and pale white, deftly manipulating those little sticks. He might have been old, but his hand was completely steady and he was a formidable opponent. Sometimes I won; sometimes he won. I appreciated that Mr. Morgan never 'let' me win. He was a real opponent.

While he and I were playing whatever game I had chosen for that day, Mrs. Morgan would always come in at some point and say hello. Then she would disappear for a few minutes, only to reappear with a plate of cookies and lemonade. Mr. Morgan and I would continue to play while we munched on the cookies. We were serious about our games so we didn't stop just to eat.

I had fun playing games with Mr. Morgan. I looked forward to my impromptu visits, and from his smile I knew he was happy to see me. He was always dressed in a suit when I visited, no matter if it was morning or afternoon, and Mrs. Morgan always had on a dress, never slacks or even a skirt. They were good and proper people, I knew even at my young age, and very decent indeed.

I would announce at home that I was going over to play with Mr. Morgan and my parents would just smile and say, "Have fun."

I did and he did and we did and even now I think of that nice old man sitting in his office with its roll-top desk, walls covered with filled-to-the-brim bookshelves, that closet with its shelf of games, and the floor where he and I sat and carefully and strategically dislodged stick after stick during our pick up sticks game. This remains one of the loveliest images of my childhood: an old man, a young girl, and an afternoon with nothing more to do than to sit on the floor and play a game. What could be more perfect? Or more special?

## Grandmother

Juliana Lightle, Canyon TX

We sit on the wooden swing suspended by silver chains hanging from the bungalow front porch ceiling. She, elderly beyond her years, grey hair piled atop her head, thin and wrinkled.

She stays with us sometimes when Aunt Julia goes off on one of her adventures.

Cattle graze across the road in front of the house.

It is summer.

A bull mounts a cow.

Suddenly, out of the silence, Grandmother speaks,

"Men and bulls are just alike;

they are only interested in one thing.

A bunch of good for nothings."

Her voice is vitriolic.

And I, a child, maybe twelve, innocent and ignorant,

sit there shocked,

amazed,

embarrassed,

astonished

to hear my grandmother talk that way.

Now, nearly fifty years later,

I wonder about her life,

what in it caused this secret bitterness

she spilled just once on that idyllic summer day.

I look at her wedding photo.

She has a steady, unsmiling, pretty face,

marrying a handsome man twenty-two years her senior.

Were they happy, sad, or probably a bit of both?

I remember what my mother, her youngest daughter, told me snippets here and there.

A hard life, endless guests

never a break from gardening, cooking, canning, cleaning.

I look at other photos of my grandmother,

Older, nearly as wide as she is tall, never smiling.

I remember her in an old lady's lavender dress,

thin from years of undulate fever.

I remember her feeding me bread, butter, and sugar sandwiches,

Easter egg hunts at her house,

and later, at another house, walking with her to the corner store.

I never remember her smiling.



## *Pega Ladryo: Catch the Thief*

Gina Baxter, Azle TX, w-ecircle 9

She dropped the red baby doll pajama bottoms into the drawer. He didn't like her to wear them. Then she heard him come into the bedroom. As he did every night, he locked the door. Was he locking out the thieves or locking in his wife? The first Portuguese phrase she learned was *pega ladryo*, or "grab the thief."

In such an emergency, she'd been instructed, she was to throw open the casement window and loudly yell, *pega ladryo*. She was also told that thieves removed all clothing and oiled their bodies so that if anyone tried to grab them, there was nothing to hold onto. Instead of alarming her, she laughed. She would love to throw open the window and yell into the street. She giggled every time she visualized the oiled and naked men. She was, after all, only 18 years old.

Quickly she got into bed and waited. She smelled his 4711 cologne. *So who was he tonight*, she wondered: *her friend and lover; the man she had met in the United States, or her insanely jealous Brazilian husband?* She wished that Maria and Julia, the *empregadas*, did not leave every evening after they finished in the kitchen. She wished the construction was finished on their new home so the *empregadas* could sleep under her roof.

Then he grabbed her shoulder and turned her face to him. He jammed a gun into her mouth and she heard the grinding sound of it hitting her teeth. She thought, *how strange, a gun, where had it been for these five months? Not in their oceanside apartment. Maybe in his Bali blue Hudson car? His office on Avenida Atlantico?*

Pulling the gun from her mouth, he shot into the nearest wall. A hole appeared 20 inches from the Oriental rug he so admired. "Hang a picture over the hole," he shouted. He went on, "Don't ever, ever look into Marcello's eyes again. Hang your eyes down if you speak to a man."

*How ridiculous to think that the hole would go unnoticed with the floral picture covering it. No one hangs pictures on the floor.* His ranting ended in a few minutes. He turned and fell into bed.

She waited for him to fall into a drunken sleep, then walked to the dresser and took out the baby doll bottoms. Trimmed with little cream colored bows and sateen roses, she recalled choosing them at Abraham and Strauss, while shopping for her trousseau with her mother and Auntie Bea. Now she resolutely put them on and snapped the waist band. She lay down and thought. *I am not a Brazilian woman. I am an American woman. I will never be, not want to be, a Brazilian woman, bearing babies, enduring mistresses, stuck in a cage—no matter how gilded. I am an American woman and I will find a way to go home. I will wait for the right moment. My baby and I will go home.*

Then she felt her belly. He wasn't doing much yet, but she knew it was a son. She closed her eyes and listened for the surf song. She would miss that in Houston but tomorrow she would begin planning. Amazingly, she fell into a deep and peaceful sleep.

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## *Precious Memories*

Bette Lafferty, Valrico FL, Val Perry Writing Circle, Brandon FL

I turned seventy-six today. I'm surprised how quickly the years have accumulated. A steaming cup of tea quiets my racing mind as I sit alone struggling to recall a lifetime of experiences. The telephone interrupts my memories about one of our most unforgettable Thanksgiving Days.

"Happy Birthday, Grandma," the voice says. "It's me, Shelby."

"Well, thank you, honey. So what's happening in Texas these days?"

Forty-five minutes are filled with stories of starting college at the Art Institute of Houston, details of the fun she had vacationing in Colorado with her parents, and news about the young men in her life. They are only friends, she insists.

"Well, got to run, Grandma. I'll keep you updated on how college goes. I love you. Bye."

As I sit drinking in how precious our relationship is, my thoughts drift back to that special Thanksgiving Day when Shelby was only three.

Our home buzzed with excitement as thirteen members of our family came together. The table overflowed with tasty morsels surrounding the turkey. Once the meal was devoured, the men retreated to the living room to watch a football game. Some napped.

The women cleared the table, stored the leftover food, and began the monumental task of hand-washing the dishes. China and crystal always graced the table for holiday meals and never went into the dishwasher.

Loud explosions of laughter erupted as water splashed over the sink. Unforgettable conversations developed as the towels whipped the silverware dry and pans clattered as they found their way back into the cupboard. Clean-up after these large meals definitely was not for the faint of heart.

Normally, we would join the men, but not this year. I had planned a surprise project for the seven of us. I dragged out the hot glue guns, rolls of festive ribbon, a box of Christmas decorations and a string of lights. Then, I brought in a huge Christmas wreath and placed it on the table. For two hours, excited chatter filled the room. We created large red bows, attaching them along with gold twine and large red and white velvet flowers. Christmas balls, holly berries, and the stringing of lights finished the project. With the wreath completed, we made plans to hang it on the front of our house where it would echo the joy of our fun together.

Revisiting these precious memories comes as an unexpected birthday present from my family. Although they are totally unaware of their gift today, I am blessed by the joy they have given me throughout the many years of my life.

## Office Commando

Pat Daly, Largo FL

A cordial work environment has always been important to me. I function best in an environment of respect and trust. If you have to get up and go to work every day, life is a lot easier if your co-workers are friendly and supportive.

About ten years ago I accepted a job offer that was a dream-come-true. It offered a large salary increase, great benefits, closeness to home, and a good boss. I started my new job with enthusiasm. We were a small office of four: our supervisor, my co-worker, and the office assistant, Helen. It soon became evident that the atmosphere would not be as congenial as I wanted and needed.

Helen took her job as timekeeper seriously. She was responsible for the numbers entered on each timesheet, which she filled out each week. She was obsessive about her own time and watched every move made by her three officemates. Our supervisor was off the hook because she was The Boss. My co-worker, Josie, also was off Helen's radar because she was in another organizational category and Helen had no authority in that area. So that left me as her target.

Each morning as I passed her desk and said, "Good morning, Helen," she would look up at the wall clock without returning my greeting. Admittedly, I was not always on time, but I had come from an environment where you were trusted to put in your 40 hours without oversight. And you put in whatever hours beyond 40 that were required to get the job done. So I was surprised and annoyed when Helen began to comment on my comings and goings. She made offhanded remarks if I was away from my desk or if I took more than 30 minutes for lunch. Then she questioned my requests for printer ink and office supplies. Her controlling and demeaning treatment began to wear on me.

Helen also gossiped. She could turn on the charm when she was sniffing for juicy information and then release her verbal, scathing judgments of others. She, of course, was blameless. She prided herself on following the rules perfectly and being always, always right. The slightest question of her perfection was met with hostility and defensiveness. You could not reason with Helen, and confrontation resulted in further passive-aggressive paybacks.

When I spoke to our supervisor about my growing unhappiness in the work environment, she defended Helen. She couldn't understand my viewpoint because Helen kissed-up to The Boss incessantly. I felt worse after that and began to question what was wrong with me for allowing her to get into my head and stomp around like a commando.

I saw a counselor twice, but counseling did nothing to change Helen's borderline personality traits. I considered leaving the company, but I did not want to give her the satisfaction of driving me away from a job I otherwise loved.

My breakthrough came when I knew with certainty that this woman with no insight and no filters was not going to change. I felt victimized and defeated. It was unfair that I would have to be the one to change if I wanted to stay. But I did, finding ways to reform my mental perspective and devoting myself to a path of self-improvement that has had an ongoing impact on my happiness to this day.

I began to read the writings of men and women of the late 19th to mid-20th centuries who emphasized the power we have

available in our thoughts and feelings, and our ability to influence our environment through our inner attitude. When I accepted the premise that my own thoughts impacted my feelings and therefore my life, I started to pay close attention to what was going through my head. Through the recycling of negative feelings into positive affirmations, I kept Helen out of my head. The more I affirmed the good and maintained a protective energy around my thoughts, my mental strength improved. As my ability to keep Helen's ego at arm's length grew, my own personal freedom grew in equal proportion. I no longer reacted to her verbal barbs and accusations. Instead, I began to bless her and wish her well inside my heart. I celebrated my emotional freedom and started to see positive changes in other areas of my life.

Over time, I came to a place where I was grateful for what I experienced working with Helen, as painful as it had been. I had been introduced to a path that has brought happiness and faith to my life ever since.

The biggest surprise and unexpected outcome of my revised thought patterns was, that as I changed my attitude toward Helen and refused to allow her to affect the way I thought, felt, or acted, Helen began to change the way she related to me. She began to respond positively to my unflappable demeanor and to the respectful way I treated her, no matter how she treated me. As I put aside her negativity and related to her with joy and love for the good person buried deep inside her, she in turn grew warmer toward me.

I knew I had won the Super Bowl of personal growth when, on the day I left that position five years later, Helen said to me, "It was a pleasure to work with you."

## Why Do I Cook?

Marlene Samuels, Chicago IL

Four weeks after my wedding—the event that kept her hanging to life by a disappearing silken thread—my mother died. It was 1983 and she was 63, relatively young by contemporary standards. It was then that I began to cook in earnest, systematic and daring in my efforts. Often, I struggled to recreate dishes I wished could taste like home, the one in which I grew up. Those dishes embodied flavors and aromas wholly unique to my mother.

My mother's culinary creations evolved in concert with the progression of her life. She never owned a cookbook. She carried nothing tangible forward from the destruction of her past into her life in the present. In many ways, the obliteration wrought by the Holocaust she survived deleted my history as well. Foods she cooked were grounded in her recollections of life in Romania before World War II, not in recipes scribbled on yellowing or stained note-cards handed down from grandmother to mother to daughter or from aunts to nieces and beyond.

When I'm in my kitchen, I reminisce about the meals entirely unique to my mother—ones my brother and I still challenge each other to reproduce. My mother's cooking

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spanned the range of our economic status: poverty to plenty and all that lies between. Those memories weave the responses I proffer to friends and strangers alike, who ask, “Why do you cook?” or “Who taught you to cook?”

I cook a great deal, blog about cooking, watch shows about cooking when the world news is replete with tales of destruction. I write articles about cooking that occasionally are published. I’ve even taught cooking!

Can I answer these seemingly straight-forward questions but not ruminate about women passing their recipes and cooking secrets on to their progeny?

At times I’m compelled to ask: who did teach my mother to cook? My mother—the smart young woman from an Orthodox Jewish family growing up in a remote Romanian village; my rebellious mother who pursued education in lieu of culinary skills during the era, historically, when Jewish girls married young and rarely ventured beyond their garden gates. My mother couldn’t learn from her mother—one of millions of mothers and would-be mothers killed in places bearing names like Dachau or Auschwitz or Ravensbruck.

So what is my answer? It’s not one but a complex web of answers!

I cook to create what reminds me of the scent of home and the security of family. I cook because cooking distracts me from life’s problems as I become absorbed by the ingredients’ sensory elements. I cook because going to a restaurant when I’m tired or harried does the chef a disservice and deprives my taste buds of due appreciation. I cook because it’s the consummate way I can show family and guests that I care about them—a hug around our most basic senses and with the power to unite strangers. Cooking, tasting, and memory become inseparable.

I cook to celebrate spring’s intense colors; newly ripened berries, crisp baby greens, and delicate young vegetables picked before they’ve grown large and tough. I cook as an adieu to vestiges of summer, to welcome fall’s heartiness with pumpkins, apples, peaches, and squash. I’ll reconfigure fall’s bounty into spreads and soups and pies. They’ll become the flavors of summer that live on in my kitchen to help brace me for winter ahead, a winter of short days and cold, early evenings.

I cook to boost my self-esteem of which a part depends upon being better at one thing than anyone else in my family is—a family comprised of men who know everything about most things yet vastly less about cooking than I do. I cook as my avenue to creativity like the many short stories I write and books I savor. I cook to progress in life. Cooking is progressive. And, as I progress, I know that all those meals I’ve cooked over the years will help my sons remember me when they’re far away or I’m no longer here.

I cook to invent and to be creative. Then, I reinvent, edit and test again—exactly as I reinvent myself each morning and with each edit of my stories. I cook as a way to challenge myself to grow, to travel the world, and to befriend it by meeting the foods and flavors of unfamiliar lands and cultures. And when I do, I inhale their scents, touch the delicate and coarse and if ever the opportunity to visit arrives—well, then their familiarity will welcome me in like a friend inviting me to a meal.

I cook because it provides an exceptional avenue into understanding others—observing what they will or won’t eat,

like and dislike. Not to cook would render me incomplete; not cooking would deprive my senses of one of life’s crucial components. I cook to nurture myself and those around me, to calm and sooth, to make merry and celebrate.

Cooking legitimates my sporadic excursions into ethnic neighborhoods and out-of-the way markets where I become a student of foreign spices, herbs and aromas, a discoverer of sauces and pastes, cookies and cakes. The vendors’ sounds are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. In their tones, I recall childhood’s long forgotten memories; the French farmers coming to sell their goods in my Montreal old French Quarter neighborhood. Mine are the memories of Polish butchers selling homemade sausages, Jewish immigrants hawking kosher pickles and apple strudels, and Greeks peddling aromatic herbs and unfamiliar cheeses.

When my table is cleared and all who’ve graced it are content, I know that every reason I cook is intertwined with me understanding who I am, what I’m capable of, and discovering not what I can do with ingredients at hand but, most important, all I can do without yet still being satiated and whole, continuing to impart what I’ve learned to those for whom I’ll cook.

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## Rites of Passage

Martha Slavin, Danville CA

A group of old guys stood around on the patio of Peet’s, laughing because instead of comparing cars or talking about hot dates, they were talking about heart attacks. When we were living downtown while our house was being remodeled, we saw these same guys every day at Peet’s. They sat each morning in a circle and talked the hours away. When we walked by, they would wave and call and we would wave back, and they would go on about their chats with each other. They seemed to be the kind of guys—a little rough around the edges—who earlier in life would be skiing every weekend, riding motorcycles, or drinking in Elmer’s, the local old bar. Now they spend their morning jawing with each other, telling tales about their exploits, football games, or arguing politics. One of them babies a bright turquoise ‘57 Chevy, on show in the parking lot. Another drives an enormous “Hog”—a Harley Davidson with sparkling clean chrome highlights, which at the end of the morning he fires up and rumbles away at an old man’s speed.

They were mostly in their sixties, retired from the fire department, PacBell, or from numerous other local companies. Gary was boisterous, always the first to say “Hi.” His white hair extended to his shoulders and his white beard and mustache stuck out in various directions. Today he had a bandana around his forehead.

We came out of Peet’s with our coffee and they all jumped up and came to talk to Bill, my husband.

“How many stents did they put in?” Gary asked and then said, “I have one on my left side. I flat lined twice.”

“Yeh, he died twice in the hospital,” Bruce confirmed.

Bill said, “I have two. You had the widow maker too, huh.”

“You, at least, didn’t have a heart attack, Bill,” I inserted.

(Cont. on pg 14)

(Rights of Passage from page 13)

Gary claimed, “Yeh, I walked off my first one. But the second one—wow!—that was the elephant on my chest. I drove myself to the hospital and...”

“He could hardly get out of his car. They helped him and, yeh, he died twice on the table. Unbelievable.”

“Who would think that this would happen to us? And here we are talking and comparing notes just like we do about cars.”

“Well, see you later. Take care of yourself.”

We waved as we walked away.

In our fifties we would have been hard-pressed to name a deceased friend. Now in our mid-sixties, people we know who seem perfectly healthy drop dead without warning. We gasped when we heard about George, who is younger than we are, and with whom Bill used to play golf. Five women that I have known in various times in my life passed away in the last five

years from different types of cancer. When we get together with friends, instead of talking about our parenting problems, we first get out all of our ailments and visits to the doctors. We have become old without being willing to admit it.

When we hit sixty, we both felt the loss of youth. We looked toward the future and saw 30 to maybe 40 years, less time than we had spent already on earth. Some of my friends, early in their sixties, had facelifts to level out the wrinkles and make the extra folds on the chin disappear. Others, like me, never could decide and now the wrinkles are everywhere from my forehead to my ankles—a facelift would not suffice to smooth me out.

We worry about frequent word loss and we realize that we don’t go out as much as we used to. We often change our minds and stay at home rather than face traffic or late nights. The heart attack comparisons, though, are a new progression as well as talk of friends who have had strokes. We look around at all these incidents and wonder how did we suddenly get so old.

## The Face in the Mirror

Joyce Boatright, The Woodlands TX

In the summer of 1960, right before I entered high school, my daddy dyed my hair red. Yep, that’s right. He put on those rubber gloves and mixed the color with peroxide and then, with my head hanging over the bathroom sink, he painted my wren brown hair with Miss Clairol’s patented Coppertone. My daddy said I was an Irish girl and should have been born a redhead—he was just helping Mother Nature correct her mistake. Wow, what a difference. My hair dazzled.

There were lots of blondes, a passel of brunettes, and a few chestnut-haired girls in high school, but I have to say, in all honesty and a smidgeon of humility, that I was the only redhead worth noticing.

I wasn’t beautiful but I’ve always been pretty. While my girlfriends fought acne, I had a peaches and cream complexion that came from good genes rather than any kind of skin regimen. At five-foot-four and 116 pounds, I had the curves of Marilyn Monroe. I remember that my favorite lipstick was Pink Parfait, which I bought at Goolsby Drugstore on the Courthouse Square of my hometown.

My mother tried her best to interest me in the latest fashion from New York, but I was more interested in the fads of my age group. I wanted to fit in, not stand out. Except for the red hair, that is. I did like that bodacious red hair—mainly because my daddy kept telling me how pretty I was, and my Aunt Jean went out and bought the same Miss Clairol and colored her hair right after she saw mine. I knew I had to be good looking if my aunt wanted to copy me.

That red hair laid the foundation for a girl who combined sassy with savvy. I gained confidence that my mental prowess could make up for my less-than-Miss-Texas-Beauty-Queen looks with each degree I earned: high school diploma, bachelor’s degree in journalism and English, master’s degree in educational administration with a specialty in public relations, and a doctorate in adult education with a specialty in higher education marketing.

At 25, I had spurned five proposals for marriage and then succumbed to a man who proposed to me four months into our relationship. I said yes. I wouldn’t say it was love at first sight or a whirlwind courtship. Actually, and I know this is hard to believe but it’s true: in some quirky six degrees turn of fate, my mother had been flower girl in his parents’ wedding. Because of that little detail, we decided that even though we hadn’t known each other very long, we were well matched. Good stock. Crazy about each other. And we wanted to be married like our friends were. What else was necessary? We had the rest of our lives to get to know each other. I was, after all, 25 years old and not getting any younger.

The marriage lasted four years, seven months, and twenty-five days. By then the hard reality of spending a lifetime together had sullied all illusions of wedded bliss. What we knew of each other wasn’t strong enough to hold us until our fifth anniversary, much less the rest of our lives.

My 30s were the most powerful of my young existence—I was smart, I was pretty, and men and women listened when I voiced my ideas.

Then I became middle aged. My youth faded and my body began to betray me. I had a hysterectomy and gained 20 pounds, began taking steroids for ulcerative colitis and gained another 30 pounds. I’ve been fighting—and sometimes winning—the battle of body image ever since.

This morning I took a look in the mirror and see my reflection. All else has been stripped away—the lipstick, the silky smooth skin, the husband. Even the red hair is fading to grey. I face who I really am. It has taken time—and faded youth—to see me. Not someone else’s idea of me, but truly me. And I like her.

But there’s no need to toss Miss Clairol out the window. Instead, I’ve chosen to fade to honey blonde. After all, the aging soul needs to glow.

# 1023

Marty Hoover, Albany IN

I was ecstatic when the Hoovers and their two teenagers decided on me after scouting out no less than 49 properties. The minute they walked in my front door, I knew I was their house. Finally I would have a family after being built last year here at 1023 Skyview Drive.

Mike was the oldest at 15 so he commandeered the larger bedroom. Lisa at 13 moved in the smaller one and they shared my hall bath. My master bedroom has an attached bath so it all worked out. My lower level is finished in one half so the teens could entertain their friends, and Marty and Dave could have parties. The land's slope is deep so you can enter either in my bottom level in back or at ground level in front.

A scary aspect about my location as one of the highest points in the county is the sound and fury of storms. The frightful lightening and powerful wind during storms can make my shingles stand on end. The intense lightening has fried our TVs, phones, computers, thermostats, microwaves, trees, and we've gone hours and days without electricity. Some of our treasured trees have fallen, but fortunately, none have ever crashed directly on me.

Dave put in a garden early on and with expansions and improvements, it became a four tiered vegetable and flower garden that's his pride and joy. They enjoy the delicious fresh veggies and I love having the beautifully colored flowers around my rooms with their heavenly scents floating through the air.

The Hoover's have had many cats and a few dogs over the years, but they were mostly kept outside or in my garage so I didn't sustain any pet damage. I relished the dogs languishing on my front stoop and the cats rubbing their soft furry bodies on all my doors and corners. The cats also enjoyed lazing on the deck and watching the birds in the feeder and bird bath.

Being a serious homebody, Mike wouldn't even spend the night with a friend or go to camp. I was totally shocked when he announced that he'd enlisted in the Army and agreed to an assignment in Germany. It got real quiet around here in 1985 when he left, followed the next year by Lisa going to Ball State University. Our baby chicks had flown the nest. I did get a facelift in their bedrooms and, while I missed their laughter, parties, and friends, I did not miss the loud music that rattled me to my foundation.

Recurring remodeling has been an immense challenge with all the irritating noise, floating dirt, obnoxious smells, limitless equipment, construction materials, and workmen constantly coming and going. First was the large screened in porch, then the workshop, next the transformation of the porch to a sunroom, which is my favorite because of the expansive light and wooded view. Next was a new sloping, curving, creek stone front walk with no step. A new concrete pad was poured on the lower patio to hold a hot tub which I'm so glad they put outside.

The new master bath was a smart move with a walk in shower in preparation for Marty's knee replacement surgery. Now I know how those women feel on the Oprah makeover shows.

The most ambitious project was the complete kitchen/dining room remodel. I didn't know if I could survive three months of total chaos. The two rooms were gutted and combined into one large area. I was outfitted with new lighting, maple cabinets, stainless appliances, a cozy banquette and now I look absolutely fabulous. I'm glad Marty had a decorator to help because she's not very good with colors and indecisive about how to bring big projects together. Between the sunroom and adjoining kitchen/eating area, I feel pretty attractive for a thirty year old house.

When Dave built the workshop and began to seriously sell boxes made from exotic woods, Marty and I didn't think we would survive the constant fine sawdust, noise, and did I mention the sawdust that permeated every nook and cranny? Happily he now only occasionally works with woods and is into the more benign oil painting.

What I've liked best about the Hoovers' living here is their countless parties. Always a blowout at Christmas, some memorable Halloween parties, open houses and hootenannies, birthday parties and the usual teenage happenings. We've had lots of family birthdays, post wedding celebrations, Mother's and Father's Day, after funeral get-togethers to celebrate the life of a family member or friend. There's been a great deal of shared fellowship, laughter, sorrow, conversation, and good food under my roof.

The most heart breaking event was the day the sheriff's deputy came to tell them Mike had killed himself. I have never heard a more mournful cry as the sorrowful wails from Marty that still vibrate in my walls. There was formidable gloom and doom here after that. It took years and enormous effort for life to slowly get to a new normal.

Some of the happiest times involve the three granddaughters, Stashia, Ashley, and Alyssa, and the hundreds of days and nights they've spent here. It's been great fun to see them as newborns and watching them grow up. The girls have been pretty kind to me with very little defacing, dents, and scrapes. The joy and laughter they bring is rejuvenating and good karma.

It's refreshing to have Lisa visit regularly. She's always fun to have around and I love her stories about her travels and exploits with her job and friends. She has experienced some bumps in the road, so I'm glad that I could be here for a soft place to fall. She's such a treasure.

The Hoover's are aging; we've been an awesome fit. My hope is they can stay with me until they depart this life.

We belong together here at 1023.



**“...acknowledging your profound influence on the...woman I became.”**

**~B. Epstein**

## Dear Momma

Bea Epstein, Rockville MD

Dear Momma,

For many years, my thoughts returned to how unbalanced and unfair I was in my selective memories of the role you played in my life. I realized that for far too long, I saw you through a negative lens. Your life became a model of how not to be a wife and mother. Looking back, I see how much energy I spent proving that I am your total opposite.

Yet, woven through my life has been the hidden recognition that much of what is strongest in me is due to your influence. It wasn't until after you were gone that I could acknowledge this truth. A woman with barely a sixth-grade education, you had little life experience outside the limits of your ghettoed world—first in Russia, then in America. How did you know so much about molding a daughter who could, in one generation, take hold of and enjoy the advantages this country has to offer? With no opportunities to realize your own extraordinary potential, where did you learn to think with such shrewdness and complexity?

As your confidante, it was difficult to hear your disappointment in Dad and the dissatisfaction you felt building a life with a naïve, unrealistic husband. During those intimate conversations, as I sat and listened without defending him, I was flooded with guilt. No father could have given a daughter more unconditional love and adoration than he gave me.

In our immigrant, blue-collar neighborhood, surrounded by working class families, you let me know in a hundred ways that I had to aspire to something better. With fierce intensity, you believed in my ability to realize your image of the American dream. You pushed, you prodded, you demanded of me an ever-higher level of academic achievement and social grace. No lapse escaped your watchful eye, and your disapproval was all too plain. Launched on this path early in life, I dealt with the intense pressures you placed on me by attaining and even surpassing your expectations.

I always knew it was because of your determination, your energy and drive, that I was able to forge a life so different from your own. A life filled with opportunity, education, and realized potential. In truth, from earliest childhood, I recognized that you were the smartest, most complicated, and most difficult person in my world.

As I grew into the person you groomed me to become, we both felt the distance between us increasing. Asserting my right to be a separate person, I pulled away from you. My comfort in an educational and social class so different from the one in which you lived, combined with my new emotional separateness, wounded you deeply. With less and less to talk about, less and less to share, we grew awkward in each other's presence. Although I attained precisely the life you desperately struggled to give your children, you saw my gains not as your gains, but as your losses. You were certain we would never be close again and you were so right.

After my marriage, you became increasingly bitter and discouraged with the direction your own life had taken. Dad's debilitating depressions, your continued distance from your son, and my move far from New York added to the loneliness and resentment that formed a shell around you, a shell neither your grandchildren nor I could penetrate.

For years, I struggled to bring some joy into your life. Only after your death was I released from the guilt and shame of every one of our conversations, always hearing the disappointment in your voice. When I no longer felt the need to keep you at bay, I allowed myself to recognize what a remarkable woman you were. Only later in my own life did I understand the traumas you faced as a child and again as a young woman. Only then could I fully appreciate our story as another in the millions of stories of immigrant families who came to America to find a better life for the next generation.

I deeply regret that I was unable to bridge the gap between us before your death more than thirty years ago so that we might have had the opportunity to forge a closer, more positive connection. I wish I could have separated from you and your disappointment while still honoring you, still acknowledging your profound influence on the best of the woman I became.

Forgive me, Momma. I love you,

~Beebee

## To those who write about closet skeletons

June B. Jefferson, Fayetteville AR  
r-ecircle I

I know  
you think you were just responding  
to the imperative of your past  
When you wrote the story—  
all its darkness, mania, survival,  
triumph.

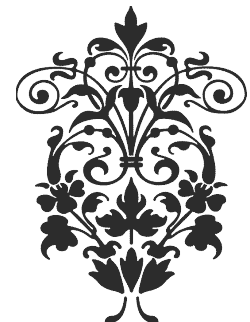
I know  
you didn't know you were writing  
words  
across the ages, for the faceless, the  
ones who dared  
not utter a sound, those who didn't  
know how to say the pain, the  
confusion,  
the hope, the hope.

You know  
you were compelled to put pen to  
paper,  
you were empowered with the  
strength  
mightier than a sword  
To voice the silent  
To make sense of the lunacy  
To petition for relief.

You know  
You told just one story. Many wait to  
be told.

You found  
Your words touched closed hearts,  
some that may yet open  
to break into pieces.

You know and I know what others  
too will learn:  
it's the journey—  
the path to restoration.





# The Seed Bed

June B. Jefferson, Fayetteville AR, r-ecircle 1

Sometimes the memories are from Spring, other times perhaps October. I just know I am very young, preschool age, because I am at home with my grandmother while my sisters and brother are at school.

This is the time period, I now realize, when some of the first lessons about values, caring, being a part of community, and personal responsibility were given to me. Here is the setting, the seed bed for the principles I was taught to live by.

Mama Grace, my mother's mother, takes care of us children while Mama and Daddy work. We all live together ever since Daddy David, my maternal grandfather, had a stroke years before I was born and my mother and father moved home to help.

The house is the one Mama grew up in during the 1920s and 1930s. It and the yard, a quarter-acre lot, are part of the original farm belonging to the Sullenberger family for whom the street is named. The oldest remaining male Sullenberger lives down the street with his sister, Mrs. Noble. As I grow up, they both personify the word "noble" to me.

She is tall, slim, and stately like my grandmother (except Mama Grace has huggable curves). Mr. Sullenberger is always handsomely dressed in suit, coat, and tie, with his walking stick and gloves. He walks to town daily along our sidewalk and we always greet each other. He treats me with Southern politeness, and I know we converse because I come to think of him as someone my grandfather, now deceased, would have been like.

Only years later do I wonder what circumstances caused him to lose his hand so that he is gloved in all weather. As a child, I may have been curious, but we were taught not to ask about things like that, just to accept them as a natural part of the whole person.

My solitary days at home with Mama Grace seem lengthy and yet I know by looking at the chronology of my life, they could not have been more than a few years. They were filled with tasks and life lessons learned, discoveries, affection, and a distinct feeling that I was a handful.

The last grandchild of four, in a household that totaled seven people, I was born when she was sixty years old and had been widowed for four years. Especially at this time in our society, the postwar baby boom, Grace Eb Deere McDowell should have been allowed to relax and "be taken care of" instead of the opposite.

However, Fate gave me the present, and her, the responsibility, of raising me: the last live firecracker at the bottom of the barrel. And there were explosions; Mama Grace bore the brunt of my tiny overactive curiosity as well as the endless years of adolescent angst (by then she was 78 years old!). I'm pretty sure I wore her out; she died the fall I went away to college.

All this retrospective knowledge is cradled in archetypal images I cannot pin down to any specific day but which come to me both as invited memory and also without warning, like falling stars I can wish on.

The flash of a cardinal's red wing in a forsythia bush reminds me of the bird we nursed back to health in a shoebox on the back porch. The red bird with the injured leg remains a

family legend about recovery and rebirth. The cardinal, which my grandmother named "Crip," returned to us each spring for years.

The forsythia shrub also recalls for me the times I was sent outside to pick out a switch which was supposedly going to be used to discipline me. I never remember any switchings; the choice of just the right slim whiskable branch "while I thought about what I had done" was punishment enough.

My love of good dirt comes from the hours of digging in rich river bottom soil while my grandmother "rested" from her inside work outside in the yard. She tended the floral offerings of the seasons while teaching me how restorative the natural world is, how weeding and getting muddy and planting result in beauty. I learned whatever measure of patience I possess as a result of putting bulbs underground in autumn and seeing their first blades push up from the earth in spring.

I cannot chop onions without seeing Mama Grace's hands swiftly wielding a knife to create some comforting miracle meal from almost nothing. She never cut herself no matter how fast the blade flew. I thought her skin, like everything about her, was impervious to harm. She was SuperWoman; deflecting arrows while creating sustenance and bounty. With this lineage I felt like I could undertake anything.

Finally, there is a life-encompassing memory: the creak of an old rocking chair takes me back to numerous times of being snuggled against her wide, soft chest, tears drying into nothingness, blessed sleep descending on me from whispered lullabies and the rhythmic squeak, rock, squeak, rock, squeak. I rest secure now, assured that this experience translated into my personal faith and confidence in the unconditional acceptance and love of God.

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## birthday remembrance

Nancilynn Saylor, Austin TX, w-ecircles 4, 5, and 6

today in austin texas, the sun is already up  
 when i awaken; it is an odd feeling  
 to wake up to the blue walls bathed  
 in golden light from the moon window  
 above my bed that faces East  
 so my body can sleep at night.  
 my mind never sleeps; again, dreams filled my night.  
 last night i dreamed a dinner party joined by some favorite nuns.  
 my mother, although gone over fourteen years,  
 as animated as the daughters of saint vincent;  
 she was, in fact, sitting between two of them.  
 the nuns had colored their hair brown...  
 it was odd to see them this way,  
 but it was a good odd.  
 they try in their lovely way  
 to bring me comfort in the night  
 so waking upon the forty fourth anniversary  
 of my boy's birth will not sting my heart so deeply.  
 he, who has been gone, just barely over eight years now...  
 half awake, i stumble to the kitchen to make coffee  
 then go out back to the garden.  
 good dreams and birdsong will get me through...

## Echoes of His Mind

Sara Etgen-Baker, Allen TX

The windows of the day room were flung open; the air, light and fresh, gently blew the curtains to and fro, but the air within the enclosed corridors, heavy and stagnant, wafted down the hall with the sound of choking coughs, the blended noise of televisions broadcasting different channels, and the distinctive smell of urine.

When I entered the day room, I felt a surge of shock. Many residents slept in their chairs; a wheelchair swallowed the tangled skeleton of a woman, her head flopped over her chest and her leg bones twisted uncomfortably. Joyless inertia permeated the room hinting at Timber Rock Manor's unspoken function: caring for elderly people who are dying.

Behind me a raspy voice said, "He wanted ta go fishin' after dinner," said Anwar, the aide who cares for my father and his roommate, Henry.

"I tries ta oblige Edwin whenever I can; I wheels him down to da creek ta sit fer a bit whilst I'm tendin' ta Henry. Mosey on down there; he'd loves ta see ya! Careful so's not to spook him, though."

I glanced out the windows and saw my father sitting outside in his wheelchair near the edge of Timber Rock Creek. His left arm, over which he has no control was propped up by pillows. His olive skin, once tan from fishing during long summer days, was now ghost white. A white paper bib hung from his neck in a rather undignified manner.

I approached the creek bank not wanting to disturb either the fish or the angler who was casting his line into the shallow creek waters. As I drew near, a small twig snapped like a guitar string underneath my feet; small birds scattered above me, disrupting the tranquility.

Pop shifted his head in my direction. "Hi, sa..sa..sawee tie pie! Ca..ca..caught 59 fish t'day."

His eyes danced; a familiar mischievous smile raced across his face as he demonstrated how he'd cast his line into Lake Tawakoni. He knew its choicest spots, for—when the lake was but a river—he'd hunted the area as a young boy and gathered Indian arrowheads.

"What did ya use to catch those fish, Pop?"

"Crickets 'n blood bait.....da fa..fa..faish nibble sla...sla...slowly..ca..ca..caught...59 fish t'day! We havin' fish fry!"

I choked back the tears remembering that summer day in 1961 when Pop actually caught 59 fish and brought them home for a fish fry. Since Pop's stroke, though, both time and space lost their relevance—happily frozen in the recesses of his mind.

"Fantastic! I've been wantin' some fried fish and hushpuppies. You iced 'em down, right?"

"Yep! Wha..wha...where's Anwar? He..he..he said he'd clean 'n filet fish."

"He's waitin' for ya up at the Manor. It'll be dark soon—let's head back inside."

"Okay, sa..sa..sawee tie pie. Love you!"

So I pushed Pop's wheelchair across the winding trails toward Timber Rock Manor. When we arrived in Pop's room,

Anwar was tending to Henry, who was clearly at the brink of death.

Anwar spooned water into Henry's mouth and asked, "Dat frog still in your throat? Youz needs to drink. Please now, Henry," he begged.

When Henry accepted some liquid, Anwar approvingly said, "Wunnerful!"

Anwar massaged Henry's shoulders, arms, and hands then gently cleaned his mouth with a small medical sponge. Henry's eyes didn't open, but he uttered a sound that could be either a sigh or moan.

"Edwin," he said, "your daughter brought cha a choc-lit malt. I knows youz loves dat malt! Why don'ts I eases ya up into bed sos youz can drink it?"

Pop nodded affirmatively, but a frustrating frown crossed his face. Although Pop's stroke took away his independence, it hadn't eliminated the emotional anguish Pop faced each day adjusting to his inability to do even the simplest things: walking, bathing, eating, lifting himself into bed, and going to the bathroom. Pop glanced at me; I instinctively knew he'd rather me not see him vulnerable and physically incapable.

Yet, I desperately wanted Pop to know that, despite his current condition, he was still my inspiration and hero. I wanted to find the words that would express how much I admired his courage even at this stage of his life, for he's never once complained since the day his stroke forever altered his life. I stood next to his bed struggling with what to say and do at this particular moment.

Then I remembered that Pop, too, sometimes struggled with what to say and do whenever I was troubled or sad. Often he walked to the local convenience store, bought two small, nickel-size bags of plain M&Ms, then we quietly sat together on the back porch sharing our M&Ms. Eventually, he'd touch my hand, give me a hug, and say, "I love you. You're gonna be alright."

I treasured those moments of comfort and understanding, then recalled I'd seen packages of M&Ms in the vending machine in the lobby. So, I slipped out the door; headed to the lobby, and bought two packages of M&Ms. By the time I returned to Pop's room, Anwar was gone, but he'd left Pop sitting up in bed. So, I scooped a chair next to him, tore open a package, and placed some M&Ms into his right hand. He glanced down at his hand, then back at me, pouring all the candy from his hand into his mouth and chuckling.

I opened my bag, pouring some M&Ms into my hand then directly into my mouth. We continued eating our M&Ms silently sharing a moment of understanding. Eventually, I touched Pop's hand, gave him a hug, and said, "I love and admire you Pop. Thanks for loving me!"

"Love you, too, sa..sa..sawee tie pie!"

Tears quickly filled both our eyes. Before awkwardness ruined the moment, I squeezed Pop's hand, hugged him, then walked down the corridor toward the dim evening light—grateful for the echoes of his mind where Pop could live in the midst of his memories without pain.

## The Gift

Lois Halley, Westminster MD

It was a beautiful day in May, 1973, and my husband and I were leaving our home in Philadelphia to drive to Key West to celebrate our 5th wedding anniversary. As my parents saw us off, my father reached into his wallet and pulled out some money. "Buy yourselves an anniversary present from me while you're away—something nice that you wouldn't spend your own money on."

As we traveled south enjoying the sights and tourist attractions, we had fun contemplating what sort of small luxury we might purchase, but it wasn't until we reached Florida that we stumbled upon a shop which specialized in cuckoo clocks. We turned to each other and smiled, knowing that we would buy our gift there.

We chose a clock that was hand carved in Germany. It had a nest of baby birds flanked by two larger birds. On top of the clock was the largest bird which seemed to guard the others. It reminded me of the relationship I had with my father who always seemed to protect me, his only child.

After our trip, we hung the clock in a prominent place in our home. We learned that to keep functioning, cuckoo clocks require maintenance from a clock maker every couple of years. We tried to faithfully have our clock "tuned up," but eventually our busy lives and other priorities prevailed, so the clock stopped working but still looked lovely on our wall.

Although my dad almost died twice in my childhood, once from a coal mining accident and once from a serious illness, he reached the age of 89 before his generous heart stopped beating.

During the five months of his final illness, I drove the 155 mile trip to visit him every week. A couple of weeks before his death, my father described to me a beautiful young woman that he said he saw in the corner of his room near the ceiling. The last time I saw him alive, my dad said "I hear Frank in the hall. Tell him to come in and have a seat."

Frank was my father's best friend throughout their lives, but I couldn't invite him in as he had died years before.

I was greatly saddened that I was not with my father when he breathed his last. My mother, his wife of sixty years, was alone with him at the time.

Three months of grief and guilt passed, and deep inside I wished for a sign from my dad to let me know that he was okay. One day I was home alone, feeling despondent, with thoughts crowding into my mind that there must not be an afterlife and that death brings nothingness.

I began thinking how punctual my dad always was, and how every Sunday night precisely at 7 pm he would telephone me. Just as the TV show *Sixty Minutes* came on the air with a clock loudly tick-tocking, my phone would ring.

In my reverie, I thought that I heard that *Sixty Minutes* clock, but when my gaze went to the cuckoo across the room, I saw that the pendulum which had not moved in years was now swinging back and forth. I watched through tear-filled eyes as the minute hand moved to the 12 and the little mechanical bird came out to sing, as if to let me know that my father was in the place where good souls go, and everything was indeed okay.

## Tender Tenancy

Lisa Shirah-Hiers, Austin TX, w-ecircle 10

From the moment I saw him laugh across the crowded bar,  
I wanted to know him, and be with him, and be his friend.  
I didn't care then  
What color his eyes were.  
It was the unrestrained joy in his whole face  
And carriage  
And being  
That drew me.  
But later I did come to relish those eyes—  
The deepness of them, the honesty, the passion.  
The connection.  
The color doesn't describe it. The look is what matters.  
I think his soul would shine out  
No matter whether it peeked through a blue doorway  
Or a green,  
Or brown or grey.  
And still,  
The way a deep blue shirt deepens the blue of his eyes  
Is breath-taking—  
Light dancing on water.  
He is the man with whom every cliché is true.  
My heart skips a beat,  
I hear music,  
I see fireworks,  
The earth moves.  
22 years and still  
The clichés hold  
Even as we move  
Beyond them  
To indescribable realms of peace;  
Fat happy contentment  
And security.  
We are no longer explorers  
Charting the unfamiliar territory  
Of each other's minds and bodies,  
But instead  
Are tenants in each other's hearts.  
We each have a beloved and comfortable  
Home in the other,  
As familiar and sweet as any real place I've ever known.

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## Let it Rain

Doreen Myers, Blairsville GA, Valrico FL Writing Circle

When storms brew and tides change,  
And the forest of lashes can't hold the swell,  
Across the cheek hills the rivulets race,  
Deep springs burble from the well,  
Let it rain.

When ashes line the fireplace,  
And ruby embers bear the pleasure or the pain,  
On tired windows the sparks reflect,  
The saline river wets the same.  
Let it rain.

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*  
—1 Corinthians 13: 4-7

*What greater thing is there for two human souls than to feel that they are joined together to strengthen each other in all labor, to minister to each other in all sorrow, to share with each other in all gladness, to be one with each other in the silent unspoken memories?*  
—George Eliot

August 30, 1968 dawned cloudy and muggy—unusual for any day in Albuquerque. But this was not just any day. It was my wedding day, one that I'd always dreamed of as being sunny, bright, and special in every way. Special I was sure I'd have, for I was marrying my best friend, the love of my life. Sunny and bright remained in question all day long. As time for the wedding drew near, I seemed to be the only one in my household getting ready. In frustration, I called Harold and told him I'd no doubt be hitch-hiking to the church. He laughed that special Harold laugh that was so much a part of the man I'd fallen in love with, and he promised whenever I got there, he'd be waiting for me at the altar.

Waiting he was, and the wedding and reception went off without a single problem. We left to spend the night at an upscale place near the foothills that we'd decided to splurge on for that one night before we left for our lovingly planned week in the Colorado mountains.

The clouds finally won out and we were serenaded by thunder and lightning that rolled down those foothills. So instead of going back out, we decided on room service. Both of us had been too excited to eat much, but then we looked at the menu and settled on splitting a hamburger, the only thing that came close to fitting into our limited travel budget. When it arrived, Harold served up our "sirloin under glass" with much flair and flourish. We laughed and feasted!

The next morning brought the sun and blue skies we'd been hoping for. We went out to the car, ready to head for Colorado—only to find that our clothes for the trip, left hanging on a rod in

"Rise and shine Ethel! The day's not gettin' any longer," called Pop. Ethel

heard the same thing every morning and wondered how Pop never tired of it. Only twelve years old, Ethel rose before dawn each day to help her dad work in the cotton fields. She was in third grade when her family had to make the heartbreaking decision to take her out of school and put her to work. Ethel was the oldest of six children and the family was going through some hard times. Her younger brother, Elmer, had died of pneumonia the year before and her mother hadn't recovered from the loss. Ethel worked hard as she toiled in the hot sun picking cotton side by side with the adults. At breakfast one morning, her father jokingly teased her, "Ethel, you're a hard worker. When are you going to pick your first hundred pounds in a day?"

Her blue eyes danced and sparkled as she eagerly stepped up to accept the challenge. "I can do anything the others can do!" she declared.

"Now honey, you know you can't pick that much!" Pop said with a laugh. Never to walk away from any challenge, Ethel

## Day to Celebrate

Susan Ideus, Albuquerque NM, w-ecircle 7

the back seat, were gone. Flabbergasted, we wondered if we could live a week with just the clothes on our back. An airman and a college student, we couldn't afford to replace what had been taken. Then we saw it, a soggy note under the windshield wiper. Our "friends," the same ones whose chase we thought we had eluded the night before, had managed to get in the car and remove our things. They were nice enough to leave us a note about what they'd done, and they did tell us where the clothes were; unfortunately, that part of the note had washed away in the downpour! We spent the next hour and a half calling around trying to locate which of our enterprising friends had our possessions. True to his nature, Harold laughed through it all and had me doing the same in no time. Our trip, complete with our clothes, was everything we had hoped for and dreamed of.

It was the perfect beginning of a marriage that spanned over four decades, not always ideal, or easy, or smooth—but always full of love and laughter, faith and friendship.

August 30, 2012 has dawned sunny and hot. Today was to have been our 44th anniversary. We were going to be celebrating at our favorite hideaway in Ouray, Colorado. Instead I woke up alone. Just as I have for the past 3 months and 25 days. In my wildest dreams, I could never have envisioned this day turning out this way.

I have cried, I have screamed in anger and frustration, I have wallowed in the depths of sadness and despair, I have had days when the pain and loneliness have seemed unbearable, I have grieved deeply. I suspect there is more of the same to come.

For today, though, I choose to celebrate. Not with parties and gifts and crowds and dancing. No, this is a celebration of my heart and spirit, a celebration of thankfulness for the almost 43 years of love and laughter I had with my best friend.

*Thank you, Harold, for gifting me with those years. Your deep abiding love and your tremendous faith keep me going, and the memories of the good times and laughter buoy my spirits daily. The realization that together we weathered hard times and sad times gives me strength still.*

*All my love to you on our special day from your Susie...*

## A Hundred Pounds of Cotton

Renita Collier, Glenn Heights TX, w-ecircle 13

refused to back down. As she worked in the fields that day, her back ached, and her fingers bled. The sun was scorching and even with her bonnet covering her head, she could feel the sun baking her. She stopped few times for water and rest, only to quickly return to picking cotton. She even cut her lunch break short. *I'll show them all that I am not some little girl!*, she thought to herself.

At dusk, as the adults began meeting near the barn where a make-shift weigh-in station had been set up, Ethel struggled to drag her bag of cotton. Her fingers had been cut so much by the jagged cotton bolls that they appeared to be nothing more than bloody stubs. As she stood waiting her turn, she silently prayed that she had made the hundred pounds. Finally, Mr. Belcher, the man in charge, helped her place the bag on the scales, and she almost burst into tears when she heard him announce: "Ms. Wickliffe, ninety-eight pounds!"

"Honey, you have never picked that much before. I am proud of you," boasted Pop. (Cont. on pg 21)

My father was patient and kind. He did not envy, nor boast. He was proud of his wife and daughter. He was never self-seeking, was never rude, and never easily angered. He kept no record of wrongs. My father's love never failed.

I modified 1 Corinthians 13:4 as a tribute to my father. I read these words at the luncheon we had after his funeral, which was the second hardest day of my life; the first being the day my father died.

My father's name is Justin. He came into my life when I was sixteen as my step-father and exited it as my father. My dad did all the things a father does for a daughter. He taught me how to take care of my car, gave me advice on life, and was extremely protective of me when the boys I dated misbehaved. My fondest memory is from my senior prom when my dad was my chauffeur. He had his car detailed and even rented a chauffeur's cap to complete the part. I remember my prom with such pride in how handsome he looked.

My dad's health issues began in 1995 when he underwent a quadruple heart bypass. After the surgery, he was diagnosed with polycystic kidney disease that led to kidney failure. My dad began hemodialysis in 1997 which became the mainstay of his life for the next 17 years.

My dad was lively, energetic, and loving. He always helped friends and family and was compassionate to everyone. He had a quiet dignity and was extremely well respected. My dad had volunteered to serve in the army as an engineer during the Vietnam War and that military bearing carried forward throughout the rest of his life. He was precise and organized. His favorite motto was "measure twice, cut once," when it came to doing any projects around the house.

To show how precise he was, I can remember when I came home from work one day to find that my dad had hung shelves in my bedroom. As I began to put my knick knacks on the shelves they slid off the shelf and onto the floor. I took a closer look and saw that the shelves weren't level. I told my dad that my shelves were crooked, and he said with much vehemence that there was no way they were crooked because he had precisely measured before he had hung them. To demonstrate the crookedness, I placed a small item on the lower shelf and watched as it promptly slid to the floor. He gave me a nasty look as I giggled. He got his tools to re-measure and re-hang the shelves, this time perfectly parallel to the floor, straight as an arrow. For Christmas that year I found him a Gary Larson "Far Side" comic that pictured an art gallery in which all of the

(A Hundred Pounds of Cotton from page 20)

"I said I would pick a hundred pounds and I will!" Ethel exclaimed. She returned to the fields determined to pick those last two pounds. Pop tried to help, but she refused his offer. Her back hurt so much she could barely walk and her hands were numb with pain. Her lips were chapped and she dreamed of giving up, but her strong determination kept her going. She came in for the second weigh-in after dark, the full moon already well in the sky.

"Step up and weigh-in!" called Mr. Belcher. He had been so impressed with Ethel's determination that he agreed to stay a while longer to weigh her final attempt.

Ethel dragged her bag over and placed it squarely on the scales. She stood breathlessly until the scales stopped. Victory was hers at last! "I did it, I did it!" she beamed. "I picked a hundred pounds!"

## To My Father

Melissa Dallago, Safety Harbor FL, w-ecircle 13

paintings were hung crooked. The reason for them being hung that way was because the curator had a kinked neck and to him they looked straight, but to the non-kinked neck people they clearly leaned to the right. I wrote in the corner "Justin's Gallery." We laughed and that cartoon hung on the refrigerator for years.

I applaud my dad for his strength, bravery, and never say die attitude when it came to dealing with his health. He never gave up. Every time we went to the hospital or faced a critical diagnosis, and there were many, he would do whatever was needed to survive, come hell or high water. For 17 years he fought. For 17 years we weathered the storms and still pulled enjoyment from life and our family. For 17 years we were a safe harbor from the tumultuous storms of disease and the nastiness of life.

My father was diagnosed with peripheral artery disease in 2008. Over time the circulation in his legs worsened and the situation turned dire when it was discovered that my dad had a complete blockage in his left leg. His leg was dying from a lack of blood and oxygen. My dad was admitted to the hospital in July, 2010, and never came home again.

My dad was in the hospital for three months and underwent two surgeries to amputate his left leg to try to save his life. He underwent months of physical therapy and rehabilitation. Yet after 17 years of dialysis and a chronic heart condition, his body was tired and the situation did not look good. With our support, he decided that he had been fighting for so long and was tired. His medical conditions were terminal and he felt like he was ready to let go. He made the courageous decision to stop his medical treatment because his quality of life was only going to worsen. After he made the decision there was an honor about him: there was no fear in him and no fear in us.

We were gifted with having one last day with my dad. He had a boundless supply of energy. We talked about his last wishes and he spoke with friends and family members to say his goodbyes. We laughed, we loved, we said the things that needed to be said, and listened to the rain. That day was wonderful and has become a happy memory during a very sad time. Those were my dad's last pleasures on this earth.

My dad slipped away from us on September 18, 2010. My mom and I were honored that we were with my dad when he died. We had been through so much together, fought so many battles, and faced so many challenges that it was only fitting that we were with him at the end, a family for one final moment.

My father was a brave, loving, and wonderful man and he is still missed.

"You should be very proud of yourself, honey," Pop said. "Now you can help us like that every day." And with a smile and a wink, Pop patted her on the head and Ethel secretly resolved to make that her new challenge.

*Ethel Wickliffe was born in Round Bottom, Arkansas on October 3, 1903. She was a loving, giving woman and was more insightful into human nature than any other person I have ever known. Her strength and determination kept my grandmother going, as she lived through the Great Depression, the death of her husband, and two of her four children, never losing her faith and determination to survive. At fifty, she took on another major challenge: raising two young grand-daughters. Although we did not make it easy for her, she gave us unconditional love and taught us how to be strong. She was a unique, wonderful woman.*

*“I’ve noticed that good things and bad things often stir themselves up together, like a kind of soup of your life.”*  
~M.L. Fulkerson

## Bee Stings and Hollyhocks

Mary Lee Fulkerson, Reno NV

I’ve noticed that good things and bad things often stir themselves up together, like a kind of soup of your life.

Take, for instance, pinching a bumblebee inside a hollyhock flower. Catching the bee is great fun, but it can sting you, too. Or being too happy, which can be either good or dangerous. See, my mama will hug or slap, and you never know which one it’s going to be.

The day of my sixth birthday, I was happy as the summer sun with my present, a two-wheeled bicycle. But sad about the willow blisters over my arms and legs, and little brother crying in the closet with his hands tied behind him. Mama was in a not-love mood. I closed my eyes and pushed the sick feeling away. She couldn’t help it. Besides, today was special: I was going to learn to ride.

See what I mean about good things and bad things?

I skated back and forth over the linoleum floor ‘til it shone, then untied the rags from my white shoes and yelled up the stairs over baby sister’s cries.

“I’m going outside now, Mama!”

“Don’t you dare get those shoes dirty!”

I raced outside and down the cement steps and grabbed my birthday bicycle. Then, with my dog Homer trotting alongside, I pushed it down Jackson street, past grassy lawns shaded by apple trees, to my friend Carmen’s house. She’d just turned seven, and for our birthdays we got our very first two-wheelers. Carmen’s big Schwinn gleamed red in the afternoon sun. A white basket hooked onto the handlebars, and streamers waved out of the rubber handles. Carmen wouldn’t let me touch the bell, which burst into a cheerful *r-ring* when she pushed a little lever. She looked at me, smiled but in a not real smile, because her top lip curled up, and rang her bell about six times.

I pretended not to care about the bell or that my bike was shorter and its fenders dented. It was painted blue as the sky in some places; other spots were rusty. But it was mine, and I could ride as far away as I dared—if I could learn the secret of staying on. Carmen’s father, Bill, promised to teach us. Bill was a piano-playing bartender at night and he stayed home daytimes. What luck.

I stood on the sidewalk in front of Carmen’s house—the house I wanted to live in, with its yellow plaster walls and “Home Hotel” sign, where Carmen’s mother, Margaret, lay smiling on the sofa, and Bill just waited on Carmen. Mama said Carmen was spoiled, and I wished I could be spoiled, too. When she cried, her parents didn’t spank her; they cuddled her. They gave her a swiny birthday dress with pink polka dots, but she wanted blue, so Margaret and Bill went straight to Ayoob’s Dry Goods store for a blue dot one. They gave me the pink. It hung down below my knees, but if you spun around fast it twirled straight out, like a high school cheerleader’s skirt. I found a

good stick for my pretend baton. Carmen wouldn’t play cheerleader ‘til she got a real baton.

Up the street I could see the plum tree in front of my house, and the sting when my dress touched my legs reminded me to stay away. I patted my big furry Homer, and he licked my hand.

“Eeew,” Carmen said. “Germs.” I smelled my hand but it smelled fine. Homer smelled good. We shared an ice cream cone sometimes.

Bill held Carmen’s bike steady. “Get on, honey,” he said. She climbed on her Schwinn and moaned like she hurt somewhere. Bill talked nice and soft, and he began to push her.

After a while I called, “my turn,” but they didn’t hear me. Homer left to find a gopher hole. Bill pushed Carmen up and down the street. I waited. Carmen cried.

“Coast a minute, sweetheart.” Bill let go and Carmen screamed, so he grabbed her bike again. His face was pink as the dots on my dress.

Little bees were buzzing inside the purple hollyhocks growing up the sides of the Home Hotel. Bee stings and willow stings hurt in different ways. A bee sting can burn you on the outside. But a willow sting, it gives you a kind of lonesome feeling on the inside. Nobody can see that kind.

Carmen and Bill must have forgotten me. So, I gripped the handlebars, straddled my bike, and walked it down the street. Then I went faster. Homer came and trotted beside me, like he really wanted me to do it. I jumped on the seat, raised my feet, and hung on. I was coasting! I clamped my feet to the pedals and pushed them, holding the handlebars fiercely against the wobbling front tire.

All of a sudden I crashed, right in the middle of a mud puddle. I jumped up and yelled to reassure Bill and Carmen. “I’m o—kay.” My voice became a whisper because they didn’t notice. Then I smiled. I did it! I balanced, all by myself. It was time to try again, so I kicked my shoe against the bike to shake off the dirty water and brushed the mud from my leg. Then I wiped my hands on my dress and tried again: push, trot, sit, pedal fast. I held the handlebars tight, and this time it worked fine.

I pedaled harder. I rode past Carmen and Bill and she kicked at me, but I looked away. My wobbling front tire straightened. I went faster, and Homer ran alongside, barking for joy.

I was doing it! I felt like barking, too.

“Mary Le-ee-ee,” came Mama’s faint call, but I didn’t look. I sailed down Jackson Street with Homer at my side, my face headed into the wind.

## Nuances

I lost a friend yesterday. With that loss, I became painfully aware of the nuances of our language. “Lost” sounds like I set my friend down, like recalcitrant keys, and forgot where I put her. “Friend” implies a deeper intimacy than “acquaintance;” we were not intimate, yet so much more than mere head-nodding-as-you-pass-by women. My friend, Gloria died. By her own hand. I can tell you some interesting things about her; she was a divorced Catholic with eight grown children. She was retired from many years as a grocery checker. She loved yard sales and flea markets. She shared my love of books, particularly well crafted mysteries. She loved her significant other, Bob, with whom she had shared 15 years. Bob’s constant memories of his deceased wife had been a third party in their relationship since the beginning. Yet *she* was lost. Somewhere, in her life, was an inner struggle that I didn’t look deeply enough to see. I truly regret that. What went on in those last bitter, lonely hours, before she made the decision to leave her loved ones behind, who are now struggling with guilt and grief? What horrors in her life made her go against her religion, which believes suicide to be a sin, and to take her own life? I don’t know. I will never know.

I lost another friend recently as well, when my best friend of 45 years, without discussion or response from me, decided that our friendship no longer served a purpose. Again, the nuances flutter in my face like angry wasps and echo in my head with devastating repeats of past conversations. Friend? For 45 years we experienced our lives together. Boyfriends, proms, marriages, childbirth, divorces, remarriages, and parental deaths. Laughing, crying, discussing books, religion, politics, family, hobbies. I felt we had such a deep root in our friendship, our sisterhood, that it would never die, but would always be there, sometimes in the background, more often in the forefront, a strong presence to rely on, to share with and enjoy. Where did I miss the signs? What

Laura Strathman Hulka, Oroville CA

happened to make her so determined to destroy what we had spent decades building and nourishing? I don’t know. I will never know.

The last member of my mother’s immediate family died recently, at 95. As I lost this last uncle, and reminisced with his sons about our parents, I became achingly aware that in this loss, an official torch had been passed. I am now the senior generation. My parents are both gone, lost to me in the physical sense, but always present in my mind, a kaleidoscope of memories that often bring a sharp burning to my throat and eyes. Did I appreciate them enough when they were alive? Did we ever really understand one another? My uncle was not a friend, in that I knew almost nothing about him except that he loved ice cream and women. Not necessarily in that order. Moreover, although he was “family,” he was not an intimate part of my life, as were my parents, as are my sisters and my children. Will I ever be able to wrap my head around being, what seems to be suddenly, a senior citizen, the one family comes to, (or groans over) for family stories, pictures, reminiscences, and tall tales? I don’t know. I will never know.

Why is it, I wonder, do we become increasingly introspective as we age? Why is it, at around age 40, we begin to search for self, for meaning, for a solid grasp on the nebulous thoughts of spirituality, religion, friendship, loss, and family? Why does it matter so much, as we age, that we understand these things, express our beliefs, share our lives, explain our viewpoints, and cherish our loves? Why do the delicate, tremulous nuances of our language both tempt and repel me as I attempt once again to express my thoughts and feelings?

I don’t know, and perhaps I will never know. And guess what? That’s okay.

Scrunched over two pillows while perched on the edge of a pre-op gurney, I exposed my lower back to the anesthesiologist’s hands as he inserted a tiny tube into my spine. He assured me it was well worth any discomfort, as the tube would carry great pain relief to the area around my new knee. To have the epidural was an option I chose without hesitation, as I was confident I would need this for the notorious pain following surgery. But in that moment, I regretted the choice. The nurse had asked my husband to step out of the cubicle during the procedure, and he retreated to the waiting room. I was alone.

The intravenous fluid with sedation flowed, and though I had lost some awareness, my mind was clear enough to regret the fact that my husband, Bill, and I had no parting words. We had shared no prayer. I wanted someone to get him, but I couldn’t speak. My heart rate quickened and I felt queasy.

The anesthesiologist left the cubicle and the surgical nurse took charge. “You may lie down now. The tube is in place.”

I sat up from my scrunched position and the pillows tumbled from my lap to the floor. Her arm went around my shoulders and she lowered me to the gurney as I swiveled and lifted my legs into place. She snapped a blue gauze cap over my hair, made a joke about my lovely appearance, and covered me with a sheet. The gurney started to move!

## Four Words

Susan Flemr, Fairfield Bay AR

*Oh, I’m going to grab that curtain and stop this gurney.*

I planned my action but my arm lay immobile beneath the sheet.

*Hey, someone needs to get my husband. We didn’t say a prayer or anything.* The words screamed in my active mind, but didn’t come out my silenced mouth.

The gurney came to a sudden halt. Two hands landed firmly on the top of my head. Dr. Ken Martin, my surgeon—chosen for his expertise with total knee replacements—began to speak. I can’t tell you all that he said. Despite sedation, I remember four words: “my hands, this woman.” In touch and tone I felt intent for excellent surgical technique, accuracy, healing, and for the Source of All Good—whom both Dr. Martin and I call God—to flow through his hands into my deteriorated knee to make it whole.

In those brief moments, I felt connected to my husband in the waiting room, to my children and grandchildren in Colorado and Iowa, to my 96-year-old mother who prayed for me that day, and to many friends who had conveyed their love and concern. Most powerful of all was the sense of peace that settled over my whole being—no fear, as I knew I was one with all of life.

There is no logical explanation for the very authentic power of such a transformative moment. None is needed—only gratitude.

## Magic Wand: The Broomsticks

Jamuna Advani, San Ramon CA, w-ecircle 4

Jiribam, Manipur, India, 1945

I was swinging under the shade of my grapefruit tree when I saw a man approach. Paying no attention to me, he went straight to our house and knocked slowly on the main door. I immediately recognized him as he had visited us before. I called him “Khura,” which meant “uncle,” a sign of respect. When my grandmother opened the door, she looked surprised to see him, then greeted him and signaled him to sit on a *mura* (a stool made of cane) on the verandah, the place where visitors were entertained. He sat down.

“Any problem?” she asked. People from the neighboring villages usually came to my father for help in legal matters.

“Yes, it is to convey news about your son-in-law,” he answered.

“What’s happened?”

He mumbled something I couldn’t hear, then left a few minutes later. I saw grandmother Sanachaobi deep in thought. Then she signaled me to come inside. I jumped off the swing and walked briskly toward her, keen to hear what had just happened. Inside the house I saw her talking to my mother in a very serious tone.

She looked at me and said, “Your father has eloped with Kunjo.”

I could not believe it, because Kunjo was a married woman, still living with her husband at the neighboring village Kalinagar. We had heard rumors of their affair but couldn’t believe this would happen.

“Where are they now?”

“At Lakhipur, at your Aunt Pashot’s place.” Lakhipur was a small village, about a ten mile walk from Jiribam.

Both my mother and grandmother had to accept my father’s new wife. Women were not educated and depended mostly on their husbands for living.

Three days later my father returned to attend to his office. His new routine was that on Saturdays he went to his new wife and came back on Sundays. For about a month.

He looked exhausted walking ten miles on the hilly dirt road every weekend and it also became a big strain financially, so grandmother suggested building a cottage for Kunjo in space available near our main house. Father immediately started collecting materials for the project and built the house by himself within three months. There was no drainage system, no electricity.

Four months after their elopement, Kunjo was brought to the new cottage. Everything went on normally like a fairy tale, except that Kunjo was not allowed to cook. Being a divorcee and also not from the same caste rank of my grandmother, she was not allowed to enter the kitchen, but she did do other household chores.

My father wanted a son for the family. But Kunjo did not have a child with her previous husband and it was doubtful she could give my father a son.

Another three months had passed when, one day, my grandmother asked me to come inside our main house. Curious, I obeyed. She pulled out a paper from a packet and gave it to me to read. I found it very difficult to understand.

“Read it again carefully to the end. You have to follow the instructions.”

I started reading again slowly. I got goose bumps. “No, I don’t think I can do it.”

Someone in the village had given my grandmother the name of a sorcerer, whom she had paid for the mantra I’d just read. “I am with you, just follow all the instructions. Only we have to be very careful. No one else should know. Your mother is not a part of this.” Reluctantly I obeyed her.

Then I worked to memorize the mantra written on that piece of paper, which was not easy as the words were an ancient language used by our ancestors.

“We are doing this for the welfare of the family,” my grandmother indicated. Three days later we saw Kunjo all dressed up, a Champa flower hanging on the left side from her hair, which gave a heavenly scent. She said she had to go to Kali temple and also meet her friend. Once she was out of the gate and walked on the street toward Kali Temple, my grandmother, who was at the loom weaving, immediately came out to see if Kunjo was far enough for us to proceed with our plan. She signaled me to get into Kunjo’s bedroom.

Once inside, I saw the room was neatly arranged and filled with the sweet fragrance of Champa flowers, which Kunjo kept near her bed. I took a deep breath as my heart started pumping faster. Even though it was safe to follow the instructions, I was still scared.

Slowly I pulled out five pieces of broomsticks from the packet and, holding them in my right hand, I recited the mantra three times on those broomsticks. Then I continued, sweeping the broomsticks on her bed from the middle toward the opposite sides. After repeating this three times I left the room as fast as I could with the packet. My grandmother’s face was still turned toward the road watching for Kunjo. She was relieved when she saw me.

For four months we continued the same ritual regularly. Then, not sure what happened between Kunjo and my father, one fine morning she left for her parent’s home in Cachar and never returned. Father did not mention her again.

I still wonder if that magic wand worked or if it was another reason. Now that Kunjo was gone, I heard my grandmother asking her friends to find a young bride for my father. A son was needed for the family’s name to continue.





## There When It Counts

Lucy Painter, Sarasota FL, w-ecircle 8

For once I was enjoying my Sunday morning drive up Tamiami Trail. The road ahead was clear except for a silver Saturn driving slowly in the middle lane, a shaggy black dog hanging from the back window. His face pointed into the wind so that his ears stood straight up, his tongue lapping up the air. *What a great dog*, I thought, as I pulled up beside the car. Then I recognized the driver—an old friend from years ago.

Jay and I had volunteered at the Sarasota County Humane Society and become friends. Too shy to work as a matchmaker for potential adopters as I did, he preferred to work only with dogs. People puzzled him. He could not figure out why a family would bring us their dog, drop him off as if the broken-hearted pet was a bag of groceries. He did not understand owners who brought in dogs full of mange and matted fur or cats with injuries from being left outside. After a week at the front desk, Jay retreated to the back where his only interaction was with the animals and with me on slow days.

As Jay and I hooked leashes onto eager dogs, we talked. We sat with our rambunctious charges under the yard's live oak and watched them play as we traded stories of our families including the four-footed members. Both of us shared our homes with former shelter dogs, but I also had a husband and a family. Jay lived alone, Lizzie his only companion.

Lizzie was a large black mixed breed, sweet and loving. Her long ears perked up straight when she saw Jay, and she spun in circles until he reached her. Nine years earlier, Jay had adopted her after Lizzie had been left at the shelter's doorstep, tied to a post on a cold wet Monday morning. The two were inseparable.

At Lizzie's intake exam, she tested positive for heartworm and malnutrition. Jay undertook her care, falling in love with her immediately. The grateful dog recovered and clung to her new friend from those first days on. Where Jay went, Lizzie went except to the shelter itself. None of us brought our dogs back here, fearing they would relive the day they were abandoned in this place, not knowing what was to become of them. No, we loved them too much for that.

Then one summer Lizzie stopped eating and began to lose weight. The vet's diagnosis was dire: kidney and liver failure from the heartworm treatment had weakened her. As the summer wore on, Lizzie shrank and Jay's heart broke.

The call came one Thursday evening as I was stood with my hands in soapy dishwater.

"Hi, Lucy. It's Jay." I could hear tears in his voice.

"Hi, Jay. What's wrong?" I asked, although I knew.

"It's time. Will you go with me tomorrow?"

It is the trip pet owners dread. Lizzie was so sick, barely able to raise her head as she lay quietly in my back seat, it was clear that this act was one of kindness. Jay said nothing as he settled in the front staring out the window. He began to shiver as I parked the car.

"Do you want me to do this for you?" I asked. "You can wait here if you want."

"No, I want to be with her, but I'd like you to stay with us."

So I did. Lizzie stumbled as she entered the office, weak and dizzy. She settled on the blanket Dr. Smith laid out for her, rested her head in Jay's arms and licked his hand, one last gesture of

love. Within one minute, her eyes closed in peace, her breath released, and she once again looked strong and vibrant, the Lizzie I had seen romping in the park.

As Jay and I rose to leave, I held his arm until we were in the parking lot, both of us speechless with sorrow. Suddenly he collapsed into my arms, sobbing like a child as his tears soaked my shirt. I don't know how long we stood in that parking lot, but I knew I could not let him go. When he had regained his breath, he asked if I could come home with him. He dreaded the house without Lizzie to greet him.

I stayed, made tea, and we talked about Lizzie and her exploits: the squirrels she chased, the shoes she had chewed to pieces, the habit she had of dragging out her leash when she wanted a walk. I left when I saw that Jay was sleepy, tucked a blanket over him, and crept out quietly.

After that day, Jay stayed away from the shelter for weeks, and I spent less time there as my husband and I traveled. I did not volunteer for months, too busy with other duties. I still visited often, sad to see that Jay had not returned, but I knew he would when he was ready. The years passed until this Sunday morning, with Jay driving next to me.

Not just Jay, but Jay and his dog; both smiling into the morning as they headed for the dog beach. I knew because he and Lizzie spent many Sunday mornings there. I didn't beep to him. He no longer needed me, but I knew I was there when he did. He was happy again, and that was what mattered, he and that great shaggy dog.

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## Long Life

Janan Hale, Tyler TX, Janan Hale Writing Circle, Tyler TX

I don't want to be a centenarian  
Although some grasp life's flesh to  
Hold on indefinitely  
Not Me

I've seen the trek down that long trail  
Vitality drifting and sifting across the days  
Until there is nothing left  
No Interest

I hear the cry for independence  
Followed by the inability to sustain it  
As body failures, aches and pains  
Call a Halt

Don't press me into special diets  
Creams to smooth and sooth  
Piles of pills to keep life level  
And Yet

I didn't like the sound of the word CANCER  
When I heard the doctor direct it to me  
Then scooped it out  
So Fearful!

I'll take today and live it best I can  
And hope for a tomorrow to try again  
Until the span is up for me  
As planned.

*Janan Hale participates in the daily care of her "amazing mother," who will be 103 in January.*

“...How do we survive times like this?”

~ S. Tweit

## Drought and Grief

Susan Tweit, Salida CO

*You have to get over the color green.*

Wallace Stegner’s advice about how to live sustainably in the inland West is not a suggestion. You won’t survive, he says, in these largely arid expanses between the 100th Meridian and the relatively well-watered West Coast, if your soul requires green.

Especially this year; especially in the Southwest and the Southern Rockies, where last winter’s snow pack—the source of our summer water—was so sparse as to be scary, and spring heated up so quickly even that paltry moisture simply vanished.

Which is why in late June, before “normal” fire season began, Colorado had nine wildfires burning, three in the southwestern corner, two west and one east of Colorado Springs, one near Leadville, and two in northern Colorado. The largest two turned out to be the state’s most destructive ever, the 83,000+ acre High Park Fire in the foothills of the Front Range west of Fort Collins, which burned nearly 250 homes and cabins and cost more than \$29 million to fight, and the Waldo Canyon Fire, which burned 18,247 acres and 346 homes immediately west of Colorado Springs.

The high temperature here in Salida, at 7,000 feet elevation in a mountain valley that is always dry, but not usually this parched, topped out at 99°F on June 22nd. That’s the hottest by far in the 15 years I’ve lived in this spectacular swath of high desert in the rain-shadow of the tallest stretch of the Rockies.

I feel as tattered and worn as the tiger swallowtail butterfly that lit on the flower basket hanging on my front porch this morning and just cling there as if exhausted, not even moving around to sip nectar from the petunias. That butterfly looked like it had been through heck and back, its tails and the lower edges of its wings broken off, and the scales completely rubbed away in several places.

The landscapes I love are hurting in this drought, and that hurts me too. I can water the native grassland and wildflowers in my yard sparingly to keep them alive, but I can’t water the mountainsides around my valley. I can only watch helplessly as mountain meadows, usually green at this time of year turn brown, as the evergreen foliage of the pinion pines and junipers on the nearby hillsides begins to dull, as the streams and the green band of riparian vegetation they nurture shrink.

We received less than three inches of total precipitation in the first six-plus months of the year. That’s not enough to keep alive the living communities that animate these landscapes—from microscopic soil inhabitants to black bears and towering ponderosa pines, from rustling willows to lithe trout. These landscapes have survived long droughts before, including the decades of drought in the late 1100s that were a factor in causing the Ancestral Puebloan people to move from cliff dwellings like those of Mesa Verde to more reliable water sources along the region’s major rivers. But I’m guessing that survival wasn’t easy, or pretty.

As I watch the landscapes I love wither in this extraordinary drought, I grieve the losses. For the company we humans are losing as each individual, and in some cases, whole populations of plants and animals, die out. For the homes burned in the wildfires. If this is global climate change, I hate it already.

And I grieve for my personal losses too, especially that of the love of my life, my husband, sculptor and economist Richard Cabe, he of the brilliant mind and boundless creativity, gone on to whatever is next in the cycle of life after he died of brain cancer last November.

How do we survive times like this? I know that I turn to nature, be it ever so beleaguered by drought and fire, and look for the grace notes—like that tattered tiger swallowtail or the brilliant indian paintbrush still blooming in the restored native grassland that serves as my front-yard “unlawn”—signaling that life manages to thrive despite all.

Those small miracles remind me that joy lives on; I only have to pay attention and let it in.

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## Recipe

Amy Greenspan, Austin TX, r-ecircle 4

The enlightened one said  
You must soften your eyes  
to enter the realm of the heart

Cup your hands  
Gaze inside  
Find an image you love—  
an infant, a sunset, a friend—  
Let the tenderness swell  
till it spills from your eyes  
Let those smiling eyes be  
How you see



I picked up the ringing telephone May 3, 2009. The words I heard were, "Pat, Mike is dead." It felt as though someone had thrown a brick into the center of my chest cavity. In recent months Michael, 46, had moved from Taneytown, MD to Conway, SC where his father and stepmother lived. For years he had lived with Thoracic Outlet Syndrome. Surgical procedures did not eliminate his chronic pain.

Chronic pain and pain medications changed Michael's personality. He had been a police officer on Taneytown and Westminster police forces, and a drummer in a band that traveled. His move was an attempt to detox from all pain medications and begin anew with other medical modalities.

I knew the medications he had been taking could possibly lead to his death. They were toxic and I believe there were occasions when he took more than prescribed. Dealing with Workmen's Compensation (as the injury was deemed to be work related) was another daunting hurdle, as their goal was to deny treatment. That, coupled with his inability to provide for his family as he once had, led Michael to depression. I advocated on his behalf weekly at the office of Roscoe Bartlett, U.S. House of Representatives, to have his Workmen's Compensation not be denied. A lawyer was hired. Expenses mounted.

Michael's suicide attempt was, he shared later, a "cry for help." After his move to South Carolina he detoxed from all prescribed pain medications and any illegal substances he may have indulged in. I knew this because, when he visited me in Maryland for a week at Christmas 2008, Michael was back again. His pain was being managed more effectively with less potent medications. I had hope. I asked him if suicide was ever a considered option again. He adamantly said, "No Mom, that is not an option again."

Michael and I had talked about death and dying. He had written out his wishes in the event his death occurred before mine. This is what our family does: we plan for death, as we

## Coping With a Son's Death

Patricia Hollinger, Westminster MD

have for weddings, or other significant life events.

Of course, I was in a state of shock. I took a month off from my job as Chaplain/Therapist as I could not be effective while needing to pay attention to my own needs.

Since no one was with him at the time of death, an autopsy had to be performed. His body was transferred from South Carolina to Hartzler's Funeral Home in New Windsor, MD. Michael and Jeb Hartzler were playmates and friends from early childhood until adulthood. They were not shocked when I requested to see Michael's body as soon as it arrived. I assured them I would not "freak out." I had to see, feel, touch, and be with him. I planned and executed his memorial service and interment.

At his request, some of his ashes were scattered at Dai Bosatsu Zendo, in New York's Catskill Mountains, where he had embraced the Buddhist faith tradition years earlier. This service was held August 8, 2009 at their annual O Bon service.

I miss him terribly. Michael was born two months prematurely on December 14, 1962 and he died prematurely at the age of 46 on May 2, 2009.

A week prior to his death I sighted an owl in the wooded area where I lived at that time. In my 27 years there, never had I sighted an owl in the front lawn trees. It remained for a lengthy period of time. Initially I believed that neighborhood children had placed a fake owl in the tree. A closer look informed me otherwise. I photographed it then learned two things about the Native American Indian tradition: the owl is the "Angel of Death" and, later, when I received Michael's personal effects, I found his Astrological sign was the owl.

I now have the owl photo in a prominent place in my home. I still shed tears around his loss yet at the same time I feel relief that he is no longer in pain. I know his spirit soars with the owl.

So this is the third night here alone without him, I thought I had done pretty well, some soul searching, some plan making, lunch with a friend, getting errands done that are long overdue, feeling pleased with those accomplishments.

And here it is the third night home alone, thoughts of this week's upcoming tests and their results worry at the edge of my mind, still it could be a miracle, the one he keeps talking about, the one where the doctor says the whole darn ugly mess is gone, it's missing, maybe we made a mistake? Maybe it was never there? And who am I to doubt the workings of God?

And here it is the third night alone and the damn radio is playing Rod Stewart: *...sometimes when we touch...the honesty is too much, I want to hold you till I die, till we both break down and cry, I want to hold you till the fear in me subsides...* Please, I think, please don't leave me.

These past two days, the sense of peace I have been so driven to claim, the meditations, the walks, the mindful activities, all look ridiculous now. Mindfulness won't keep you alive, I won't be okay if you leave me. I know I will be just fine, lots of support, friends, family, finances set up, that's not what I am worried about, it's the not talking to you, who else is going to

## The Third Night

Stephanie Dalley, Forestville CA, w-ecircle 9

call me from time to time just to say hi? Who else is going to help me figure out what's what, when I can't? *Who else is going to bring me a bottle of rain?* (Thanks, Rod, you seem to have all the right lines tonight).

And then I go away from this room, away from the computer, and I have a deep heartfelt cry, from my gut, from my heart, from my soul, the pent up pain, feeling so much sorrow and outrage, I think it might swallow me whole.

But it doesn't.

A desperate friend has been texting me, perhaps she is psychic and doesn't even know it; I look at my phone and see the numerous attempts to get my attention, "Are you ok? I have tried several time to reach you, could you please just send me an X if you are ok? Let me know you are there."

I giggle (what else can you do after an emotional storm like that?), send her an X, say a prayer, think of all the good things I have in my life, and come out and finish this piece. Thanks for friends, thanks for every day I've had and will have with him, thanks for the love I experience every day, thanks for writing, thanks for readers. It's good to know you are out there.

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## Moment of Choice

Darlene Hayman, Montrose CO

Praise for elucidation when the  
spirit sinks into a sunless canyon  
into a soul-less closed basin and

praise for benevolence of spirit breaking out  
into the light of clarity on a higher trail  
eventually dawning up slight inclines

diminishing gloom and erosion of spirit  
past confusion, rashes of red anger,  
internal drainage  
circling a blue hole of depression.

Praise for a friend's easy bare truth advice,  
bringing me forward to a moment of choice,  
of taking action in accordance with nature

into the vast luminous landscape—  
the creative force that feeds the spirit of life  
giving meaning and purpose.



## The Wedding

Susan DuMond, Ashland OR

We are in a sanctuary of dark wood, a  
puritan place.  
Child-like bouquets guard each row.  
Guests inhale heaven on the way to  
kneeling.

Tasteful.  
The women approve.

Soft and swirly,  
white with a hint of fog.  
Street length, the women call it.  
Translucent sleeves for modesty.  
Do the women approve?

Shoes the color of  
melted butter.  
Cheap, if they knew the price.  
Do the women frown?

My heart runs to a mother  
who is not here, never here.  
Instead, always instead,  
I walk forward, I  
vow, marry, turn and  
smile. Such a pretty bride, they murmur,  
these women who are  
not my mother.



## Accidental Road—

*A tribute to interruptions  
and detours*

Mary Ann Parker, Sugar Land TX  
w-ecircle 1

I need to be diligent in my work today  
bills and tax filing have deadlines  
with penalties for avoidance  
laundry and cleaning chores need to be  
finished  
phone calls must be returned  
clutter calls to me from everywhere  
there are necessary errands to pharmacy,  
bank, and market  
cooking requires another whole list plus  
time to do it  
but between the lines of the list  
I will listen for the different drummer  
I will read between the lines  
I will take a walk and watch for  
wildflowers  
I will welcome the phone call from  
someone who is lonely  
I will sit in silence with my Friend  
I will lean into the accidental roads  
today...  
I love dappled sunlight.  
I will lean into the accidental roads  
today...

