



Real Women Write:

Sharing Our Stories, Sharing Our Lives

An Anthology of Fiction,
Nonfiction, and Poetry
by
The Women of Story Circle Network

Volume 14 in the SCN Anthology Series

Edited by Susan Schoch
Layout by Robin Wittig

Story Circle Network

*The Organization for
Women With Stories to Tell*



Real Women Write:

Sharing Our Stories, Sharing Our Lives

We learn best to listen to our own voices if we are listening at the same time to other women, whose stories, for all our differences, turn out, if we listen well, to be our stories also.—Barbara Deming

Writing makes a map, and there is something about a journey that begs to have its passage marked.—Christina Baldwin

Real Women Write is an annual anthology of writing by SCN members, including fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. It appears each January in both print and online media formats, showcasing the talent and creativity of our own writing women.

Story Circle Network values every woman's story, and in Real Women Write we publish writing about both the individual life in all its uniqueness, and a woman's life as it's understood by all women.

Editor: Susan Schoch
Layout Designer: Robin Wittig

Story Circle Network
PO Box 1670
Estes Park, CO 80517-1670
970-235-1477
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Dear Story Circle Sister,

The word "anthology" comes from the Greek, and originally denoted a collection of verse "flowers" or small, choice poems or epigrams by various authors. The Story Circle Network's annual Anthology, *Real Women Write: Sharing Our Stories, Sharing Our Lives*, is just such a gathering of literary flowers, but for us it means small, choice writings – no piece is more than a thousand words – by SCN member authors.

Despite enormous variance in culture, income, and experience, women are more alike than different, and we recognize our common ground. In the writings here are stories of life events that we share, and specifics that are wildly individual. Some are life affirming – a first period, a first step toward independence, or a struggle to heal a sick child. Others are devastating – a sexual assault, a divorce, or the death of a beloved spouse. Writing the story of such an event, or reading that story, acknowledges its significance and reveals its impact. It can also be tremendously healing.

In this collection, Volume 14 in the SCN Anthology series, the authors use both fiction and nonfiction, as well as poetry in many forms, to get at the truth of modern women's lives. Waiting for a doctor's exam, quitting smoking, responding to the daily news, answering a life-changing call – small actions often have lasting and profound results. The writing here is as complex and contradictory as any woman's character. Anything and everything can be the subject that reveals larger meaning, creates greater understanding, and builds deeper connection.

Page space and less precise considerations – such as the significance of the topic and the depth of its exploration, or the avoidance of duplication, or the beauty of a writer's language and imagery – require choosing the best and most apropos from a large group of excellent entries. Accomplished writers are balanced with new voices. Inevitably, there is not room enough for all that should be included. I am so very grateful to all the women who submitted their work, knowing that each one sent a piece of her heart along with her words.

It is a privilege and a pleasure to edit this diverse bouquet of literary flowers. I'm grateful for the opportunity, and for all the SCN women who contributed to creating this testament to women's real lives. It's an honor to work with such powerful and brave writing women. To turn words into a book requires a village, but especially important are Peggy Moody, our Executive Director, who so skillfully manages all the website and internet parts of the process, and Robin Wittig, our layout and production expert, who draws together all the disparate pieces and turns them into a beautiful and cohesive volume. And our founder and president, Susan Wittig Albert, continues to provide the inspiration and guidance that began and sustains *Real Women Write*. Finally, as always, the loving support of family and friends is a blessing that's vital to every endeavor.

Editing Volume 14 of *Real Women Write: Sharing Our Stories, Sharing Our Lives* has been a growthful and important experience. I hope when you read this edition, you will also feel the power in its words. With this Anthology, Story Circle Network honors women's stories and changes women's lives. We are all truly fortunate to be part of that important work.

Susan Schoch

Editor, *Real Women Write: Sharing Our Stories, Sharing Our Lives*



CONTRIBUTORS

Susan Wittig Albert – Bertram, TX

The author of several mystery series, two memoirs, and two biographical/historical novels, Susan is the founder and current (2015-2017) president of the Story Circle Network. She lives in the Texas Hill Country.

Annabelle Bailey – Southbury, CT

Annabelle is a retired teacher, living in Connecticut with her husband.

Joyce Boatright – Houston, TX

A member of the Board for SCN, Joyce teaches the personal narrative to college freshmen and facilitates a free-range OWL story circle at Lone Star College, Houston, TX. Neither she nor any of her brothers smoke today.

Lois Ann Bull – Easton, CT

Lois tells us, "I love to write, and remembering and reliving my life through words has been one of the joys of my life."

Enid Cokinos – Carmel, IN

Enid is a member of the Indiana Writers Center, Story Circle Network, and participates in a local Story Circle Network writing group called Circle City Circle. Born and raised in southwest Michigan, Enid now considers the Indianapolis area home, and lives there with her husband, Todd.

Stacy Curtis – Spring, TX

Stacy interviews fascinating people on her podcast at WriteOfYourLife.com. Her latest project is LifeStoryTelling.com – a lifestory and memoir writing course that is the culmination of years working to understand the art and psychology of lifestory writing, and making it easy for others to write their stories.

Catharine Dalton – Martinez, CA

Catharine is a voracious reader, especially of anything that demonstrates mastery of language. She has been published by the *TESOL Newsletter* and in Oxford University Press' *Grammar Sense* series, and spent over 15 years as a college composition teacher.

Bonnie J DeMars – Clinton, MA

A New England native who completed an amazing 30-year career as an Army Occupational Therapist, Bonnie has an abundance of stories to tell. She says, "I believe it is a privilege and a duty to share our stories along with our truths, lessons learned, and insights. Stories serve all of us."

Mary Jo Doig – Afton, VA

Mary Jo lives in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains where she happily spends her retirement days writing life stories. She has been an active SCN member for 14 years and currently serves on the Board of Directors. She is close to completing her memoir: *Stitching a Patchwork Life*.

Debra Dolan – Vancouver, BC, Canada

Debra is a Vancouver resident, a long-time (45 years) private journal writer, and an avid reader of women's memoir.

Sara Etgen-Baker – Anna, TX

Published in anthologies and magazines including *Chicken Soup for the Soul*; *Guideposts*; *Wisdom Has A Voice*; and *Times They Were A Changing: Women Remember the 60s & 70s*, Sara is currently working on her first novel, *Dillehay Crossing*. When not writing, she enjoys spending time with her husband, Bill.

Bonnie Frazier – Brookings, OR

Bonnie is retired, but is an active caregiver to her adult autistic son. She reads, sings, kayaks, and gardens, and wishes she had more time for all of those hobbies.

Mary Lee Fulkerson – Reno, NV

The author of a perpetual calendar of blessings, and a book about Native basketry, Mary Lee is currently finishing a book on *Women Artists of the Great Basin*. She lives in Reno, Nevada.

B. Lynn Goodwin – Danville, CA

Lynn owns an e-newsletter for writers, *Writer Advice*, and is author of *You Want Me to Do WHAT? Journaling for Caregivers*. Her stories and articles are widely published. She teaches workshops and writes reviews for SCN. Her YA novel, *Talent*, came out in 2015. Next up: a memoir of first marriage at 62.

Jeanne Guy – Austin, TX

A writer, teacher and speaker, and member of the SCN Board, Jeanne facilitates self-awareness writing workshops and retreats, and offers a monthly blog. Current projects are a memoir, *You'll Never Find Us*, on her children's kidnapping, and an e-book, *Seeing Me*, on self-awareness through reflective writing.

Lois Halley – Westminster, MD

Lois' work has appeared in numerous publications, most recently "Story Circle Journal," "Maryland Dog Magazine," "Rescue Me," and "Angels on Earth." Her first work of fiction was published in "Christmas Carroll," an anthology. Lois is living a happy retirement with her husband, 3 cats, and a new puppy.

Sandra Heggen – Kempner, TX

Sam is retired from federal civil service as a medical technologist and lives on 9 rural acres in central Texas with her SO and a dog. She got tired of writing technical stuff and is hoping to get some traction in fiction.

Elizabeth Henderson – Kerrville, TX

A dreamer, a gardener, and a lover of hummingbirds, Elizabeth lives in the beautiful Hill Country of Texas.

Susan Jordan – Lakewood, CO

Susan returned to Colorado and to writing about four years ago. She is also delighted to renew her association with the Story Circle Network!

Katherine Kasza – Taos, NM

"I am 74 years young," says Katherine. "I live in Taos, the place of my dreams. I enjoy reading, writing and taking photographs. I volunteer one night a week as a patient advocate in the local hospital. My husband and I have been married 54 years and enjoy our lives to the fullest."

Susan Keizer – Davis, CA

Living in Davis, California near her two children and three grandchildren, Susan has been a practicing artist most of her life before turning to writing. She was a MacDowell Fellow, taught at UC Davis and other nearby colleges, and exhibited her work regularly.

Janice Kvale – Austin, TX

Janice lives in Texas and Minnesota, depending on the season. On April 2, 2015, her husband of 56 years passed away unexpectedly. A version of her poetic trilogy was read at his memorial service. He was a skilled musician of the pipe organ as well as a physician.

Bette J Lafferty – Valrico, FL

Bette has worked as a sales clerk, an insurance office manager, and a professional clown and mime. She's been a Christian Retreat leader, a motivational speaker, and more. She says, "Since I retired, I've fallen in love with writing short stories and poetry." A widow, Bette volunteers and delights in her large family.

Juliana Lightle – Canyon, TX

Juliana has traveled the world, had remarkably varied careers, and currently teaches high school in the Texas Panhandle. *On the Rim of Wonder* is her memoir in poetry (2014). Part of the SCN Board, she sings with the Amarillo Master Chorale, plays with her horse, hosts opera singers, writes, and wanders the wild.

Lily Iona MacKenzie – Richmond, CA

A high school dropout, and a mother at 17, Lily eventually earned two Master's degrees and has been widely published. *Fling*, a novel, came out in 2015, and another, *Bone Songs*, will appear in 2016. She teaches writing at the University of San Francisco, paints, and travels widely with her husband.

Claire McCabe – Elkton, MD

Claire holds Bachelor's degrees in journalism and literature and a Master's degree in English linguistics. She was a public information editor and writer at the University of Delaware before joining the faculty to teach writing. Her work has appeared in the *AKC Gazette Fiction Anthology* and in the *SCN Journal*.

Joy Mills – Paoli, PA

An Episcopal priest, Joy challenges the Episcopal Church to recognize justice issues inherent in the Church's patriarchal images and language. She also is a Jungian-oriented pastoral psychotherapist, who sees the potential for spiritual awakening in the therapeutic process.

Merimée Moffitt – Albuquerque, NM

Merimée performs her poems and teaches workshops and classes. Her work appears often in poetry reviews and journals, and was honored in *Times They Were A Changing: Women Remember the 60s & 70s*. She has published three chapbooks, and her first book of poems, *Making Little Edens*, is now available.

Sally Nielsen – Jacksonville, FL

Sally holds a master's degree in English literature from the University of Illinois and received an MFA in creative nonfiction writing from Queens University of Charlotte in 2010. She is a Professor of English and Literature at Florida State College at Jacksonville.

Abby November – San Diego, CA

A retired public health nutritionist and college educator, Abby has been performing stand-up comedy throughout the Southwest. She also combines her nutrition and health knowledge with her humor, teaching "Healing Power of Humor" workshops. She is "enjoying SCN and the ability to find my voice."

Dianne Petro – Phoenix, AZ

Dianne is a wife, mother, and grandmother. A former English teacher, she is also a former, and now again, freelance writer. Dianne came from Illinois, but has lived the desert life in Arizona for over 35 years.

Sipra Roy – New York, NY

Born in pre-Independence India, Sipra devoted her life to teaching underprivileged children, helping them graduate high school. After retiring, she moved to New York City to be near her children, and continues a passion for writing poetry, memoir, and on social issues. She also enjoys New York's cultural diversity.

Nancilynn Saylor – Austin, TX

Nancilynn was inspired to write poetry by reading Emily Dickinson, e.e.cummings, and Poe. She says, "Even when I write prose, my mind is actually thinking in poetry. I live in Austin with my long-time partner and our dogs. We enjoy gardening and spending time with grandchildren and great-grandchildren."

Barbara Smythe – La Verne, CA

Barbara is a retired school and city administrator, using those skills to promote cultural events in her community, reflecting on a life well-lived in her memoirs, and being totally awed by her 8 grandchildren and 9 great-grandchildren.

Diane Stanton – Warrenton, VA

Diane is a retired teacher.

Lanie Tankard – Austin, TX

A freelance editor, writer, and researcher, Lanie has been production editor of a national psychology book review journal, creative writer for an ad agency, and editorial writer for a daily newspaper. She has also taught beginning newswriting and editing at two state universities, as well as ESL in Micronesia.

Marian McCaa Thomas – Leawood, KS

Marian is a semi-retired church musician who still teaches piano and harpsichord, enjoys reading, gardening, and keeping tabs on her three grown children and husband of 52 years. She is currently writing a biography of her mother, who lived from 1911 to 2011.

Lavon Urbonas – Rancho Cucamonga, CA

Throughout several years of being a caregiver, followed by the grief of being a widow, Lavon coped with the help of a Writer's Workshop. She recommends writing as a powerful source of therapy and insight.

Kristie Vincent – Willard, MO

Kristie is working on her MFA, and putting together a chapbook for Syrian refugee funding, while adjusting to her own "new normal." She lives on short naps, copious amounts of coffee, snuggles from her four-legged kids, and hugs from her two-legged kids.

Jo Virgil – Austin, TX

Jo is a long-time member of Story Circle Network, and now a member of its Board. She has learned, through her connections with other women writing their tales, to deeply appreciate the power of story.

Jude Walsh Whelley – Dayton, OH

A past president and current Board member of Story Circle Network, Jude writes poetry, creative nonfiction, and fiction. She lives in Dayton, Ohio.

Linda C. Wisniewski – Doylestown, PA

Linda is a former librarian who shares an empty nest with her retired scientist husband. She teaches memoir writing, has been published in literary magazines and anthologies, and is a freelance journalist. Her memoir is *Off Kilter: A Woman's Journey to Peace with Scoliosis, Her Mother and Her Polish Heritage*.

Charlotte Wlodkowski – Allison Park, PA

Charlotte tells us, "Three years ago I put pen to paper and have been enjoying it ever since. Writing gives me an outlet to creativity. I intend to keep learning the craft and sharing stories."

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Youth

"Childhood is not from birth to a certain age and at a certain age. The child is grown, and puts away childish things. Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies."

— Edna St. Vincent Millay

Free at Last

Bette J. Lafferty – Valrico, FL

I wonder what is going on.

Every day brings so many changes, so many new developments.

My quarters are getting really cramped and I can't speak up.

Where are the people who are supposed to enforce children's rights?

I want more protection.

I'm carried around like a bag of potatoes and no one seems concerned.

My days have run into weeks, into months, yet time seems to stand still.

Oops! Here we go again.

Mom and Dad, my sisters and I pile into our car.

Talk about overcrowding, I wonder where we are going?

No one tells me anything.

Well, that didn't take long. We must have arrived.

Everyone is piling out of the car, dragging me along.

Finally, it is quiet again and I can rest.

Boy, was I mistaken.

Pow! Bang! Boom!

It sounds like gunshots, but everyone is applauding.

Ooh! Ahh! Ooo! How beautiful!

No fair, I can't see, what's happening?

I can't make out the colors, but according to my family's comments,

The shades must be awesome.

Pow! Bang! Boom! The noise continues.

Will someone please cover my ears?

I guess it's over as it's quiet again and we're piling back into the car.

Packed in like sardines, and headed for the barn, my Dad says.

I wonder what that means.

The night can't come soon enough. I'm tired.

I barely get to sleep and then...everyone is up again,

I wonder what all the commotion is about?

What the heck, who pulled the plug?

All the water is rushing down the drain pulling me with it.

How am I supposed to escape through that little hole?

Ouch! Talk about a tight fit!

Whoosh! What a wild ride.

I wonder where am I?

Hey, what's with the slap on the butt?

Did I do something wrong?

There are those silly church bells ringing again, always waking me up.

You know what I say to that? Waaaaaahhh!

Thus, I was born at 7:30 a.m. on Sunday as the church bells rang out.

Bread On the Grass

Linda Wisniewski – Doylestown, PA

"We don't throw away bread," my mother said. She took a few quick steps to the metal trashcan near the kitchen sink and fished out the crusts inside.

It might have been a Saturday with both of us home at lunchtime. I would have been small, maybe seven. She probably made me a bologna sandwich with mayonnaise and a slice of tomato on Lady Betty bread and poured me a glass of milk. Lady Betty smiled at me from the outside of the white plastic bread bag, her hair in a curly brown up-do.

"Grandma says bread is like the Host," my mother said, holding my discarded crusts in her outstretched hand. She meant the communion wafer, transformed at Sunday Mass into the body of Christ.

Grandma was Mom's best friend and confidante, the one she turned to when life was hard and there were no easy answers. She had come to Amsterdam, New York at the turn of the twentieth century, and now lived in a second floor flat, with no telephone or hot running water, seeing no need for either. During the Great Depression, each of her six children, one by one, left school as soon as they were old enough to look for work. Nobody wasted so much as a crust of bread.

An old Polish proverb says, "A guest in the home is God in the home." Most of Grandma's guests were family, but as soon as anyone crossed her doorstep she scurried to the cupboard for cake, donuts, potato chips, any food she could offer. For this wife of a grocery clerk, store-bought food meant she had money.

She taught me to say *chleb*, the Polish word for bread, as she sliced a fresh loaf, giving it her full attention, making of the act a little ritual of gratitude. I never saw her toss away a single morsel.

As I chewed on my crust-less sandwich, my mother stood beside me wearing her homemade skirt and a white blouse. Beneath her curly brown hair, the look on her face was serious but kind.

"We can feed the birds," she said.

We tore the crusts into little pieces and piled them on my empty plate. I imagined tiny beaks happily munching, thanks to Mom, Lady Betty, and me. Mom turned the worn brass handle on the back porch door, pulled it open and solemnly handed me the plate. I carried it as reverently as I had seen the altar boys carry the golden paten of consecrated hosts on Sunday morning.

Then Mom and I threw handfuls of the torn bread out the porch window. I waited for little birds to fly into our yard and discover the feast, but none came. Quickly bored, I went back inside. The next morning, when I looked out the window, the bread was gone. Shy birds, I thought, like me, but at least they won't go hungry.

After I grew up and married, I learned to bake bread from a cookbook. "All natural" was the way to go, in food as well as childbirth. There would be no store-bought bread in my home. That approach lasted a year or two, until I had a full time job and a long commute. Because it was so easy to buy a loaf at the supermarket, I declared bread-baking a skill for hippies and earth mothers who did not work outside the home. We met friends for dinner at restaurants, everyone too busy to cook.

At home, my little boys left their sandwich crusts on their plates, just as their mother did long ago. You can guess what I told them.

"We don't throw away bread," I said. "We can feed the birds."

I showed them how to tear the crusts into pieces and scatter them on the grass for our feathered guests. Sometimes they even stayed to watch the birds peck at it.

Now that our nest is empty, bread is a "high carb" item my husband and I have cut back on. We keep our whole-wheat loaf in the fridge, but it still goes stale. Nobody wants the ends, dented and misshapen in the plastic bag. Outside my window, five bird feeders hold sunflower seeds, split peanuts, and calcium-rich suet for strong eggshells. I have a discount club membership at the birdseed store. But none of that feels quite so holy as the simple act of tossing breadcrumbs on the grass.

"I remember my childhood names for grasses and secret flowers. I remember where a toad may live and what time the birds awaken in the summer -- and what trees and seasons smelled like -- how people looked and walked and smelled even. The memory of odors is very rich."

— John Steinbeck, East of Eden



Ticket to Ride

Sara Etgen-Baker – Anna, TX

"You gotta have a ticket to ride!" snapped the carney. "Get a ticket or move outta da way, kid. You're takin' up space!"

I stared—motionless, hypnotized—as the magical wheel with its clockwise, circular motion cut through the heavy August clouds.

"Here's her ticket, sir. We three are ridin' together."

"Not happenin', lady. Only two per chair. One of youz has to ride by yerself."

"No problem. She's the oldest; she'll ride by herself."

"Whatever ya say, lady. She seems a bit scared to me though."

Aunt Betty scooted me to the next seat. "You're okay with that, aren't you sweetie?"

I tried to swallow, but couldn't. Unable to speak, I nodded yes, hoping not to show my fear and doubt.

Within an instant, I sat paralyzed and alone in the seat, waiting, pushing aside my fear of heights and wondering why my dear Aunt Betty left me to ride alone. Just two days earlier, I'd stood on the banks of the Mississippi River and watched the Ferris wheel being assembled on the fairgrounds. I imagined climbing aboard one of the cars, riding the circle of lights, watching the sun set over the Mississippi, seeing the city's lights from atop, and feeling the chair sway in the summer breeze. But my fascination had turned to fear, fluttering in my stomach like crazy butterflies.

"Single rider!" barked the carney. "Put down the bar so we can all go!"

The wheel turned slowly, then faster; the earth below me moved and became smaller; the chair rocked back and forth, and I came to rest high upon the apogee, stranded, alone, looking across the Mississippi River at the Old Mississippi River Bridge and the Old Lorimier Cemetery.

Above me, puffy white clouds drifted by. Below me, a Mississippi steamboat—reminiscent of the one that Mark Twain piloted—glided its way through the mighty river's current. I followed the muddy stream as it snaked its way through the countryside below me. Every inch of the legendary waterway brought something new into view—odd little islands, hills, woods, and towns. And for a brief moment, I thought I saw LaSalle standing atop the bluffs, mapping the river's course as he made his way to the Gulf of Mexico.

No longer landlocked, I sat silent between anguish and ecstasy, suddenly empty of fearful thoughts and full of soothing ones. I closed my eyes as the Ferris wheel slowly turned round 'n round, carrying me to heaven. As I opened my eyes, evening approached; I felt like I was traveling into space. The rhythmic rat-tat-tat-tuh of the Ferris wheel's machinery freed my thoughts. My spirit soared high above the ground. Inspired, and unexpectedly shaken from my self-imposed timidity, I was forever transformed.

The rhythmic melody slowed, then ended; when my chair approached ground level, the carney released the safety bar and growled, "Careful now, girly. Ya looks a bit dizzy."

I stumbled anyway, falling backwards, looked up, and found Aunt Betty smiling down at me.

"Yahoo, sweetie! I knew you could ride alone. I'm proud of you! Stand next to the carney, and I'll take your picture with my new Polaroid. Okay, smile!"

Later that night, Aunt Betty gave me that picture and said, "You grew up tonight. So, tomorrow you're going to work with me. Get a good night's rest!" I lay awake most of the night wondering just what she might have in store for me at her office.

The following morning, she took me into a poorly lit, musty-smelling back room and sat me down at an antiquated, wooden office chair that was as stiff as an old man's joints. She rolled me in front of a vintage Royal manual typewriter; placing my hands on the "home keys," she demonstrated the reaches. "You can read, can't ya, sweetie? Now follow the instructions on each page; you're old enough to type. Remember...sit up straight and keep your wrists up."

With that, she abandoned me, just as she'd done the night before. Throughout the summer I accompanied Aunt Betty to work, where I silently sat perched at the keyboard, practicing until my wrists ached and my fingers numbed. When boredom set in, she handed me a shoebox full of postcards and photographs.

"Hey, look inside. Aren't these pictures interesting? Why not use them to type and create some stories? I'd love to read 'em when you're finished. How'd that be, sweetie?"

I nodded, relishing her suggestion like a new pianist who embraces reading sheet music for the first time. Before summer ended, I typed several stories, carrying them home in a shoebox I aptly labeled, "Shoebox Stories."

The years since, like summer days, have burned and melted, and left me to wonder whatever happened to my Shoebox Stories. Then, while cleaning out my parents' attic, I uncovered a somewhat dilapidated shoebox. It smelled dusty, like memories waiting to be explored.

As I gingerly opened the box, a heartwarming aroma flooded my nostrils. I sniffed the yellowed, timeworn paper that smelled a bit like grass, with a hint of vanilla, over an underlying mustiness. I opened the folded pages and recognized the faded ink of the stories I had created so long ago.

The photographs, discolored and worn, immediately ignited memories of both the enchanting Ferris wheel and my summer of creativity, when Aunt Betty gave me more than a ticket to ride. As I rose above the horizon, she unknowingly gave me a ticket to ride above convention—past my fears—into a life filled with anticipation, adventure, courage, resourcefulness, and a level of inspiration enjoyed only by those who have had their spirits set free.

Now, I appreciate the beauty in sunsets, and the joy in unexpected, sweet surprises. As the Mississippi River inspired Mark Twain and gave birth to his creativity, the magical Ferris wheel transformed me and gave rise to my imagination—ever flowing like the river, ever turning tales to be told.

An Elf Comes Home

Bonnie Frazier – Brookings, OR

I puzzle over a small, bubble-wrapped envelope as I sort through today's pile of catalogs and cards. It bears my sister's return address and is surely another Christmas present, though she sent a package just a day or two ago. I toss it on my desk, unsure if it contains a wrapped present or something she expects me to open and wrap for another family member. Later I look more closely and notice words she has scribbled on the back of the envelope: "Not a gift. Open now."

Curious, I open it and shake the contents out on my desk. A folded note and a small plastic elf fall out. No need to read the note. I recognize this elf. I close my eyes and let the long-forgotten memory carry me nearly five decades into the past.

The elf, only two inches tall, stands, or rather sits, in a classic elf-on-a-shelf pose. Most of his painted green elf suit has worn off long ago, leaving him bare and pink. Unembarrassed, he still smiles his saucy smile. I don't remember where I got him, or why I came to have such an elf. The sight of him takes me back to my teen years, before I had my first car. My elf was a key chain fob, attached to my own set of keys to my parents' car. In those carefree days I carried no purse, just my tiny green elf dangling out of a back pocket.

My sister's note says that she is returning the elf to me, that she thinks I'll enjoy having him again. Ahhh. And just like that, the rest of the elf story, the part I had truly forgotten, comes back.

I was about 19, preparing to go off to college across the state. Mom kept hinting around about how much she liked my elf. I wasn't really listening, and didn't get what she was trying to tell me. I'd had the elf for several years and it was cute, but so what? Why bring it up now? Eventually, she came out with it: she had a proposition for me, wanted to make a trade. She wouldn't say what it was, but she had something for me, and she'd only give it to me if I gave her my elf in return. The something turned out to be a portable hair dryer, the kind with a hose and a shower cap that girls used in those days, way before hand-held blow dryers, when girls still set their hair on rollers. Oh, yes. A hair dryer would be very useful to have in the dorm. This particular hair dryer, with its slim, stream-lined shape and a carrying handle, was just right for a girl on her way to college. Of course I handed over the elf. I was delighted with my new hair dryer, and Mom purported to be equally delighted with her new elfish key chain.

I'm not sure if Mom really wanted that elf, or she just wanted a cute way to give me an item she knew I'd need. But the thing is, she carried that elf for the rest of her life. I never knew her to have any other key fob. When she died, over forty years later, the elf was still guarding her keys. I'm surprised my sister remembered it had once been mine.

Some day my children or grandchildren may run across a silly little green elf, with most of its paint scraped off, tucked away in a drawer, and they'll wonder why I kept him. All I can say is that he brought me a sweet memory, and I'm glad he came home.

The Cookie Jars

Charlotte Wlodkowski – Allison Park, PA

In the forties and fifties, every household with a child had a cookie jar. This was a must-have. Not only were cookie jars used, obviously, to store cookies, but also sometimes they were used as a bribe. For a child to have a homemade cookie, they needed to behave.

Beginning at the age of one, I lived with my Aunt Laura and her family. Her kitchen is where Little Red Riding Hood resided. Often, I'd enter this most popular room and Little Red and I would lock eyes. At such a young age, I thought cookies were always in the jar. Little Red was on top of a cabinet where we kids could not disturb her. We were at the mercy of the adults to determine if we would have a treat. When the aroma of sugar or chocolate chip cookies filled the first floor, my cousins and I knew it was time to be good if we wanted a cookie with our glass of milk.

Once I was living at my real home, my mother's apartment, there was a different cookie jar. This time it was a male and not so well known. He was covered with cream-colored paint and trimmed in light blue with dabs of brown paint as buttons to hold up his wide striped pants. A flat-topped hat was surrounded with the same pastel blue as the scarf around his neck. There were six more dabs of brown buttons to secure his jacket. He came with salt-and-pepper shakers—a boy and a girl. His made-up name was Fat Boy. He was not so colorful as Little Red Riding Hood, but still just as important and held as much power over my behavior.

When I was in my early twenties, Mom and I visited Aunt Laura with a cake in hand. We never went anywhere without something to share. While we were sitting around the kitchen table talking, Aunt Laura handed me a box. It wasn't wrapped as a present. It was just a plain box. I looked surprised—it was not a holiday. She said, "Just open it." While unwrapping the newspaper, I saw a hint of the color red. It was Little Red Riding Hood looking just as new as the day I first saw her. Over the years, she had been forgotten. It was a pleasure to rekindle our bond. On the way home, Mom explained that she had purchased Little Red and left her at Aunt Laura's house for us kids to enjoy. Aunt Laura must have felt it was time Little Red came home with me. It had been fifteen years since our eyes met and I was thrilled to be united with her again.

More recently, while cleaning out a cupboard in preparation for my mom's move to a high-rise, I made a discovery. Tucked away in a plastic bag and wrapped in newspaper were Fat Boy and the salt-and-pepper shakers. What a find! There he was in perfect condition. This was a heart-filled moment. I took a short break so Fat Boy and I could be alone to reminisce.

After sixty-five years, Little Red is joined with Fat Boy and his sidekicks on top of my china cabinet. Sometimes they even contain homemade cookies.



Fragments From My Childhood

Sipra Roy – New York, NY



Sipra Roy around the time of this story.

I grew up in 1940s India with parents, grandparents, siblings, and cousins. My mother was kind and soft-spoken. My father was a loving patriarch whom we adored. He worked for the Indian Railways and we moved often. As India celebrated Independence from centuries of British rule, we moved to a quaint town named Madhupur. Madhupur had been built to remind former residents of the English villages they left and missed—mansions, manicured lawns, churches. Railway employees were now being housed in those mansions.

Outside, the atmosphere at home was very festive. But I was not as cheerful as I should have been growing up in that loving environment. I carried a sense of melancholy, sometimes for reasons unknown, throughout my life.

My father was the third of six brothers. His eldest brother was an eccentric popular scholar and a professor at a prestigious university in another city. My father took up the responsibility of his brother's four children, to allow his brother to continue his scholarly pursuits undisturbed. And his brother seemed to enjoy this arrangement.

His eldest daughter, Renuka, who stayed with us, was beautiful. She was my mother's confidante in managing our large family. Word of her beauty spread, and brought many marriage proposals. My uncle relieved himself of the responsibility of Renuka's marriage and was happy for my father to make the decisions. Arranged marriages were the norm and were considered the parents' responsibility—a daughter's marriage was considered to be a great burden given the social pressure to get them married young and the financial pressure of sending the daughter to her in-laws' home with jewelry and gifts. Marriage negotiations involved a complex routine of exploring families, the bride's homemaking skills and beauty, and the groom's job prospects. Finally a groom was chosen for Renuka.

My father wanted to celebrate this marriage magnificently to keep up the family status. He distributed the marriage expenditure among his five brothers according to their financial capacity while he took up the largest share. Renuka's father was tasked to buy gold jewelry for the bride and groom.

The week of the marriage, a massive gazebo was set up and Indian flute played in the background while all the children played under the gazebo. My uncles gave my father their part of the expense. Except for Renuka's father. And then, on the day before the wedding, I witnessed a drama unnoticed by most.

My mother insisted that Renuka's father show the jewelry he was responsible for. He sat calmly with eyes closed. My father stood at the door of his room. On being pressed more, he said, "Renuka is beautiful, many princes will come for her hand even without jewelry, let us break this alliance." First there was silence, then disbelief, and then my father was furious at his brother's suggestion and the thought of what this meant. At one point, my frustrated father said, "Bring me a gun, I will kill him and me."

My mother somehow managed to pacify the warring brothers. All the thrill of a wedding vanished like camphor for me. Like a shadow, I followed my mother, who slipped into the dimly lit room where Renuka was sitting with her mother.

Mother told Renuka that her father wanted the marriage to be called off. Renuka embraced my mother and began to cry inconsolably, "Please do not listen to that crazy man. I will marry here, otherwise I will kill myself!"

My mother said, "But Renu, we do not have money to purchase the jewelry needed to marry you." Then she went on, "Since we cannot marry you without jewelry, maybe I will loan you my wedding jewelry. Let's keep it a secret, okay? But promise me that you will return it all to me, because this is all I have to give for my daughter's wedding."

Renuka and her mother leaped at the proposal. "Let us get the marriage ceremony done peacefully and we will return it. We are ever grateful to you."

My mother left the room, and in the dark of that room, I saw Renuka and her mother's face awash with a satisfied glow. In the evening, all the women sat around the bride and praised the jewelry and how she looked like a princess. My mother sat next to her with pride, partly at averting a family disaster and partly at the appreciation of her jewelry. I sat there blankly and listened to the nostalgic tunes of the Indian flute which stirred a strong ennui in me about days gone by and what lay ahead, the happiness all around but the sad undertones of this festivity, which I had witnessed. I wore a brocade dress but all the drama of the morning had drained me; before I knew it, I was asleep. I woke up late in the night and ran across the courtyard to the gazebo. Renuka and the groom were standing by the fire, as the priest chanted wedding vows. The courtyard was lit with lanterns and I thought my sister and her husband looked angelic. I was hungry but could not find any food. Tired, I fell asleep again in the dimly lit room where so much drama had unfolded earlier in the day.

Soon after, my own sister, Mira, got married in another wonderful ceremony, leaving my father submerged in debt from frequent marriage and medical expenses. Every year, Renuka and her husband visited us—she never mentioned the wedding jewelry or returned it. Neither did my mother mention the loan or ask her for it. I never heard my parents regret or boast about this act of sacrifice, even in the worst of their financial struggles. Much to my surprise, my mother seemed glad about Renuka's happy married life and spoke of her with great affection.

So often in life, underneath the joy and festivity lies the reality of a less joyous story. My heart fills with pride thinking about the nobility of my father and gentle mother in how they went about it all so gracefully.



Sipra's family/extended family. In the middle row on the far left are her father and mother.



Dancing Sisters – Stories from the Heart 2014

Stacked

Jude Walsh Whelley – Dayton, OH

I can feel
my vertebrae moving
stacking themselves
one on top another
elongating into
that soft S
that undulating curve
a woman has
when standing
full in her power
grounded
yet reaching
for the sky



Motherhood

"I think that the best thing we can do for our children is to allow them to do things for themselves, allow them to be strong, allow them to experience life on their own terms, allow them to take the subway... let them be better people, let them believe more in themselves."

— C. JoyBell C.

Cloud Formations

Lanie Tankard – Austin, TX



The cloud waved at me, skipping along outside my window that sunny morning. It was a low cumulus—a distinct little thermal puff resembling a cauliflower, bowled with great velocity high into the sky, ascending rapidly and riotously.

My breath caught in surprise. I wanted to stop it, hug it tight, halt its upward journey away from me as it romped toward the heavens. Surely I could do that. I had magical powers, didn't I? After all, I was a mother.

Oh, how I stretched, trying to reach high enough, hard enough, long enough, so I could grasp that spritely little whiff of white. Both arms, one still hooked up to the IV, ignored the pain as I pulled against the tube implanted on the back of my wrist—reaching, reaching, reaching for that hazy flying mass of water particles as it cavorted ever upward.

Then the tiny cloud seemed to pause and turn. For the briefest moment, I had the uncanny sensation it was sending a wink and a smile my way, like a surrealist cloud painting by René Magritte with images from my unconscious mind creatively juxtaposed. Reality or illusion?

"Stop!" I cried.

"Wait," I pleaded.

"Don't go," I begged.

"Please come back," I whispered.

"Just for a minute," I sobbed.

My magical powers weren't working. The miniscule soul riding that gust of air as a raft in the sky was now out of sight. One particular possibility had simply vanished, a thought not yet formed. This potential for full creation at nine months had fallen far short at a mere eight weeks. How dare the sun shine today?!

The prospect of a spring baby to play with two eager sisters was over. Fini. That story line had just been deleted. More physical evidence of the love my husband and I had for one another was wiped out. I blew a kiss out the hospital window as bright light filled my eyes with tears. I left, bereft and bewildered.

The first two pregnancies had been easy, although one delivery barely escaped tragedy. Our second daughter was born five minutes after my arrival at that same hospital. The neonatologist said she wouldn't have survived without the expertise of my obstetrician.

But this—never had I imagined my third pregnancy could end at two months, nor that I would find it difficult to walk for several weeks after a D&C. Since I hadn't heard miscarriages talked about much at all, how could I have even considered the chance? Such resounding silence about an event so emotionally charged was simply unnerving. How common is it, I wondered? Naturally, we

(Cloud Formations, continued from page 9)

grieve later-term pregnancy losses and stillborn babies, but no rituals seem to exist to aid in mourning the evaporation of a little cloud.

Friends tried to cheer me up with comments like "You can have another," while my brain screamed, "But I can't have that one, conceived under a particular set of circumstances, imbued with the spirits of who we were that moment, due to be born at a certain season of the year." I averted my eyes when pregnant bellies loomed in my peripheral vision. I grieved mightily for the fragment of tissue that had left me. Tears bubbled up with no warning.

Once, as I sat in in our living room, they began cascading over my cheeks. I bent double, placing my hands over my face. My youngest daughter watched for a moment, then dashed down the hall to her room. She returned in a flash. I felt something soft shoved up between my elbows. Peeking between my tears, I saw it was her DeeDee—a hemmed square of white fabric with blue polka dots, made by a friend when she was born. The cloth had become her comfort blankie, a talisman at times of trouble. And here she was, offering it up in two-year-old empathy, brow knitted and tongue clenched.

I took her on my lap, cuddling her with one arm and clasping DeeDee with the other to dab my eyes. I told her I was sad because the little baby growing inside me had been too weak to continue and because I knew she'd make a wonderful big sister—just like her own big sister (then six). She nodded, snuggling closer.

And sure enough, about ten months later next fall, I departed the same hospital once again, this time with my third daughter tucked safely in my arms. Joy reigned that day. I could never have imagined it a year earlier, when I watched that tiny little cloud drift away. Now my three girls are my best friends. I am full of love for those young women.

So, how can I explain this? Afterward, every five or ten years, for reasons I couldn't figure out, my heart would give a little lurch when I'd notice a random young boy at a park, in a crowd, on the street. What could have drawn my attention to this handful of growing men-in-the-making? Why did my breath catch when I saw one? I didn't know them. What I felt strongly each time was: I bet that's what my son would have been like.

Perhaps one never fully gets over a searing experience, but rather knits it into the fabric of life henceforward. By so doing, it's possible for clouds to continue to communicate with us, long after the breeze has blown them out of sight. Cloud formations indicate the type of weather ahead. Maybe that perky little cloud had been forecasting bliss on the horizon with my third daughter.

Today I have two fine sons-in-law, reared by two wonderful mothers who have both become my dear friends. And I have two precious grandchildren. Clouds reconfigure into different contours.

Surely, there's cosmic energy bound up in all this somewhere.

And His Face Crumpled

Joy Mills – Philadelphia, PA

On a May morning in 1970, my son was born with clubfeet. His father, coaching me during the birth and seeing his son's deformed feet, left the hospital, not returning for 24 hours. No words about what he was seeing or feeling, nothing spoken about when he would be back. Had he taken in our son's handsome round head with tufts of blonde hair, a hallmark of our now-three children? Did he notice his soft blue eyes?

By the time his father returned, my son and I had survived a visit by my family. As each parent and brother held him that first evening, I sat paralyzed and prayed they would not unwrap him to admire his perfect body. I did not want them to see his feet that looked like flippers; I wanted them to see him as beautiful.

By the time his father returned, I had also held our infant son in my arms as he screamed, outraged at having had casts put on both his legs, the first of three sets over three days. I remember thinking, "He will take a breath either voluntarily or by passing out. I just need to keep holding him."

Talking through the disconsolate scream and through my tears and terror, the pediatric orthopedist told me what our treatment options were. I do not remember what I told his father when he returned to the hospital that night. The gap between us was widening. Already this suffering child emotionally absorbed me, as simultaneously my husband withdrew further from me, from our son, and from our two daughters, who were three and five.

Each day that first week, then every other day for months, I took my boy to the Pediatric Orthopedic Hospital to have his feet wrapped with tapes, gradually molding them into their proper position. His father drove us there the first time. It was Memorial Day; the doctor met us at the side door because the clinic was not open and the corrections had to be continuous. He explained his controversial treatment of using tapes instead of casts to complete the correction process. I would have to exercise his feet several times a day to enhance the corrections and his flexibility. Often after a new set of tapes was applied, I nursed him in a curtained off area, trying to give him solace from the pain of his feet being forced into a new shape. How could he know this was the only way he would be able to walk?

The first time I took him home from the clinic and began to exercise his feet as we had been instructed, to distract him I laid him on the floor and turned on the television. At first his eyes looked around in the fuzzy way infants seem to do, apparently aware of the television images and my face. Suddenly he shifted his gaze, staring off into space as though dissociating from the pain I was inflicting, pain that echoed the more severe pain of the casts being applied and removed.

What impact does this kind of trauma have on a child's ability to experience his own feelings? To relate intimately with others? Although alert, when he was almost two and not walking or talking yet, his pediatrician told me he wanted a pediatric neurologist to evaluate him.

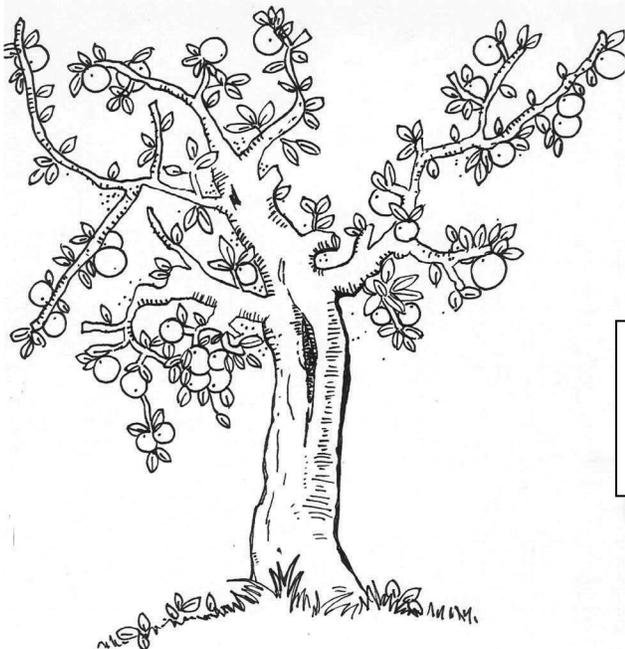
It has become hard to connect directly to my son. Gradually, I have realized he will always experience the world in ways I can

only imagine, and that he cannot imagine the way I understand the world—or him.

Sometimes I say I cried for the first twenty years of my son's life. I cried when I watched his sturdy, slim eight-year-old body at play. He would ride astride his Tonka Winnebago camper in his elaborate make-believe world created by a multitude of paths traversing the woods next to the house. I cried because this alert and engaged child was also held by a mind that betrayed him. I cried because his father could not accept his son's disabilities and differences and moved across the country when I remarried. I cried because I longed for the support of a father who wanted my son to have a full life as desperately as I did.

The last time he was evaluated, he was graduating from high school and almost 20 years old. I was told, "It is a stretch, but not much of a stretch, to say he has characteristics of autism." When I read the booklet summarizing autism's outward signs, I recognized many of his behaviors as a syndrome and experienced profound relief. At last he began to make sense to me as a whole person. Instead of thinking I could work with him to eliminate one behavior, I accepted that these behaviors went together—and might not change significantly. He would always perseverate; be prone to humming when he needed to concentrate; not show feelings easily; not look me in the eye for more than seconds at a time; talk about his world incessantly, connecting only tangentially to mine; work through his emotions by retelling stories over and over again; let me hug him, but only rarely return the hug.

And yet, when he was thirty, with his two sisters he lowered his father's ashes into the grave. I turned to look at him as the brief service ended; he was standing by his grandfather's adjacent grave. He had seen his grandmother's name already engraved with her birthdate. I saw his stoic face crumple and dissolve with tears running down his cheeks. I held him, feeling at once the man and the baby, and he embraced me, letting me hold him in his agony. His body shook silently as he allowed all of us to see his suffering.



An Imagined Phone Conversation

Debra Dolan – Vancouver, BC, Canada

Me. I don't think I am coming out to visit in June.

Mom. Why not? We are all looking forward to it.

Me. I thought I was ready.

Mom. It has been a long time. Does this mean you will never come?

Me. I never expected to come back. I surprised myself with even putting it forward.

Mom. I am disappointed.

Me. I am scared.

Mom. What scares you?

Me. That I will feel trapped. That I will feel frightened. That I will feel suffocated. That I will be angry.

Mom. What do you need from me?

Me. That I am free to be me. That I can come and go. That I can rest and walk. That I am not on display.

Mom. I can try but I can't make any promises.

Me. That is what scares me. That we will both try our best and it won't be good enough. Maybe it is just better that we don't see one another and leave it as before. I want the best for you and hope that you are happy.

Mom. All I have ever wanted is for you to be happy. Debra, it would make me happy if you came to visit. I have dreamed of this day.

Me. I feel too much pressure for it to be perfect between us. How can it be? We are strangers to one another.

Mom. I am your mother.

Long pause...

Me. Why were you not more protective of me? Why did you let that happen? Why did you side with him?

Mom. I did not know it was happening? He is my husband. When I saw you that morning, so frightened and hurt, I spoke to him. It never happened again.

Me. I always feared that it would. I'm afraid that I will remember too much of it in your and his presence even though it is a different house. I am afraid of the rage that may boil from within. I don't want to be that little scared girl ever again.

Mom. Please come home. He can't hurt you.

Me. But you can.

"But kids don't stay with you if you do it right. It's the one job where, the better you are, the more surely you won't be needed in the long run."

— Barbara Kingsolver, *Pigs in Heaven*

Warrior Mother

Lois Ann Bull – Easton, CT

Armed only with bananas, in 1941 my mother tried to control her world. Bombs burst, guns flared, people died in Europe and the Pacific while Mom battled on the home front. My brother, Ron, was very ill. When he was 14 months old, she mentioned concerns to the family GP. He passed off the lack of weight gain to, "He's a late bloomer," the same for not having the strength to walk. Seeking another opinion, the next doctor accused her of imagining problems and inventing illnesses. Intuitively, this valedictorian of both her high school and college knew better. The British Lion inside of her fought on, seeking answers.

When the child lost his attention span and could no longer hold his head up, she began calling hospital personnel begging for referrals. Finally, a name in Newark, New Jersey, surfaced: Dr. Philip Graham, a "pediatrician" (a new term for Mom who didn't know some doctors specialized in children's medicine). He saw them the next day.

Dr. Graham listened to my mom's observations and then examined the skinny little boy. Finally, he said gently, "Your son is starving to death. That's why he's so quiet. Your instincts are right. He's very sick."

She sat motionless, a corner of her lower lip tensely caught between her teeth. Barely breathing, she prayed he knew what to do.

"Your baby's not getting any nutrition from his food because he can't absorb it. I think it may be celiac disease. He can't digest gluten."

"How did he get this disease?" Mom asked.

"We think some children are born with it."

"What's going to happen to my little boy?"

"There is no known cure, no medicine. All we can do is try to prevent him from dying of malnutrition. If we can get him strong, maybe he'll be able to tolerate some foods. Start with a diet of bananas. They digest easily. It will help his intestines heal and mature."

"What other foods can he have?" Mom asked.

"No other food. Twenty a day. Ripe. If you can't get bananas, then buy banana flakes at the druggist. Be patient. It could take several years before he's better."

The length of time for recovery didn't alarm my mother. Now she knew what plagued her son; she had a diagnosis and treatment plan; her enemy had a face and she could do battle. Once in charge, the word impossible didn't exist.

On the way home, she stopped at the grocer. She would buy all the bananas. It never occurred to her they might not have any. Therefore, when she couldn't find any, she asked the manager, "What time tomorrow will you have bananas?"

"I'm sorry, Madam, but I don't know when in the near future we'll see bananas."

"But you always have bananas." Her voice rose.

"Lady," he retorted, "There's a war on. There aren't any ships. The government took them all for troops." He threw up his hands in defeat.

Mom had been so concerned about Ron's condition that she'd forgotten about war and shortages. Not wanting to use her precious gasoline, she went home and called other food stores looking for bananas. No luck. Desperate, determined, and having nowhere else to turn, she called the police. Did they know where she could get a prolonged supply of bananas for her sick child who would otherwise die?

The police called back. Mr. Ceircy in Paterson, New Jersey, a fruit wholesaler for the United Shipping Lines, still could get bananas. Telephoning him, my mother explained what she needed and why. Her persuasive speech touched Mr. Ceircy's heart. He promised to supply her with all she needed.

We'd arrive for our pick-up and go to the front of the line with our doctor's prescription. With few words, more like grunts, this stocky, stoop-shouldered, white-haired man in a green apron brusquely loaded a complete branch into the trunk of our car. Week after week, he always saved enough for Ron and, in so doing, saved his life.

Throughout the war, our house resembled a tropical jungle. Big stalks, with multiple hands of green fruit, rested in our cool basement, waiting their turn to keep Ron alive. Dad would lift the 66 to 100 lbs. stalk out of the car when he arrived home from work and carry it down the stairs. Every morning, Mom hacked off a tier of twenty or so and brought them upstairs to exchange them for ripe ones on our windowsills and tables – the day's ration. Green, yellow, and gold dotted the household. She'd slice, dice, mash, smash, whole, halve, or quarter them.

If Dad traveled on one of his frequent auditing trips, Mom would slash hands of bananas off while the stalk still sat in the car trunk. Ron and I stood clear while she wielded the carving knife like a battle-axe. Then she'd carry them to the basement. Once she had used most of the bananas, those left would suddenly ripen faster than my brother could eat them. Neighbors happily bought them.

By year's end, Ron's alertness had returned, his cheeks rounded, and he had begun to walk. With the improvements, Dr. Graham permitted the introduction of a few new foods very slowly – first baked potatoes, then lean meat, then butter came next along with buttermilk and still more bananas. The meat and butter were rationed, as was the gas. Even worse, sometimes grocers would only permit one stick of butter or one pound of meat per \$5.00 spent. Mom would go all over town to do her shopping piecemeal, using up valuable time and gas. Fortunately, family and friends shared their own rations to be sure Ron got enough to eat.

My mother fought for six years, conquering each obstacle as it arose. I was two months old when her battle started. My memories begin about age three. The ordeal consumed the whole family, and I absorbed her fighting spirit and unwillingness to give up. Ron lived. He's now 76.

TAKING ACTION

"My gran had always told me that a woman--any woman worth her salt--could do whatever she had to."

— Charlene Harris, *Dead to the World*



A Step Toward Home

Susan Albert – Bertram, TX

An excerpt from my memoir, *Together Alone: A Memoir of Marriage and Place*

A great deal of what I was able to accomplish in my years as a professor and university administrator came about because I was free to move. "Must be willing to relocate" was a common mantra of the career culture in the sixties and seventies. To stay mobile and to be upwardly mobile, I couldn't afford attachments. Connections to a person, to a place, would limit the possibilities, tie me down, anchor me. A woman who was free to move on, move up, was ready for success. I had children, yes, but (by that time) no husband, and the children could relocate with me. And later, I had a husband who was willing to live in one city while I lived in another – until that marriage broke up, and I was once again unattached.

I'm not the only one who cultivated non-attachment, of course. Americans like to boast that we won't be tied down. We are a mobile people, swept along on the many westering waves of exploration that have reshaped this continent since the first Old World pilgrims set foot on the New. My people belonged to that footloose tribe. On my mother's side, my great-great-great-grandfather Conrad Franklin drove a covered wagon west from Mercer County, Kentucky, to Sullivan County, Missouri, in 1849. On my father's side, my great-grandmother Jane Jackson Turnell, an English housemaid, up sticks and sailed to America in 1870 with her husband (a brewer's drayman) and two small children. Another part of the same family immigrated to America from Germany about the time of the Revolution. My family tree has lots of limbs and branches, but scarcely any roots.

What's more, mobility was an essential part of my education, and after that, of my professional development. I grew up in a small Midwestern town. To grow, I had to leave, and every place I went, I learned something new: San Francisco, Austin, New Orleans, and all the places and people in between helped me see who I was, who else I might be. If I had been a homebody, stayed put on familiar ground, lived for keeps in that Midwestern town, how could I have learned these things about myself, about others, about the world?

I remember reading John Berryman's poem "Roots" and feeling the slashing truth of his line, "exile is in our time like blood." It was so. To me and many others, exile was heart's blood, mind's blood, life's blood, stronger than any blood ties to people or place. And necessary. Exile gave me the freedom to look back over my shoulder and dislike what I saw. During this robust, roaming, learning, liberating period of my life, I remembered the Midwest of the 1950s with distaste: the parochialism of our neighbors and yes, of my family, too; the prejudice, the narrow-minded

ignorance; the insistence on being always morally and religiously and politically right, as vehemently right as possible. I understood Carol Kennicott, the protagonist of Sinclair Lewis' 1920 novel *Main Street*, who was oppressed by the numbing conformity, the dull speech, the rigid requirements of respectability. And I certainly agreed with her that not all women were satisfied to wash the dishes.

And yet, and yet. As time went on, I began to be aware of an increasing sense of rootlessness and placelessness, a feeling that the price I paid for exile, however necessary, was a certain homelessness. I belonged nowhere. Partly, this feeling came from spending so much of my time in books. Partly, it was due to my commitment to mobility, to my fear of becoming attached, and to a sense that there was always some other place that might be more attractive, more professionally rewarding, more interesting than the place where I was.

Whatever the cause, by the time I was in my early forties, I began to be aware of my rootlessness and feel a new kind of wanting, something entirely unexpected, compelling, disturbing. The rural landscapes of my childhood, which seemed more real and rooted than the abstract ideas and academic politics of my adulthood, now called out urgently. Those old desires began to find a voice, and I began to try to imagine what it would be like to stop moving around and settle somewhere that looked and felt like...well, like home.

At first I dismissed this as mere sentiment, a belated homesickness, a midlife nostalgia. But what is sentiment but an impulse of the heart, a sighed yes, yes? Yes, this is mine, me, where I belong. Yes, this is who I am. And what is homesickness but a desire to be at home, to be in place, to dwell in the here from whence we came?

Before long, my dreams and daytime imaginings were full of remembered landscapes, and I began to think of having a small place in the country with chickens, a garden, fruit trees. I could drive back and forth to the university – many people did, and it satisfied them. But that wasn't what I wanted. I couldn't really live in the country, in a full, whole-hearted way, if I had to divide my day between home and work. In order to have the kind of life I wanted, I had to leave the life I had. And on the day I walked out of the university, I felt astonishingly, astoundingly free – as free as those wild birds – and I could sing my own glorious hurrah.

It was only a step and a small one, but it was the first, and it was necessary. I was on my way home.

Self Examination

Lavon Urbonas – Rancho Cucamonga, CA

She wishes she could laugh.

Certainly her appearance deserves at least a giggle, but self-generated mirth has been elusive lately. She clutches the front opening of the pink paper vest with her right hand. With her left hand, she tries to tuck the end of the white paper sheet under her bare bottom, to keep the slithery drape from slipping off her lap. Her feet dangle from the end of the exam table, sporting her only other attire—white bobby sox. This ensemble is *a la mode* for a gynecologist's examination room.

The small square room is too brightly lit and too quiet, except for a few muffled sounds from the hallway outside the closed door. The speculum gleams luridly from the counter. She recognizes her distorted diminutive reflection in that frigid piece of metal. Limp latex gloves lay along side it, waiting for the doctor to go palpating and probing. She never looks forward to this annual excavation.

A yellow, plastic tape flapped in the night wind near China Basin. Large, electric beams highlighted the words, "POLICE LINE. DO NOT CROSS."

I paused on my way home from the swing shift at Ed's Diner and stared at a body draped with a blue tarp. Why not? No child or hubby waited in my studio apartment. I had only a calico cat and a twenty-year-old TV—cable, no Comcast. My refrigerator contained three cans of club soda, a decade-old jar of sweet pickles, an unfilled water pitcher, and grapes in a yellow Tupperware colander.

I figured all this out right after I was told, "You're a waitress on your way home from work," by an Assistant Stage Manager who didn't look much older than the high school seniors I used to teach.

I'd never been a waitress, but my experience in the classroom had shown me the thanklessness of the swing shift. I could imagine refilling coffee cups, cutting pie, and waiting for four square-dancers in frilly regalia to leave me a \$1.87 tip. I knew abuse. I felt it after teaching five classes of required high school English and then running a final dress rehearsal for the fall play. Light cues came late, certain actors were also late, and some of them forgot their lines.

Like me, Wanda Cook wasn't there because she wanted to be. We both knew resignation and inertia. All I had to do was recall morning after morning of driving to Cal High, dreading the bells, the morass of bodies in the hall, and the defiance of tenth-graders without their homework done. I endured my routine, waiting for something better to come along.

Like me, Wanda didn't realize she was a burnout. We were sisters under the skin.

Her son, Kevin would have graduated from high school that June, if he hadn't become a runaway. "Leave me alone. You never loved me," he screamed, slamming the door behind him one night in January.

"You go to work, Sug," his father told Wanda. "He'll be back." But when Wanda returned that night, his clothes and CDs were gone.

His father contacted the police, posted fliers, and set up a

An air-conditioned breeze crawls over her exposed skin. She hunches her shoulders forward and hugs herself for warmth; this only bares more of her backside to the audacious draft. To distract herself, she studies the one nonmedical picture in the room: a stark watercolor print of a single flower, white and daisy-like. She would have preferred a seascape or a mountain scene. Something with perspective. Something with color. Something to take her out of this room.

She empathizes with the lone blossom, though, feeling as colorless and confined in her life as the flower is in its frame. Flat. Static. Insensate. Lackluster. They are soulless sisters, each an insipid imitation of the real thing. It's disquieting to see this one-dimensional rendition of herself. She finds no freshness in the daisy on the wall, but neither will it wither like the picture of Dorian Gray.

She wishes she could cry.

More Than a Waitress

B. Lynn Goodwin – Danville, CA

hot line. Leads were sparse. The police stopped returning Wanda's phone calls. Kevin's father poured doubles and triples.

The hot line ate their savings. Wanda slept on the sofa, keeping the porch light on for Kevin.

When her doorbell finally rang one night at 2 a.m., she jumped up, tossed off her blanket and peered through the peephole. Her heart thumped.

She took a deep breath as she opened the door for two officers.

"Are you Mrs. Cook?" the younger one asked.

She wrapped her arms around herself and nodded. "Come in. Did you find my Kevin? Is he alive?"

The young officer looked at his partner.

"The driver's license says Curt, not Kevin," the senior officer said.

Goose bumps rose up on her skin. She wrapped her arms around herself as the older officer led her to a red leatherette chair.

"Curt?" she asked.

"Curt Cook. 52. Brown hair. Blue eyes?" he read off the driver's license, smoothing the plastic bag until he could read the print.

"Curt went out for a paper three days ago." Probably fell into a bottle and couldn't climb out. She hadn't reported him missing. She'd had six months of experience with the police and this time she planned to cope alone.

Two weeks later, after eight hours of toting grilled cheese sandwiches and refilling coffee cups, she walked home until a yellow strip of police tape blocked her path. She peered across it, praying that the dead body under the blue tarp was not her Kevin, and was pushing through the police line when a young officer stepped in her way.

"Let me go. I have to see if...." she screamed.

The Assistant Director called, "Cut. Good job everyone."

"That was great," the young officer said, a pumpkin grin spilling across his face. He removed his cap and wiped his forehead.

I felt my spine shift and shook out my shoulders. Wanda Cook slid away. She took Curt, Kevin, and their family troubles with her.

I Can't Breathe

Mary Jo Doig – Afton, VA

I grew up on the eastern end of Long Island, near the Hamptons, in a lower middle class family of five. When I started school, more than half my classmates were "colored," as we called them in the '50s. Many were children of Long Island's large migrant population, who worked on the duck and potato farms. The Long Island Railroad ran through our town and those tracks marked the divide between white and black residents' homes. North of the tracks most homes were small, often unkempt shanties that usually had a shiny new car parked in the driveway. The "n" word was prevalent and we used to joke about those sparkling clean cars parked in weed-filled yards. The general attitude in my home and community was that black people were second-class citizens and, unfortunately, I believed it.

Despite our financial difficulties, my mother was adamant that I attend college, so I entered an upstate university to become an English teacher. Just a handful of black students attended and I vaguely wondered why. I didn't yet tie that fact to another one: by the time we graduated from high school in 1959, less than 25% of us were black.

As I was journeying into "happily ever after," working at my degree, marrying my high school sweetheart, becoming the mother of two sons, the dream suddenly shattered when my husband disappeared with another woman. I, not yet degreed, was now a single mother of two small children, with a mortgage, and without a car or income. I got a job I could walk to, but quickly saw the minimum income would not be enough, so I did the unthinkable: I applied for public assistance for my children. In our town, people on public assistance were in the same boat as colored people: we were second-class, society's leaches, looking for a handout.

I could barely breathe the day I applied for "welfare." I felt so shamed, helpless, and angry. In time, I pulled our life back together, returned to college, and completed my degree. Yet I never forgot those eighteen months on public assistance. To this day, I vividly remember standing in lines for government surplus food. Each time my check arrived in my mailbox, my face burned with humiliation.

As it turned out, I never became an English teacher, for having experienced the predicament of my fellow "second-class" peers changed my life. Suddenly I had a passion to help others move ahead in their difficult journeys, as I had been so fortunate to do.

Four years ago, I retired from a varied human services career, where I often met my former self in a new client. The challenge to assist remains, and may always be with us, although I strongly hope not. Then last year, when Ferguson and Manhattan blasted to the forefront of our society after the awful, unnecessary killing of unarmed black men, I developed another passionate hope: that our new awareness of avoidable police violence will grow and transform into a movement of restructure, reason, and respect.

I can still hear Eric Garner's voice cry out to the police that he couldn't breathe. In that moment, beyond the tragedy of his death, I also heard him poignantly articulate the plight of all his peers, including myself all those years ago. When will we *all* be able to breathe?

Burying the Cat

Catharine Dalton – Martinez, CA

Bridgie is gone now. We honored her life's end with a viewing and a moving version of a Catholic service, sung and spoken in Spanish by a Mexican neighbor. Bridge's death, when it came, was not unexpected – she was in her nineties. But she left us with a much-changed local environment, something we did not expect.

Bridgie's property was adjacent to my own and to my neighbor Michele's. When she was alive, the properties were divided by a flimsy fence composed of horizontal boards, patched and re-patched by a succession of handymen. One of those might have been Jesse, whose duty it also had been to spend nights at Bridgie's house, and who would arrive at twilight on summer evenings and engage her in long, lazy conversations in Spanish, Bridgie herself being of Spanish extraction. The drone of their voices in a language I did not yet know was as soothing as the sound of the bumblebees cruising my garden in the daytime.

When Bridgie was alive and the fence between us still permeable, a variety of cats, including my own three, spent warm days sprawled out in her driveway where the pavement was warmest, unshaded by any trees except one miraculous one that produced three varieties of figs and extended over my own yard. The cats included a few of unknown origin, tended as if they were our own. Anne, who rented an apartment over Bridgie's garage, had named one of them Mitch. Black with white patches turning rusty at the edges, Mitch was clearly an older cat.

He had an agreeable personality and was a reliable presence in our three yards, so much so that when one evening Mitch did not show up, I became concerned. On my evening walk I encountered a friend who asked if anyone I knew was missing a cat. Her neighbor had found one dead, apparently the victim of a passing car. Skeptical because Mitch had been absent such a short time, I nevertheless checked with the person who had retrieved his corpse. The body lay in a plastic garbage bag, and it was indeed Mitch's remains. Declining the woman's offer to bury the cat, I took the bag and carried it home, weeping. As I passed the house next door, Michele, hearing me, emerged. We conferred and agreed to split the cost of having Mitch cremated by my vet.

The next morning I loaded Mitch, in the plastic bag, into my car and headed for the vet. In my distress, though, I forgot to check the gas gauge – within minutes the tank was empty. I barely managed to coast into the parking lot of our local Ace Hardware. From there, I called a cab; the driver, when he came, dismissed my fretful explanations – there was nothing unusual for him in transporting animals to the vet, alive or dead. So I left Mitch's body at the vet's office, to be kept on ice until the scheduled day for shipment to the crematorium. Going from there to a gas station, and thence to Ace Hardware to retrieve my car, I figured the deal was sealed.

Later that day, thinking someone should explain why the cat was missing, I paid Bridgie a visit. To my surprise, she was agitated to learn of the cat's demise and insisted he was hers, had come to her as a kitten and was named "Bootsie" because of his white feet. Though Anne's story was more convincing, Bridgie was persistent enough that I deferred to her and tried to make clear that the cat was at the vet, a cremation had been ordered,

(Burying the Cat, continued from page 15)

and she would soon have a shiny wooden box containing his ashes. But this was not enough. Indeed, for over an hour, Bridgie asked fretfully, repeatedly, "But where is the cat?" and insisted that she wanted to bury him, as she had her other animals, in the pet cemetery in her yard. Finally, I gave in, called the vet, and asked to retrieve Mitch/Bootsie's corpse. Though understandably confused, they were amenable, and I went there once again and brought home, in a cardboard box they provided, a near-frozen-solid cat.

When I reported to Bridgie, she was clearly relieved and promised a burial as soon as Alberto, her hired man, returned from work. So all afternoon Mitch/Bootsie lay in the box in my car, slowly thawing. While the cat thawed, word circulated in the neighborhood, so that by the time Alberto arrived home, the upcoming event was widely anticipated. When Alberto appeared with his shovel, I grabbed a brightly colored scarf from my bureau drawer and then Bootsie in his box, and we assembled around the pet cemetery. Those present included Bridgie, of course; two of Alberto's older children and his toddler, who was holding the hand of Jesse's wife, Maria; plus myself, and several unfamiliar youngsters, including one apparently named "Tiger." We watched respectfully as Alberto dug the hole and placed in it the box, decorated with my scarf and containing the late cat. As he covered the grave, I gazed at the group around me intently enough that the scene is still fixed in my mind today.

And now? Alberto's youngest is ten years old, his other children almost adults; Bridgie has, of course, passed on; Tiger (whose name, in fact, was Tyler) has a deep voice and a nascent beard; Jesse was crippled in a fall and lives, with Maria, too far away to visit; Anne has moved back to her native Ohio.

Bridgie's house was soon bought by people who peremptorily had the property re-surveyed – costing Michele and me a foot of our land – and erected an eight-foot fence between them and us (uprooting the fig tree in the process). I can only hope they have done no damage to the pet cemetery. Sometimes, though, I see Tyler, and we reminisce briefly and wistfully about that long-ago time when we all buried the cat.

Signs of the Times

Susan Jordan – Lakewood, CO

The first time I tried taking pictures of the neon signs flashing motel names on the Avenue, a bicyclist rammed me, smashed the camera and my face into the curb, and bounced me into the turn lane. The clad-in-black wheeled terrorist kept riding. Two cars skidded around me and moved over from the right lane to the center lane. Another car honked. I bled enough for a patron leaving the dive diner behind me to shake his head before pulling out his cell phone to take a picture. A cop on her rounds flashed her lights, spun a U-turn, and pulled behind me. An ambulance ride and several x-rays later confirmed that my arm's current angle was an unnatural position.

I paid the hospital bill with a credit card near its limit. The cab ride from the hospital to the bolthole I flopped into each evening took all but two bucks of the dough I had shoved into my pocket before heading out that morning. Cold coffee and a handful of painkillers struck the bottom of my gut like the dull thud of a

Sunday newspaper slapping an empty suburban porch. Yesterday's cheese pizza stuck to the lining of the delivery box sitting on top of a stack of unopened mail. I peeled strips of cheese and shoved the mass into my mouth. The last of the coffee forced the glue down my throat. I eased my body onto the sagging sleeper couch and prodded a pillow under my arm resting in its sling. The arrival of the light rail cars at the next-door station vibrated the room. I pulled my old down jacket over my fractured arm and covered my head. My day was done.

The arm pained me for the next week. I tried to ignore the cell phone, but I needed to make some money. Two of my freelance accounts bugged me about deadlines, resorting to actually calling me after multiple texts. Typing with one hand, I managed to transfer a few bucks from my emergency-only savings account. Because the rent was due and the refrigerator stood empty, I determined I was in emergency mode. I walked two blocks to the nearest pawnshop, residing in a crumbling strip mall where the landlord filled parking lot potholes with used kitty litter.

A bunch of cameras covered the top of one cabinet next to the barred entry. The debit for the new camera squeaked through. I hit the Walmart down at Wadsworth and the Avenue for batteries. A quick run-through of the functions and a couple of test shots put me back in business. The bus ride back to my corner was uneventful, none of the usual altercations, grandmas protecting squirming toddlers, and agitated teens with snarls instead of smiles.

Because I like to eat, I fastened the sling tightly against my body and raised my right hand to my chest, a position recommended by the torturous casting technician, before setting out once again to photograph the remnants of the neon gallery of signs on the Avenue. I figured a one-armed photographer would fit right in with the day-trippers on the west end.

The second time I tried taking the pictures, a guy covered in sores and sooty clothes tried to steal the camera. A full breath scream and a quick jab with the attached tripod backed him off me. He muttered a string of curses in a language known only to himself as he slouched away. The odor from his presence lingered, a cross somewhere between a smoldering campfire and kimchee.

I swept in behind cars grinding to abrupt stops at lights synced to 38 miles per hour and got the first shot: a whimsical rabbit topping the roof of a motel scarred by sixty years of snow and sun. After a few different angles and a flip-off from the hooker working the corner, I moved on to a western-themed graphic sporting a headless cowboy. The sign hung by a single rusting chain length and it swung in the wind against a fifty-foot cedar coveting a corner of the buckled parking lot. Light spun off the rough metal edges and I caught the reflection in several shots.

The tripod steadied my balance. I reset the camera and aimed it skyward at my last target. The "Day is Done" motel sign of a half-crescent moon rose above a well-tended motor court with roses surrounding a hitching-post fence. The owners, Ned and June, sometimes sat out front in the wicker rockers that now required chains and locks against those who stole anything not tied down. The couple enjoyed their cups of tea in between check-ins, and Ned kept a Luger and his concealed weapon permit in a fanny pack. They hoped to sell the place next year and begin winters-in-Spain. I got the shot and headed home.

It took me a week to polish the portfolio of signs before turning it in to Mile High Magazine. The editor didn't ask for any changes. He tried to get out of our single-use contract. He lost that round. After some friendly negotiations over good beer, we struck a new contract deal and he gave me several assignments over the next year. The year went fast.

My new apartment sits on the land where Ned and June's motor court once stood, and I got a postcard from Spain at Christmas. My "Signs of the Times" photographs decorate the lobby of this building and several other new developments along the Avenue. A lady at the historical society called today about a new East Avenue photo assignment. I like to eat, so I made it a lunch appointment.

Calling It Quits

Joyce Boatright – Houston, TX

I started smoking when I was thirteen. I was spending the afternoon at my friend Judy's house when her older sister, who was a senior in high school, offered us a cigarette and a beer. I choked on both. Judy and her sister had a big laugh. I felt totally humiliated and vowed I'd learn these vices or die. Looking back, I find it downright scary how a budding teenager thinks.

I went home in search of my big brother, a high school senior who was experienced and could teach me the skills to master these exotic depravities. Turned out, he didn't keep his beer hidden in his closet like Judy's sister did, but he did have a pack of Marlboros. I sat cross-legged on his bed while he tapped out a cigarette from the red and white soft-pack, struck a kitchen match on the windowsill, and touched the flame to the paper-wrapped tobacco. He took a drag, leaned back, and blew the smoke through his nose. I stared, in awe of his sophistication.

"You sure you want to learn to smoke?" he asked, feeling protective and probably worrying about what our parents would say if they ever found out he taught me.

I nodded. "Please, Stone. You just don't know how dumb I felt when Judy laughed at me. I just gotta learn."

And so the lesson began. He warned me to take small puffs so I wouldn't choke, but I didn't catch on right away. I coughed and sputtered until my eyes watered and my chest hurt. Still, I was determined. And finally, I got the trick: I drew in a tiny puff, then opened my mouth as wide as a sandy creek catfish and inhaled. I may have looked wildly weird, but I didn't choke. Soon I was French inhaling and blowing smoke rings. What a feat. What a victory. What a waste of brainpower.

I taught my cousin to smoke. She was a year younger, but much quicker to master the technique. We gave a secret code name to our vice: chocolate pie. On occasion we gleefully asked, right in front of our parents, with a dramatic emphasis on the code words, "Had any *chocolate pie* lately?" Then we giggled in that shrieking pitch only young females can hit, and our parents rolled their eyes and wondered when we'd outgrow our silliness.

I once watched my younger brother, Mark, smoke a pack of cigarettes in an hour, which means he averaged one cigarette every three minutes. Mark accomplished the deed by lighting one from the other, and by not smoking them down to the filter. This was about the time we heard that one cigarette smoked cut

seven minutes from a person's life. I spent an entire civics class calculating the years of old age I'd be spared if I continued to smoke. I was seventeen and sassy, but not very smart.

My boyfriend smoked, and he convinced me that smoking the brand with the lowest nicotine was almost like not smoking at all. I switched to his brand, and went from one pack to three because it took three packs of his brand, Carlton, to get the nicotine high of one pack of Marlboro. When we broke up, I smoked a pack of Salem to soothe my aching heart, then I went back to smoking Marlboro, but my three-pack habit remained just that, a habit, so there was no cutting back despite the boost in nicotine.

For eighteen years, I smoked filtered, unfiltered, king-size, regular, menthol and non-. My preference was Marlboro, but I would smoke any brand before I did without. During this same time, I suffered from summer and winter colds. No longer did I have the lung capacity to swim laps. Or bike along country roads. Or hike in the national forest. Or dance a full set. None of this, I'm ashamed to admit, caused me to consider the toll cigarettes were taking on my life.

What finally got my attention was an incident in graduate school. I had run out of cigarettes before a class, and at the break, when I tried bumming a cigarette from one of my sixty classmates, I was shocked to discover I was the only smoker. I tried to quit "cold turkey," but I only made it two and a half days. For the first time in my life, I realized the terrible hold the addiction had on me.

On National Smokeout Day, Nov. 21, 1981, I tried again.

This time I prepared for withdrawal by building up my resolve. I listed my reasons to quit, including the sad fact my car smelled like a dirty ashtray and I smelled like my car. I probably should have added more intelligent reasons for quitting, such as the reason that cigarettes are called "cancer sticks" is because cigarette smoke contains more than 40 chemicals that have been proven to directly cause cancer. But "intelligent smoker" somehow seemed like an oxymoron as I struggled with my addiction. Nevertheless, with the help of a support group, I quit. This time I stayed quit.

In my day, smoking was a rite of passage. When I was thirteen, my big brother and Judy's big sister were my role models; they emulated the habits and lifestyles of the adults around them. Our own parents smoked at home, in the car, and at work. Sophisticated Hollywood stars and New York actors lit up in every dramatic film and Broadway play, worldly war veterans related tales of heroism through the haze of their unfiltered cigarettes, and carefree Haight-Ashbury hippies puffed to the psychedelic beat of Jimi Hendrix. The lure was attractive, appealing, captivating. And we kids reached out to adulthood by imitating the habits of adults.

Today I know habits are not all worthwhile—and it's easier to abstain than to kick an addiction. Unfortunately, I was a grown woman before I learned this lesson.



From Tramp to Champ

Lois Halley – Westminster, MD

Daniel O'Brien slid from the quiet booth in a corner of the diner and patted his pocket for reassurance. It was still there – the pint of Smirnoff. He had earned enough money from panhandling that day to buy himself a burger and fries, even a slice of apple pie, but only after purchasing the most important thing, the vodka.

The cold wind hit him like a slap in the face when he stepped into the dark. Now, to find a quiet alley where he could drink himself numb. He was just settling in beside a dumpster when he heard the boisterous laughter as two teenage boys came into view. One of them carried a baseball bat, and Daniel could see them tossing something back and forth. It was a tiny black kitten.

Instantly grasping their intentions, he jumped to his feet, shouting and waving his fists. "Drop that kitten!" he yelled, and without thinking threw the only thing available. The bottle of vodka struck the boy with the bat before shattering on the paved alley. Grabbing the bat, Daniel menaced the second youth, who dropped the kitten before running away.

Tears streaming from his eyes, he was watching the precious liquid drain into the gutter when he heard tiny meows near his feet. He reached for the little creature and, holding it in his big hands, murmured comforting words – while thinking to himself, "Get yourself together, Buddy. Most of the kids around here belong to gangs. If they come back, they won't be alone. They'll be seeking retribution. You need a safe place."

Slipping the kitten into an oversized pocket, the one where the vodka had been, Daniel hurried away. He kept one hand on the feline and soon he could feel purrs going through its entire body. It felt warm and safe, the way Daniel would like to feel.

Luckily, he had one subway token to help him reach his destination on the other side of town. Entering through a side door, he descended well-worn wooden steps and heard the murmurs and laughter from the basement of St. Michael's Church. Sidling up to the coffee pot, he filled a Styrofoam cup for himself and nonchalantly stuffed a handful of creamers in another pocket for the kitten.

Daniel gulped the hot liquid on the way to the restroom. Hands trembling slightly, he locked the door behind him and examined the kitten under the light. "You can't be more than 6 weeks old," he cooed. It was a beautiful pure black with blue eyes, thin, but otherwise it seemed unhurt.

Quickly rinsing the cup, Daniel tore it down to kitten size and poured the creamers into it. "Drink, little Tramp," the man said, and it did, every drop.

Daniel took a seat just as the meeting started. When it was his turn, he stood and said, "Hello. My name is Dan, and I am an alcoholic." "Hello, Dan," the group answered.

"I did not drink today. Once, I had a wife, a home, and a good job. While my wife was dying of cancer, I lost my job. The medical bills wiped out our home. Now I live on the street, but I try to not look like I'm homeless. I have reached rock bottom and am looking for a sponsor 'cause now I am committing to the twelve-step program."

By the time the meeting adjourned, Daniel had a sponsor, an older retired man named Bill. As people were leaving, Daniel surreptitiously reached into the creamers again while trying to avoid Father Kelly, an elderly priest whom he knew from his former life, as he referred to his pre-drinking days.

"Ah, Danny," said Father Kelly. "So nice to see you. I want to talk to you about something."

Reaching into his pocket, Daniel felt the kitten squirming. He wriggled his index finger and could feel needle sharp claws and teeth digging in as Tramp played catch-the-finger. Trying to keep a straight face, Daniel respectfully responded to the priest.

Father Kelly got right to the point. "Our choir director retired and moved to Florida. Since you were a music teacher, I want to offer you the job, which will be multifaceted. You would need to do maintenance work around the church and grounds as well as direct the choir. Also, set up for the nightly AA meetings. We can't pay much, but there is a cot in back and you can room here. As for meals, the parish ladies' group has so many meals for fundraising, you won't go hungry."

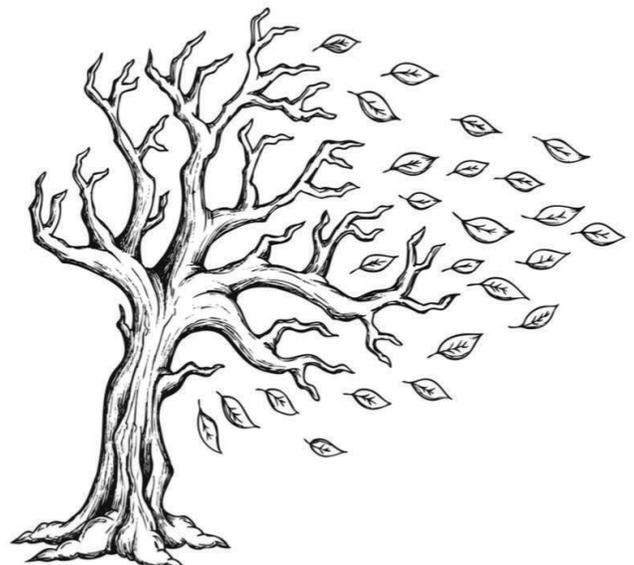
Daniel's eyes misted as he asked, "Can I have a pet? This could be a deal breaker, Father, but I'm thinking of getting a kitten."

With a big smile and a twinkle in his eye, the priest replied, "Like the one in your pocket?"

Daniel never had been able to fool Father Kelly.

"Let's have a look. Oh, he is beautiful. You say his name is Tramp? He's not a tramp anymore. Call him Champ, 'cause that's what he's going to be – and so are you. You can start your job tonight by helping me clean up after the meeting. Then we'll look in the kitchen for a can of chicken or tuna for the kitty, and something to serve as a litter pan. Then you can hit the sack."

For the first time in a very long time, Daniel felt warm and safe.



The Pilgrimage

Elizabeth A Henderson – Kerrville, TX

I never expected this trip to be a true pilgrimage, but it seems it is. I thought I was just going on a tour, to see a part of Spain I had not yet seen. Apparently I was wrong.

Except for those of us who are with our partners, we are all strangers. Gradually, I learn who my fellow travelers are, their names and stories. (And when I come home, it seems strange not to see those people every day. I look for their faces in the crowds at the airport, by the side of the street, in the grocery store.)

The pilgrimage is partly walking, like a traditional pilgrimage. And at times we are on a bus driving through the countryside or through cities, towns, villages. Unexpectedly, this too is pilgrimage.

We wander through cathedrals with huge altarpieces of ornate Inca gold. One small ancient church is a remote, austere Romanesque structure, quiet and dark and holy, stranded in the lonely fields far from any town. Why is it here?

We see huge doors carved of wood and doorways sculpted from stone, Gothic spires and plateresque ornamentation. Stained glass windows in brilliant gem-tones are nearly a thousand years old, still unbroken. People kneel reverently before the relics of the saints. And here is the tomb of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, *El Cid*. We laugh at the story of the apostle's bones coming here in a stone boat, at the original "holy grail" of agate and gold. And yet, and yet....

Queens lie in their stone tombs, hands folded over their hearts, carvings of their dogs by their sides. An aging *marquesa* shows us her half-ruined castle, hundreds of years old, still her home. In the hallway stands an enormous bear, shot by her uncle in the nearby hills almost a century ago.

We walk through convents, monasteries, and ancient cloisters, over floors of river stones in intricate patterns. The designs are Christian, Moorish, Jewish. We hear monks singing Gregorian chants, see the tapestries of Goya. Narrow winding streets and wide boulevards are lined with pollarded plane trees and chestnuts heavy with their huge, white, candelabra-shaped flowers. Roses, geraniums, calla lilies, pansies, and petunias adorn the houses.

Evening cities are lively with townspeople walking in the streets, the sidewalk cafés packed. There are older couples strolling arm in arm, girls in black leotards dancing and singing, boys clapping and flirting, little girls in first communion dresses, and brides and grooms trailed by photographers.

Then we are on the *Camino*, hiking through fields of grain and vineyards as far as we can see. We trek through forests of newly budded oak, through the *bosque de las brujas* where old women gathered their herbs. The roadsides are bright with wildflowers of every color—lavender, mustard, poppies, daisies. Huge

bushes are covered in pungent white blossoms and the hillsides are yellow with gorse. Poplar trees edge the fields. As the stones crunch under my feet, I am in a cocoon of my own thoughts. Ahead and behind me I see an occasional pilgrim, heavy pack on his back, swinging his walking sticks in rhythm with his tread; we say "*Buen Camino*" as we pass. Always following the yellow arrows and the signs of the scallop shell, we stop in tiny villages at little cafés and are welcomed to buy a coffee or a beer, to rest in the shade at sidewalk tables.

As I walk, I feel, through this earth, my connection with thousands of pilgrims who have gone here before me, with all their stories, with their hopes and dreams for how this journey will grant them new life. Does this path really have the power to heal? Or is it just a beautiful hike? Just a chance to make new friends and enjoy the red wine at the end of the day?

From the bus we see the land change from arid to lush, from rolling hills to rugged mountains crossed by modern highways with long swooping white bridges.

And then we are in Santiago. In the past 12 days, we have walked 30 miles on the trail and many more in the cities and towns; we have driven another 450 miles of the *Camino*. As we compared our steps on our Fitbits, we joked about our "pilgrimage light." But a pilgrimage it has been. The poet, the artist, the scholar, the widower fulfilling his wife's bucket list—all are part of the mosaic of our trail.

We enter the old city, passing through archways and narrow lanes. Bagpipes, a legacy of the Celts, echo through the passageways. The wide *plaza mayor* opens out—the cathedral on one side, its famous spires covered with scaffolding. The *parador* where we will stay fills another side of the square. The pilgrims' packs are piled in the center of the plaza, the burden finally set down. Vendors sell scallop shells on their red cords, a symbol of the trek completed.

And here we are, finally, at the end of the journey. It was the goal, to reach this place, and I am weary; but also it heralds an end to this enchanted time-out-of-time, this dream. A return to waking life. Will that life be changed?

The pilgrims' mass begins. A nun with a beautiful, clear voice is singing. Prayers are chanted. Standing, sitting, up, down. I have been honored by family and friends to bring more than forty prayer requests to this sacred place. And there are my own prayers for my loved ones, my family, myself. As I silently send out these heartfelt yearnings and wishes into this space, I am carried into a timeless world. Now the thurible, the famous *Botafumeiro*, begins its swinging arc high into the roof of the cathedral, spewing out pungent smoke, taking all our prayers into the heavens. The crowd is awestruck, cameras held high, amazed as the censer flies back and forth, back and forth...and then it slows, stops. And it is done.

In Search of Justice

Marian McCaa Thomas – Leawood, KS

A response to the 2015 shootings in Charleston, SC

Since I am a gardener, I know
that weeds steal from flowers that grow.
To make the weeds stop,
don't pull from the top!
Dig deep to the roots down below.

Dig deep to the roots down below,
where fear and gross ignorance grow.
And after the rain,
there's slightly less pain
in searching for what I don't know.

In searching for what I don't know,
I may have to let my fears show.
But this is the way
to bring on the day
when flowers of justice can grow.

When flowers of justice can grow,
then peace, love, and joy also show
that there is a way
where hate has no say
and kindness is all that we know.

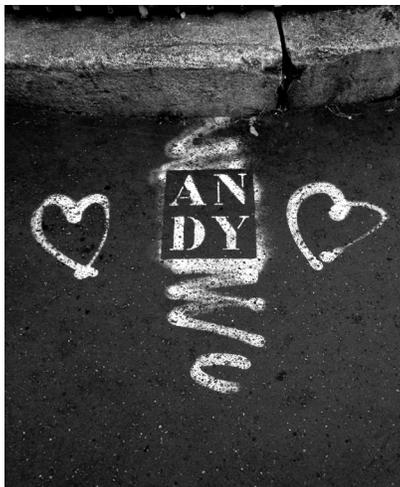
Finding Love

"Hope for love, pray for love, wish for love, dream for love...but don't put your life on hold waiting for love."

— Mandy Hale, *The Single Woman: Life, Love, and a Dash of Sass*

Two Hearts

Jude Walsh Whelley – Dayton, OH



Paris thrills me. I love everything about it. I'm here for a writing workshop and my two friends and I are staying in an exquisite corner apartment just two blocks from Alliance Francaise, where the workshop is nestled amidst classes learning French, from beginner to advanced.

As I set out for my first session, croissant from my neighborhood

boulangerie in hand, I am drinking in Paris—the women in their stylish clothes, the mothers or nannies pushing prams with rosy-cheeked children, the businessmen in their narrow-legged suits, the cyclists braving morning traffic, the wide boulevard, the black metal street signs, the Metro stop along the way, the smell of fresh baked goods and coffee...ahhh.

And then I notice it. At my feet are two painted hearts and a stylized square with stenciled letters. Ah, I think, love in Paris. This is the city that has thousands of locks fastened to the metal grate on a bridge over the Seine. Lovers from all over the world buy a lock and fasten it to the bridge, most planning to come back sometime in the future to again seek and find their lock. Paris is the dream honeymoon location.

But each day for the next week, as I pass over this spot, something nags at me. It is the stenciled letters. Read from left to right, top to bottom, they spell ANDY. As an American, that's a familiar boy's name. But no, it must be AN and DY, right? So I begin to conjure French names that might work. Amelie or Adele or Alix Neri? Daniel or Denis or Damien Yount? This amuses me for several days and I begin to solicit name possibilities from others. Soon, most people in my class have checked out the graffiti and voiced an opinion.

On my last day there, I take one final look and snap a photo. And in doing so, I realize it doesn't matter what the letters stand for. It doesn't matter if the artist was French or German or American. It doesn't matter if it was one person, Andy, declaring his love for Paris or AN and DY forever professing their devotion. What matters are the two hearts on either side, because after all, Paris is the city of love.

Things Aren't Always What They Seem

Bonnie J DeMars – Clinton, MA

Can you be ambushed by a word?

It happened to me in 1992. I was in relentless pursuit of the elusive male target. I took aim with video dating, blind dates, lunch dates, speed dating, and online dating, with no tangible results. The only winners in the matchmaking games were frustration, disappointment, and bewilderment. I needed a better tactic to earn a bull's-eye.

I thought I found it. The revered Smithsonian Institution's course, titled "The Friday Night Singles Meet and Mingle" lecture series, could be the answer to my prayers. It was a winning combination of educational content and the opportunity to meet a dating partner. My hopes jumped high.

The first class in the Mid-Atlantic States series focused on the Shenandoah Valley. It attracted a capacity crowd. I arrived early to gain a strategic advantage: scrutiny of male prospects as they entered the lecture hall.

The hour-long, fact-filled, slide-laden lecture seemed endless. Finally, the classroom lights brightened and the matchmaking could begin. We made our way to the reception hall at a snail's pace, not wanting to advertise explicit enthusiasm. I noted no nametags of Eager or Excited this evening. Alarm set in when I laid eyes on the inauspicious spread: wine like Kool-Aid and meager bites masquerading as hors d'oeuvres. Did this portend the evening's outcome?

I joined an innocuous unit of one unremarkable-looking gal and one average Joe outfitted in office attire. You can get overlooked in a larger gaggle. Dispassionate chatter filled the hall as everyone jockeyed for success.

He entered my peripheral vision and headed straight towards me. Cary Grant he wasn't, but his engaging smile, delicious green eyes, and expressive countenance spoke volumes. He was at least a Tom Hanks. Who could complain about that? And he looked as if he stepped off the pages of GQ. Within moments, Mr. Leading Man landed right next to me and promptly introduced himself to our small group. Wordplay commenced. His charm, wit, age, and height were not lost on me. We settled into pairs.

Looking directly at me, Mr. Charming asked, *Would you like to get some "real food"?*

Check. This man with shrewd gastronomic sense confirmed my thoughts exactly. The paltry offerings were less than satiating after a long day's work.

Yes, but I don't have my car.

No problem, I have mine.

Okay, let's go.

Right out of the gates he was a winner. My leading man wanted greener pastures: a real dinner. Before you think I'd taken leave of my senses and good judgment, Mr. Suave and Debonair generated good vibes. I felt reasonably assured I was in no danger. Nothing suggested he was an ax-murderer. If things soured, I had a plan. DC Metro stops are ubiquitous. I could make a hasty escape on public transportation and be home before he realized what happened. We left in search of his car and a better evening.

Our engaging conversation halted only while he opened the car door. Then repartee resumed. Leading Man worked at the IRS. I made a mental note to ask him for some tax pointers. I disclosed that I was in the military. This was my assurance that if he decided to pull any funny business, I could call in the reserves. I'm certain this crossed his mind.

Have you ever been to the 701? he asked.

No, I'm not that familiar with restaurants in downtown DC, I said.

It's a topless bar, he remarked, with no alteration in his demeanor.

I was stunned! His words stopped me in my tracks. He didn't say that, did he?

It was incongruous that this satisfying package of testosterone would suggest such an outrageous junket. My personal GPS engaged and I zeroed in on my surroundings to register the nearest Metro stop. I was incensed by this apparent subterfuge.

Within minutes we parked the car. I eyed the nearest getaway, but decided to hedge my bets and validate my suspicions. As we approached the door, Mr. Charming opened it with a flourish. We entered the main dining area, a room noticeably absent of neon lights, chrome poles, and loud garish music. Nothing in this establishment fit my mental picture. Was I mistaken or were the tables adorned with linen covers and napkins?

He interrupted my reverie and asked, *Would you prefer a seat at a table or the bar?*

The bar, I replied like a speeding bullet.

I assured myself that a bar seat guaranteed me a hasty retreat without creating a scene. We headed to the back of the room. Upon reaching our destination, I spied a sleek glass case with tiered shelving loaded with delicious, eye-catching fare.

What type of tapas would you like? he asked.

All I could do was grin.



The Signs Are All There

Linda Wisniewski – Doylestown, PA

A spring evening, ten o'clock, and outside the Crystal Diner, a full moon hangs low in the cloudless sky. Annie pulls open the glass door and motions for Marcia to enter first. Marcia laughs, then goes inside ahead of her to their usual booth. This has happened before between these two: one of them opens the door for the other, who hesitates before going ahead, in a little dance that has developed along with their brief friendship. Every Thursday night, they meet here after choir rehearsal to catch up on each other's lives. There is never enough time to talk during practice and they need privacy to gossip about the director and the other singers. The new sopranos are not as good as they think they are. Alice, the director, has been preoccupied since her husband was diagnosed with Parkinson's. Will that affect the spring concert?

Ever since their first practice together, Annie had known Marcia would be someone special in her life. They had so much in common: they loved singing, adored nice shoes and clothes, and even liked the same movies. Marcia wore no rings and said she lived alone, and why tell Annie that unless she trusted her, even hoped they would be more to each other someday? Annie used her meditation practice to get in touch with her deeper self, and when she did, Marcia's face appeared like a vision.

Tonight, they have taken their places across from each other in the booth and shrugged off identical windbreakers. Marcia wore hers first at the beginning of March. A week later, Annie showed up for practice wearing one just like it over her thin shoulders, her straight blond hair falling just below the collar.

"I liked your jacket," she said, acknowledging Marcia's stare. "You said it was from Urban Outfitters, so I ordered one online."

Marcia had smiled without showing her teeth but made no comment. Now she is folding her jacket neatly and placing it beside her in the booth. Annie's breath catches in her throat. The gap in Marcia's purple silk blouse has fallen open and her perfectly round breasts are half exposed. Annie looks up and meets Marcia's eyes. She smiles shyly. Marcia returns a quizzical look, her head tipped at an angle.

"Everything OK?" Marcia says. "You look a little flushed."

Annie pushes a thin strand of hair behind her ear. "I guess I'm still excited from rehearsal," she says. "Didn't we sound great together?"

"You mean better than we always do?" Marcia tosses off, already reading the menu. The lights overhead grow dim and a waitress lights a candle in a little jar on each table. After she walks away, Marcia leans across the booth and says in a low voice, "Geez, I forgot my flashlight!"

Annie giggles. Her moist hand closes on the silver bracelet in her pocket, one of several treasured items left to her by her favorite aunt. The wafer-thin bangle will look so lovely on Marcia's delicate wrist. This is the perfect night to tell her how she feels.

It's not without risks, though. Yes, they sing in a feminist choir where half the women are openly gay, but Annie doesn't know for sure about Marcia. And there's no way to know if Marcia cares about her as more than a friend. Still, there have been signs.

Marcia had recently added cheek kisses to their usual goodnight hugs. She complimented Annie's new haircut. And that thing with her blouse. Why has she worn it tonight? Marcia orders a cup of peppermint tea and a slice of apple pie.

"That's just what I was going to say," says Annie to the waitress standing at their booth. "I'll have what she's having." Her face goes red as she remembers the line from the movie; wasn't it about orgasm or something? Oh God.

Marcia pulls out her iPhone and peers at it, then taps the keyboard impatiently with her polished red fingernail. She glances up at Annie. "Hey, Annie," she says. "I've been wanting to tell you something for a long time."

Here it comes, Annie thinks, before she had a chance to bring it up herself. Marcia has felt it, too, the strong attraction between them. The jukebox plays "This Magic Moment," and Annie starts to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Marcia's brown eyes narrow, the way they do when she is annoyed. Their waitress comes back with the plates of pie and cups of tea, placing everything on the table between them.

"Will there be anything else, girls?" They shake their heads without looking at her. Annie reaches into her pocket for the bracelet. It feels cold and hard. Maybe tonight wasn't the time. Maybe she hadn't read the signals right. She'd never been very good at that. Marcia's voice broke through like a distant bell. What had she just said?

"Annie? Hey, Earth to Annie, come in!" Marcia is laughing in that full-throated way Annie loves. "Look, I wanted to wait until I was sure before I told you." She picks up her empty teacup with both hands, then lowers it onto its saucer with great care.

Annie holds her breath. She is still touching the bracelet with her open fingers.

"I've met someone. She's so much like you it's incredible." Marcia tips her head to one side and grins, her lips parting to reveal her perfect white teeth.

"Wow, that's great," Annie says, but it comes out too loud. The elderly couple in the next booth turns to look at her. She tries again more softly, reaching a hand across the table. "I'm so happy for you. Tell me everything."

The bracelet rests in her pocket for now. Later tonight, she will find it there. She will place it on her dresser and cry, just a little. Then she will watch the moon and wait for tomorrow.

Bank Job

Sandra Heggen – Kempner, TX

George's nerve suddenly failed him and he stood stock still in the revolving doorway. The following glass panel struck him hard as the woman behind him continued pushing.

He stumbled forward, grabbing the push bar of the panel in front of him. He let it support him temporarily, then relinquished it as he staggered into the bank lobby. He stood looking around uncertainly, shuffling his feet on the slush-smearred marble floor.

The woman from behind whooshed past with a quick, impatient glance. George regarded her in irritation. What was the matter with people anyway? Couldn't she see? Couldn't she tell? Had she no idea what was raging behind his bland and nondescript face? It was probably good she couldn't, he admitted.

With a quick waggle, he settled his overcoat into a smoother set on his shoulders, then grasped his lapels and aligned his collar with a tug.

He looked around the ornate old-fashioned lobby with its marble pillars, its dark oak desks and paneling, the brass bars set into oak frames in front of the tellers. It oozed wealth and prestige.

People moved purposefully. Some were going to tellers' windows from the stands where they'd filled out various deposit or withdrawal slips. Others were leaving the tellers and heading out the doors, pulling on gloves against the cold, snuggling up woolen scarves. Clerks and tellers moved around one another with precision. Everyone appeared to know what was going on, but they were totally unaware of George and his purpose. Of course. So much the better.

He lifted his chin and stretched his neck, fiddling with the knot on his tie. Ambling over to the standup desk, he yanked a slip of paper from a pigeonhole. He had no idea what it was, didn't even look at it.

With a surreptitious glance around, he picked up one of the pens on a chain. Holding it poised over the paper, he continued to case the area. There were a couple of security guards, one standing by the door he'd come through, the other chatting with a teller at the end of the long counter. Could he do this? Could he pull it off?

He looked to the other side of the lobby, across from the tellers' windows. Various clerical persons sat busily pecking away at computer keyboards or other machines he couldn't identify. So much money was represented here. His insides quaked.

Taking a deep breath, he quickly scribbled something on the back of the form he'd pulled from its cubbyhole. He reviewed it for a long moment. Laying the pen down with a slow deliberate motion, he straightened resolutely, calling his pride into play. This had to be done.

He squinted toward the clerks' area, away from the tellers. His attention went to a desk where sat an attractive woman with lustrous dark hair. He'd noticed that until this very moment she'd been busy helping a customer, an older man with thick white hair. The man shook her hand and walked away with a satisfied look on his face.

George had watched her polite yet friendly demeanor as she patiently answered questions, pointed her pen toward information on forms. She was good, all right.

No other customer now sat down beside her desk so he strode over and seated himself in the upholstered straight-back chair. He felt perspiration pop out all over his body as he gazed at her with both fear and steely determination.

She glanced up, a professional smile appearing on her glossy lips for just a second before she said in alarm, "George, what's wrong? Why are you here?"

George gulped, his resolve nearly wiped out by her question, her kind voice. He crumpled the slip of paper in his hand and slipped it into his coat pocket. He'd have to say this aloud, not just hand over an impersonal note. Besides, it was all spotted and smeared from his sweaty hand.

He replied in a shaking voice, "I've never done this before. I have to do it now. I can't wait any longer." He stopped for another gulp, then went on, "I hope you won't think too badly of me for this." The woman's eyebrows became questioning arcs as she waited, her eyes steady on George's face.

George's speech erupted in a rush. "Irene, will you go to the New Year's Eve dance with me? I've been practicing my dance steps for months while I got up the nerve to ask you, so please don't say no! I always had to work so I never learned to dance in high school and we never danced the whole time we were dating and then..." His voice trailed off into a nervous quaver. Eyes pleading, he waited.

The smile on Irene's face was genuine this time. "Of course, I'll go with you, George. I'd love to. I suspected something was up, but I never expected this. Just in case, I arranged for your mom to babysit the kids, so we can stay out as late as we want. Going to our first dance after ten years of marriage deserves plenty of time to enjoy."

Her eyes welled as she said in a tender tone, "I love you."

She stood, pulled George's clammy hand until he also stood, and then she embraced him, right there in front of the security people, the other clerks, the tellers, the white-haired man, who had turned around to see who had pushed past him, and oblivious customers, some who weren't quite so oblivious that they didn't grin or smile at such a display of affection in this staid old bank.





Wounded Woman



"A woman will endure many wounds in her lifetime, but the betrayal of a friend is one of the most difficult to overcome."

— Tina Samples

Loss of Innocence

Katherine Kasza – Taos, NM

My neighbor's kitten, a precious creature, was carefree, happy, and had a twinkle in her eye. I affectionately named her Sunshine. She ran across the street to greet me whenever I pulled my car into the driveway. Her personality made her irresistible even to a non-cat-lover such as me.

One time my husband carried her into the bedroom to wish me good morning. I stroked her head and told her she was a rascal; she purred contentedly. Several days later, I stepped out the front door and called to her; she looked at me but didn't come. I walked toward her and she backed away. I knelt down and held out my hand and she wouldn't move. What had happened? Why this strange behavior?

As she turned to walk away, I noticed a huge gash on her right side, which had been sutured. Something or someone had hurt her. Later, I learned that she had been attacked by another cat. Her physical wound had been repaired; her psychological damage was permanent. Never again would she be the innocent and trusting kitten she had once been.

My heart broke as I witnessed the change in her behavior. I wondered, when did this first happen to me, the feeling of fear and lack of trust? The memory returned—I was five years old, the summer before entering first grade. It was a beautiful day and I was playing in my backyard.

I walked to the edge of the lawn and looked down the alley. It was so inviting. I could see the backs of houses, trashcans, and white picket fences. Even though my parents had told me to never go there on my own, I decided Mom and Dad would never know if I skipped to the corner and came straight back home.

I started on my adventure, my make-believe world adding to the excitement. With my head in the clouds, I headed toward the corner. In a flash, a hand grabbed me from behind, lifted me off the ground, while the second hand covered my mouth. The powerful hands shoved me between two buildings; my heart pounded so hard it hurt. The fear was so overpowering that in seconds everything went black. Did I faint? I don't know. The next thing I remember is a voice. I was facing my attacker. I felt the heat radiating from his body. It wasn't a man but a large boy. As he released his grip, he said if I ever told anyone, he would find and hurt me. He pushed me back into the alley and I ran as fast as I could to the safety of my home.

It wasn't until many years later that I shared this story. I have

tried to recollect what happened between the time I was grabbed and the time he let me go but it will not surface. Maybe that's a good thing.

The impact of that day shaped my life in more ways than one could possibly imagine. I learned the world was not a safe place to be. The carefree child within me began to look at the world through filters, ever watchful for dangers that may or may not exist.

Then and there, I decided obedience to my parents—and anyone who I was told had my best interest at stake—was paramount to my being safe. But, of course, in coming to that conclusion, I set myself up for a multitude of hard lessons. Blind obedience brings its own set of psychological problems.

It's been years since Sunshine was injured. I've regained her trust and she knows my home is a safe haven to visit to receive TLC and, of course, her favorite treat.

During one fateful encounter Sunshine and I lost the sparkle of innocence that once gleamed in our eyes. Yet, we survived. Over the years we learned there are special people who will always love us and can be trusted. We lost our innocence, but not our ability to experience joy.



I Should Have Raised My Hand

Stacy Curtis – Spring, TX

At age 7 I knew the answer to Teacher's question, but I didn't raise my hand. I had been taught by my parents to be polite and that showing off to others was a prideful sin. I had also been taught by experience that other kids got mean if they wanted to answer the question and you did instead. So I let them raise their hands and answer the question in their sinful way. Then they would play with me.

At age 18 I wanted to go to med school to become a doctor, but I didn't raise my hand. "You should be a secretary and learn dictation," said my soon-to-be. "OK," I chimed. I had been taught that good little wives did what their husbands told them, and I so wanted to be good. Then he would marry me.

At age 23 I wanted to go to college and get a degree, and I tried to raise my hand. But he raised his, and put a hole through the door.

At age 25 I thought I should raise my hand and say, "It's either her or me!" when I found out, but I didn't. After all, it's impolite to make a big deal about it; forgive and forget is the right thing to do. Then he would stay with me.

At age 29 I knew I should raise my hand and say, "It's either her or me!" but I didn't. It's in the male DNA, they can't help themselves, and I wouldn't want to cause embarrassment for the families, would I? I was the better person for not putting up a fight and just putting the marriage behind me.

At age 31 I wanted to raise my hand to point out that quitting your job and moving in with me was quite more than I expected for a 2-month relationship, but I didn't. That wasn't hip or cool, and if I had, he may have left and I would be alone again.

At age 34 I tried to raise my hand and prevent the big house purchase, but I didn't. His ego would be damaged if I were to point out that he couldn't keep a job. Then he would be insulted and leave.

At age 35 and 36 and 37 and 38 and 39 and 40 and 41 I should have raised my hand to say, "That's no way to treat our child!" and "That's no way to treat me!" but I didn't. I didn't have it as bad as some, and causing a stir would be, well, selfish of me. Selfishness is a sin, of course.

At age 42 I finally raised my hand and my head and said, "This has to stop!" and I tried to make him go away. But he wouldn't, and New York courts said they didn't have any proof that I had raised my hand before. So, though I raised my hand and waved and waved, it was in farewell to safety, security, and sanity. I knew I shouldn't have raised my hand.

Car Tools Boxes

Merimée Moffitt – Albuquerque, NM

Car

It's the car sitting in our driveway. The trunk weighed down with extra parts like a lowrider. It's unlocked, and the interior, black leather, has some kind of burly wood details on armrests, the console, and a sexy, creamy-rich smell. I torment myself about having it junked. Yesterday, put my finger in the empty keyhole. Tinted windows make it dark inside. The presidential model Beamer, bulletproof windows. His car. Up on blocks, his fancy hubs and tires were stolen. He cried. Never touched the car again or said a real goodbye. The engine runs; I witnessed the purr. His extra dough was not enough for the trannie. He's gone. Down the rabbit hole filled like those empty mine shafts. Toxic grief: drowning in it, I snap awake. Anger is better. I can pull anger together like silly putty, and apart, make blue weapons or dollhouse furniture, but the grief is liquid and way bigger than me or him or his kids. I have given him six days, as long as it took God to make the world. Six days to get the damned heap out of my driveway. It's broken, he's broken, everyone is broken.

Tools

Arranged like jewels heaped in little steel drawers, tidy cases: needle noses, cutters and claws, grips and wrenches, heavy metal. The sign says, "Hands off! This property protected by angels." I am his angel but I'm not. I carried, set-straight, cleaned, fed, you know, but I can't find a damn angel today. Up to you, the last thing the angels said. All up to you. But writing this reminds me, they're in me. My eyes and hair, everything, my clothes, shopping lists, the soups and salads. Why do I forget and expect them in front of me like jinns, awaiting my wish. Their feathers, long, black, powerful wings, even they are inside me, so old school. I keep thinking I want drugs, too, but I've tried everything. I climb in, cozy up for the long haul, the ride out of this particular hell, opposite the rabbit hole, a mirrored image high above it all, a carnival juggernaut and it's just me, being me.

Boxes

His stuff inside, what's left of his stuff, lines the walls of my too-big home. The home my other kids arrive to: visit, sleep, work, play foursquare, shoot baskets, Frisbee in the street, night Frisbee, hot tub soak, club, eat out, catch quick rides to the airport. "Bye Mom, I love you," a sweet memory. 'Cept for him. He is boxes along the wall we ignore. Bathroom stuff, belts, hats, hardhat, photos. Maybe I'll unpack as if box-cutting my veins. Oh, sad to let him go like pulling the plug—cut the cord for God's sake. My parents never kept a thing of mine, not even me. All new territory this holding on tight, tight, tight like the third woman on a whirligig. Centrifugal, no, I won't, I shan't.



The Woman Without A Nose

Lily Iona MacKenzie – Richmond, CA

Each night, before the woman fell asleep, she took off her nose and gently placed it in a tiny cradle, lined with white satin, that she kept on her nightstand. As she drifted off to sleep, she rocked the cradle, crooning under her breath, "Hush, little baby, don't you cry. Mama's gonna sing you a lullaby..."

Her husband, who shared the same bed, never noticed this nightly ritual. He crashed before she did, leaving her alone in the midnight hour to entertain herself. It wasn't that he didn't wonder about his wife and her occasional weird behavior. Many times he had returned from work to find her cutting out paper dolls and enacting scripts for them. Or hanging by her feet from a trapeze she'd hung in the basement, certain that it would improve her thinking if blood rushed to her head for extended periods each day. Or planting shoes in the garden that she'd picked up at yard sales, wanting to see if they would reproduce.

Since he didn't have the language to explain what she was doing, he decided to ignore the inexplicable. He saw no need to change his conduct now. Besides, who would notice? God? Not likely. Not likely at all. Really. Who cared? If someone had told him she could detach her nose, he would have laughed at the idea. It was too ludicrous. An integral part of human anatomy, noses weren't removable like false teeth. They were not to be tampered with.

This showed how little he understood his wife. Tampering was her second name, her first one being Tamara, a good Russian name after her great-great-grandmother.

And what of the nose? How on earth could Tamara spend the long hours of the night without it? On men, it often evokes the penis. Some insist the size of a man's nose shows how well (or unwell) he is endowed. A silly idea. But how could such an understanding be applied to women? They don't have cocks. They don't even have hens.

Besides helping us breathe, not an unimportant function, a nose can be a useful prop for our glasses. Tamara had no trouble reading without it, so this didn't pose a problem. The nose also allows us to smell mellifluous odors, no small thing. But what odors might one want to sniff in the night? It could only be a distraction.

A distraction from what? If Tamara were speaking here, she would say, "From sleeping and dreaming."

You would likely reply, "How so?"

And then she would be off on a lengthy treatise of how the schnozzle robs dreams of their power to be the night's noses. Not unlike an elephant's trunk, dreams sniff out possibilities, search around corners, smell what's coming. Devoted to her nightly visitors, these internal movies she participates in, she doesn't want to prevent them from fulfilling their function at full throttle.

You still may be puzzled by her concern with dreams, residue from the previous day. But for Tamara, they weren't residue. If anything, they were messages from another place, source unknown, capable of using dribs and drabs of our daily lives to reconstitute and create messages. Many messages. It seems hokey,

but they were food for her soul.

As for why she treated her nose like a baby, putting it to sleep in a specially made cradle, it was a dependent. If she treated it as an infant, it would never grow up and leave her. She could always count on it to be there in the morning because, after all, it needed Tamara for its survival. But the real truth is that Tamara had never conceived a child, so not only did the nose fulfill this lack, but it also didn't threaten her by growing up and leaving. It was there to stay, a child forever.

Is there a moral to this story? Don't cut off your nose to spite your face or you might end up like Tamara, awash in multiple realities, a tightrope walker between the various worlds.

An Interesting Life

Susan Keizer – Davis, CA

He had written that she would have an interesting life after he was gone, one that would be rich and rewarding. Was that wishful thinking on his part to ease his guilt at leaving her? Or was it perhaps merely a wish for something he would no longer be able to give her, or enjoy with her? She wanted to believe it was because he wanted her to be attracted to something that would provoke her, play on her desire for something that would pique her curiosity enough to follow its call. When someone says this, immediately one imagines that what defines interesting is something out of the ordinary, a lightning bolt of some outer world phenomenon. Perhaps a new location, perhaps a new man, who of course would be true and pure and, certainly, a bit provocative. I doubt that is what he meant, although, being a man of passion, it's possible he could wish it upon her as he would wish it upon himself. But the fact is, since he died, her life has had detours unexpected, passion that has led to disappointment. The steady rod has been that thread that ties them together and brings her back to ground.

Anyone looking in would declare how lucky she is. And indeed that is true. One can count on their fingers: a nice house, a lovely garden, two children with jobs and benefits, three grandchildren and their small dog, who in spite of the stains on the rug, is an accepted member of this family. Yet she knows that she is a bit of a swan, not in beauty nor stature, but in a lifelong commitment to her mate.

It is not possible, however, to ignore the innate independence that always caused her no end of conflict with herself. To her, after his death, it represented a void, no sense whatsoever of a future. But slowly, and not as something she particularly noticed as such, she became part of a group of women who surrounded her with a sweet and strong, unselfconscious support. She had never looked towards women as a bulwark. She and he were the sum total of their lives. It never occurred to her to look for women for any kind of sustenance. She still isn't sure, doesn't reach out in a way she imagines women have done. But perhaps that is just what one reads in books. Perhaps it is much more nuanced than that. What she does know is that these women friends now provide a kind of true but subtle caring that she has found to be sustaining, and which she realizes has become the underpinnings that support her. These women weave in and out of her daily life, never presuming, always casually there. Their very essence and truthfulness are the glue that keeps this structure intact. She does have an interesting life, one that is rich and rewarding, but not in any way that she had imagined.

Illuminate

Annabelle Bailey – Southbury, CT

to him

I sense that the answer is lurking in some
dark corner of my consciousness
Lighten my load you always have but you
can't this time
Loosely linked we prop each other up trying
to ignore the pervasive sadness lapping at our everyday heels

to her

Under my heart I carried you carry you
Underneath all the hurt you carry I carry hiding behind fancy phrases
lengthening silence Is it there?
Make me understand let us hear each other's
truth
Match me in the mending
I can't heal myself the wound is deep raw
Note the correct answer circle the right
response
Cross off the mistake not me
End this now Shine some light

Dream House

Barbara Smythe – La Verne, CA

I was so startled by the sight of it, I nearly lost control of the car. Up until that moment, I had been in a bit of a trance, enjoying my drive. Traffic was light, the road familiar. The day was ordinary by Southern California standards—warm and sunny with a caressing breeze, lazy summer roses and brilliant bougainvillea blooms vying for attention amid the variegated greens and browns of summer foliage—a pleasant blending of tropics and desert.

In my dream-like trance, I turned, without thought, off the familiar boulevard and started the ascent leading to the address I had been given. It was at that moment I was jarred from my reverie. Standing there on the next corner, strong and solid, was an apparition from another time, another place, a place that did not exist. It did not exist, and yet, there it stood. It was the house from a dream I had over thirty years ago!

I couldn't believe my eyes. But there it was, as though it had been plucked from the dark forest of my life-altering vintage vision and plopped on this street corner, in the bright sunlight, on this ordinary day, thirty years later. And it looked spectacular, in spite of its suburban surroundings and age. It seemed as indestructible as I had remembered it, with its gray exterior of smooth, timeworn river stones and expansive windows framed in white casings. There was an unmistakable substance and character to this house. There was no need for a welcome mat; its very existence invited you in without condition. It was friendly and lasting: a survivor. I felt a great flood of affirmation and contentment wash over me, and I knew I was smiling. What an extraordinary gift from the Universe!

I had never forgotten the dream from those troubled times. It was a turning point for me, a vision of what could be, if I only had the courage to take the right path. At the time, my marriage of twenty years was

in severe trouble. Our relationship had been disintegrating into disappointment and disrespect for several years. There were terrible verbal attacks, alcohol abuse, unfaithfulness—every covenant we had made to each other had been broken by one or the other of us. We had made wounds that would never heal. I knew I had to either accept things the way they were and stop the fighting or end the marriage. And yet, I just couldn't make a commitment one way or the other. I was paralyzed by fears of the consequences of either decision. And then, I had the dream.

My husband and I were on a bus, apparently tour guides for the older adults on board. Suddenly the bus came to a complete stop, broken down in the middle of nowhere. The people started getting off the bus. Outside, the weather was freezing. At least a foot of snow was on the ground, wind blowing, the sky gray with the promise of more snow. There was no sign of shelter. My husband was directing the disembarked passengers to follow a snow-covered path into the frozen wilderness. I was very afraid he was leading us to our death. I looked around, and to my right the sun was shining brightly on the sparkling snow, revealing a clean pine-needled path leading to a clearing in the trees where a peaceful green meadow could be seen. I looked back to my left where all was gray and cold. My husband was urging the struggling elderly to keep on going in the snow toward the hopeless emptiness. I called to them, frantically trying to show them the sunny path, but they could only hear the winter wind. I turned away from my foolish husband and them, followed the sunny path and ventured into the clearing surrounded by tall, sweetly scented pine trees. And there it stood. The house. My house.

Awake, I looked up the symbolism and meaning of dreams. Journeys—represent the journey through life and provide an image of the individual's progress. A bus ride—trying to get along like everyone else. (That obviously wasn't working!) The engine supposedly represents the sexual impulse. (That had ended months before!) Snow—the emotionally cold, frigid. (Felt like death to me.) Sun—the light of consciousness, intellect, active intelligence. (Ah, life!) Houses were interpreted as extensions of ourselves, and most images say something about our lives and relationships. (I loved the strength of that house!) And the trees? Trees are symbols of spiritual growth and life. For me, they were also symbols of friends who would be there to support and encourage me. And that is the point, after all, what the dream meant to me.

I awakened with the courage to make a decision. The dream had clarified my thinking. For me, it was clearly a dream of life or death. If I stayed with my husband, the essence of me, the possibility of me, would die. If I left and took another path, I would live. And so, I chose to go.

And here, thirty years later, was my dream house, standing on a street corner in Southern California, the sun still shining on her. She was sturdy and strong, surrounded by friendly trees, surviving the encroachment of cookie-cutter suburbia. I smiled in recognition as I drove by, and heard myself whispering to her, "Me, too, old friend. Me, too!"

17.4 Seconds

Enid Cokinos – Carmel, IN

It happened in a matter of seconds.

So many things happen in mere moments, both life-altering events and everyday occurrences, yet in our minds we believe they must take longer. A man proposes to a woman and she accepts. A baby enters the world, takes a breath, and lets out its first strong cry. A professional diver gracefully leaps from the cliffs of La Quebrada in Acapulco and lands in the sea below.

If someone had asked me, even an hour before the crash, "How long does it take for a car to skid on a patch of black ice, collide with an oncoming car, roll over and over and over into a ravine, and come to rest in a crumpled heap at an unnatural angle against a giant oak tree?" I would have confidently proclaimed, "A full minute, at least."

In fact, it was 17.4 seconds.

The police directed traffic, guiding the few cars and trucks on the road at that hour into a single lane. Emergency personnel—paramedics, firefighters, and wreckers—needed space for their large vehicles, a buffer to ensure everyone's safety, and room to work unimpeded.

No one asked me what had happened. I suppose it was evident.

The other car, the one I had hit, was nowhere in sight. It must be on the other side of the road. I heard more sirens approaching, the shrill sounds echoing in the frosty morning air. I knew I should go over, make sure the young family was being cared for, but I was mesmerized by the scene unfolding before me.

Firefighters in full gear scrambled around my car as they frantically calculated the best method of extraction. The passenger side had become lodged against the tree. The driver's-side door was too badly damaged to open. They were a well-choreographed group, these highly trained men and women. They had done this many times before. I wanted to enter the fray, assure them everything would be fine, but they had a job to do. Who was I to claim otherwise?

One of the First Responders used a hydraulic device with pinchers at the end to cut away the roof, snapping metal in two like it was kindling wood. The other firefighters huddled around maneuvering pieces of the car until the roof gave way. Two of them wrenched open the driver's side door, metal creaking and grinding as they stretched the hinges beyond capacity, practically pulling the door off the car. I cheered at their success.

The first firefighter on the scene, the tallest one with dark hair and light blue eyes, turned and shouted to the paramedics; his voice carried up the hill on the wild, cold wind. The paramedics scrambled down the embankment with a stretcher in tow, unable to roll it because of the snow blanketing the ground.

The temperature had dropped to 25 degrees during the night. I had left the house in a hurry, my coat and gloves never entering my thoughts. I should have been shivering as I stood in the snow, yet no one approached me to see if I was okay; no one offered a blanket.

Then, I remembered.

He returned to the kitchen after taking a private phone call in our bedroom.

"Again? Really?" I said, knowing his deception before he spoke.

His supervisor had called. He needed to go in to work.

"Please don't lie. Just tell me the truth for once," I begged.

I knew the signs but wanted him to confess his sins, to come clean about this latest tryst. I couldn't take it anymore. Why didn't I just leave? There was nothing keeping me here. No children. No close family. Just leave.

Openly sobbing, I ran from our house, grabbing my car keys, but neglecting my parka, gloves, and purse by the back door.

I was driving too fast, trying to escape the emotional pain that had surrounded me for the last five years. His latest affair was the tipping point of my sanity. The patches of black ice on the road were invisible in the pre-dawn hours.

Without a seatbelt, the initial impact threw me into the windshield. Then I bounced around inside the car like a rag doll as it rolled over and over. My body ended up sprawled across the passenger seat. One of the paramedics climbed into the car to lift me up. Taking care to avoid the jagged metal, they worked as a team to gently remove my body. My favorite blue sweater was covered in blood. My short auburn hair was matted and sticky.

Why hadn't I been wearing a seatbelt? I always wore my seatbelt. It was as though I was watching a movie in which I had been cast in the starring role without my consent.

The firefighters stood back, their faces betraying their desire to remain professional and detached, as the paramedics placed my body on the stretcher. They checked for a pulse, for breathing. They looked up and shook their heads.

It was Sunday. The road should have been clear of other cars. Why had that family been on the road, at that place, at that moment? It should have just been me. I did not mean to hurt that young couple or take their children from them. I would not be able to tell them how sorry I was to have altered their life plans, forcing them, as parents, into the dark void of loss.

My pain ended in 17.4 seconds. Theirs had just begun.



Overcoming

"No more crying. Tears only cause destructive floods. When you are sad, you build a boat."

— Katherine Russell, Without Shame

What Are the Odds?

Jeanne Guy – Austin, TX

My husband's recent prostate cancer diagnosis hit us hard. Doctors recommended surgery, which caused us pause and created a second opinion debate, especially since MD Anderson Cancer Center was a mere three hours from our Austin home.

Eleven days after his diagnosis, and pre-MDACC contact, Robert suffered a Sunday morning motorcycle accident. The country road curved. His bike did not. Per the two friends riding with him, he and the motorcycle skidded and slid sideways, past a tree, into a field, throwing him face down into the dry ground and tearing up his left side. Results: no broken bones but a nasty concussion, short-term memory loss, and a badly bruised body. As an experienced cyclist, his ego also suffered a bruise or two.

The trauma team doctor okayed our flying to Seattle the following weekend for a pre-planned ten-day trip, meant for some much-needed R&R on Whidbey Island. With the accident thrown into the mix, it increased the need for the vacation but hindered preparation. Robert's pain level worsened and doctor appointments filled up the week. Though he regained pre-accident memory, he remained fuzzyheaded and fatigued.

We also met with our attorney that week regarding federal law changes affecting our assets. Based on Robert's condition, I probably should have canceled the session but it proved to be an unexpected gift. Because of her husband's 2012 bout with prostate cancer, our attorney knew just which MD Anderson doctor we should call.

With that information in hand, a dear friend who had been both an attorney and a patient at MDACC took it upon herself to contact the doctor, and we were now scheduled to see him the end of the month.

"Jeanne, come look at this get-well card." Robert held a card displaying a painting that so strongly resembled the location of the motorcycle accident, I gasped. Google Earth had allowed us to see the site, and the only difference was the painting's small spread of bluebonnets close to the tree in an otherwise empty field. The information on the back of the card? The artist was a 15-year-old Iranian girl whose work was part of an MD Anderson children's art project.

* * *

In our state of exhaustion, how we got packed and ready by the time the shuttle arrived remains a mystery to me. Gayla appeared out of the blue—a blue shuttle van, that is—at 6:30 a.m. I looked into her face as we shook hands and felt like I knew her.

She reminded me visually of a loving "voice" in my head. We all have a number of voices in our heads (Priscilla Perfection, Sally Slacker, Dutiful Dan...you get the idea) that can lead us astray, but if we're lucky, we can tune into a voice of compassion that loves and protects us. Mine is Big Mama Rita: a bold, full-bodied woman with a loud mouth, and very funny. Very funny.

Gayla was my Rita in the flesh. She engaged us with her stories of growing up in Seattle before moving to Austin. A college graduate, she had given up a corporate role ("I was tired of being in a cube") and opted for the less stressful job of shuttle van driver to pursue an acting career. "What's the point if I don't do what I know is my gift?" My workaholic husband's furrowed brow indicated he was absorbing her wisdom, even in his current cotton-headed condition. At the airport curb, I asked Gayla if I could take her picture and explained about her being "my Rita." Her hearty laugh confirmed my assessment. She graced us with a Rita pose before hugging us goodbye.

After we had checked our bags and were heading to the new-to-us security location, we were startled to see our friend, Tom, walk into the terminal. He had driven from Georgetown, an hour away, in hopes of seeing us off. His gesture of love and concern overwhelmed us; I couldn't stop smiling. When he said his goodbyes and left, Robert ran outside and called to him. I watched as they met at the curb and hugged one more time.

And then...there was no one in line at TSA Pre-check.

And then...pre-boarding was granted because of Mr. Motorcycle's bruised condition.

And then, although I'd hoped to keep the seat next to me free so we could spread out, a silver-haired woman asked if it was available. I couldn't refuse her smile. Earline, slender and casually dressed, gracefully assumed her seat. She waited a bit, engaged us in conversation and, during the next 15 minutes, listened intently to Robert's current challenges with cancer and the aftermath of the accident. She offered a bit of advice based on—who knew?—her nursing, training, teaching, rehab, and research background. "I bought this book today, and I think it's meant for you," she said, placing it in Robert's hands. A tree in an open field graced the cover of a book on how to get through difficult times.

Once we reached Seattle, the magic continued. At a very crowded baggage claim carousel, I spied our luggage and eased through the maze of people to secure our bags. The car rental shuttle bus appeared unbidden; there was no line at the rental counter; and we drove to the ferry and boarded with no wait.

Arriving at our destination, a beautiful home on Whidbey newly purchased by our good friends, we found hugs, wine, and rest awaiting us.

We were experiencing post-traumatic growth. We'd been broken open and now were being cared for and held. The Universe made it clear, whispering with every encounter. Pay attention. Be part of this. Be open to the odds.

We felt grateful and connected. Why, we might even learn to live well, regardless of our challenges.

After all, I mean, what are the odds?

The Little Life

Dianne Petro – Phoenix, AZ

Before "The Event" we lived the Big Life as most people do. It had room for the past with all its remaining grudges, pains, and joys. It had room for the future, full of mystery, hope, and planning. Then, in the most terrible 5 minutes of our 45 years together, one of us went from a healthy, vibrant man to a helpless, gasping victim of what cardiologists term a "heart event." I watched my husband barely able to prop himself against our couch as I spoke to the 911 operator. I was ice calm and completely comprehending all that was happening to us, but at the same time, in utter horror. I knew I was watching my dearest friend and the love of my life dying on our living room floor.

The paramedics crashed through our door and in seconds they were doing all that they could and he was on his way to the hospital, sirens screaming. I followed, brought by a kind fireman, who waited for the seconds it took to close our house. I could only think about who would return to this house we'd shared for over 35 years.

In the days that followed, together most joyously, we learned the beginnings of the Little Life. Through all the terrors of the CCU, we learned the pleasure of just being in the same room, with our whole life with us in that small, beeping space. Then the progress of being able to joke and smile and share tiny events of life – a meal, a nurse with a happy attitude, a visit from dear ones. And so we go on, through coming home together to looking at one thankful day at a time. The Little Life will be enough, more than enough, forever on. So much that seemed of great consequence has fallen utterly away. So much that really is of great importance has filled our lives, our thanks-filled Little Lives.

This Leave-Taking

Sally Nielsen – Jacksonville, FL

The last two tomatoes have shrunk to squishiness. Dropped brown leaves from my tall ash tree fold into themselves and move into the grandkids' deflated plastic swimming pool. The tree is going bare; the garden is empty. September is the downsizing month.

Several of my friends have shed their homes and moved into smaller ones, stripping their lives down to the barest house-bone. One moved from a split-level into a smaller house on her new husband's large wooded lot; another built a new house with a forest preserve behind it. Another moved into a cabin in the woods. One moved into the home of a poor Peruvian Andes family now in Guatemala, where she sleeps inside a sleeping bag on a pallet. The leave-takings were tender and sad. But the talk was all about the need for moving on.

One friend desired an ultimate downsizing. She wanted to sell everything, move into one of those one-room homes with only what's needed: a tiny table, tiny bed, and tiny toilet, tucked into tiny corners. She wants no knickknacks, no neighbors, no rules. She wants a tiny life.

I wasn't moving anywhere, wasn't desiring to downsize so drastically, but her comments intrigued. So I started looking at YouTube videos of tiny houses built by people who live off-grid. Using the sun, they heat with solar panels attached to their house. They bucket water into the house from an attached cistern. Everything attached to the house is essential.

Life inside a tiny house reminds me of a turtle's life. Everything in the turtle's shell is essential and is attached to the turtle itself. There is no room for anything else. When tiny house dwellers video their spaces, their friendly selfies gaze from inside their shells, two big turtle eyes beam outward, like the headlights of a tiny car.

Stones

Nancilynn Saylor – Austin, TX

There are some I've kept for lifetimes.
Iron pyrite: fool's gold plucked from a river
in Alaska as a child. It reminds me that
wealth, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

Stacks of rocks from Sedona remind me
what I've lived and loved through, and
survived to become stronger.

Petrified wood stones, from my lover's mother's house,
when she was my mother-in-law...
He was my ex-husband then, and now my late husband's
brother.

That stone reminds me true love is endless, and
complicated is this world I created for myself.

A heart-shaped stone reminds me never to give up
on love.

A solitary chip of stone from the collapsed Berlin Wall:
a cold, hard reminder what hatred will do.

A handful of small white stones from a prison yard,
picked up when visiting my son over many long months—
these stones a reminder of all the other stones.

There is a smooth rock with a hole worn through in the
center and worn sometimes on a leather cord around my
neck...

picked up from a bluff overlooking the beauty of the Texas
hill country, the beauty of Lake Travis, and the beauty
of a place named Gracy Cove.

This stone reminds me that hearts will heal—
even when you think the pain
will last forever.

What does a turtle do
when a part of itself is
invaded or fails? Does it
shed and replace it, like a
snake? Or does it downsize
and do without, or die? Does
it have regret? Three weeks
ago, I began to think like a
turtle might think.

Doctors had discovered
three tiny lumps in my left
breast. Tiny cancerous self-
invaders. I climbed into my
body, eyes first, and watched
it for a while, but I could
not see them or feel them.
In my MRI breast selfie,
the invaders appear to be
tiny winks inside a tangle of
tissues. I wanted to cut them
out. But they have taken up
too much room and are a
type that multiplies.

I am not a turtle. I can
downsize myself. I will be
shedding two breasts, and
replacing them with other
parts of my body. I'm not a
turtle; I can separate from
some parts of my body, leave
them behind. I caress my
breasts, those old friends,
and tell them I will be leaving
them in September, moving
into a new body, a new life.
It is the most intimate and
tender of leave-takings.



AGING



“Women may be the one group that grows more radical with age.”

— Gloria Steinem

The House

Jo Virgil – Austin, TX

From the dark black asphalt of the newly built road, the farmhouse was barely visible. Even from the sagging cedar and barbed wire gate, a stone's throw from the concrete foundation, it was hard to tell whether the jumble of weathered wood had ever been anything recognizable. But this wonderfully crisp fall day seemed to invite curiosity, so I slipped through the drooping barbed wire and zigzagged my way through the thigh-high grasses and pecan-sized burrs toward a stolen glimpse of someone's past.

I truly was not prepared for the emotional impact of that innocent exploration. I came to feel that I was prying into a stranger's intimate history, peeking at goodnight hugs and eavesdropping on whispered secrets.

The roof of the tiny frame house had caved in almost completely, like a tired old dog collapsed on the ground. Only over the kitchen area was the roof partly intact, but there, one entire wall was gone, its graying boards scattered and piled over what must have once been the side yard, leaving the western sides of two rooms exposed like a giant dollhouse. A steel sink with crudely handmade cabinets on each side was all that identified the kitchen. No furniture, no ornaments, no abandoned boxes of treasures. But still, the house told tales.

The kitchen was tiny, maybe six feet by eight feet. The design on the wallpaper had long since weathered away and the paint was cracked and peeled. Rows and rows of shelves in the pantry must have once held a bounty of canned goods for the family, maybe homemade in Mason jars. Just behind the kitchen was a small room with one window looking out onto an old oak tree in the yard. The colors of its wallpaper were gone, but the boots-and-cowboy-hat motif spoke volumes. A little boy? Maybe two, sharing the tiny bedroom and learning how to get along?

On the south side of the house, a small square of concrete porch stretched out from the doorjamb, welcoming long-ago visitors into the living room, now just a jumble of rotten floorboards and debris. Around the side of the house and towards the back stood what was left of the windmill, its round head of silent blades sadly drooping from the top of the frame, looking like a tired old cowboy. A corral remained mostly intact in the back yard, empty now except for tall weeds and five-foot saplings. Between the corral and the house was the entrance to a storm cellar, doors missing, exposing nothing but darkness and windblown debris.

Nature herself had come to reclaim this piece of land, using her mighty forces of wind and water, sun and ice. The transition

was, at the same time, blurringly swift (in geologic terms) and tediously slow (in human terms). I estimated the house to have been built maybe in the 1920s, and probably abandoned with the onslaught of suburban developers in the 1980s.

I could only guess at the more personal history of the home. Had the children grown and left for new homes in different places? Had the parents died, or aged so much that they could no longer care for their home in the country? Had the entire family left in disgust when the rows of tract houses began to block their view of the sunset? Or had a developer offered them more money for their pastureland than they could refuse?

Thirty years ago, this piece of land had been far out in the country, bounded only by country roads and barbed wire, with a clear view of the city skyline twenty miles to the south. On my crisp fall day, the site overlooked two schools and a third under construction, a church, a four-lane divided road, and a sea of brown asphalt shingles atop brick homes.

We call it progress, but doesn't it make you wonder?

My Pillboxes

Abby November – San Diego, CA

Every week I fill them
for AM & PM.
Weeks fly like pages in a diary.

So, every two weeks I refill them
for AM & PM.
But in two weeks, they disperse, like sand grains in a funnel.

So, now, every month I refill them
for AM & PM.
Yet these too vanish, almost before I close the lid.

Can I ever fill them just so
the world slows enough for me
to breathe and be
between the refilling
for AM & PM

and inhale the moment?

The Test of Wisdom

Mary Lee Fulkerson – Reno, NV

When I was six, I dreamed of Wonder Woman,
She of golden crown and star-decked shirt,
Of magic bracelets fending off the bullets,
The heroine who saved the world from hurt.

So, to practice my flying, I climbed to the top of the garage roof and,
opening my mother's umbrella, I jumped. Ouch!
I was never going to be Wonder Woman.

At ten, I aimed to join the Women's Army.
March with all the other WACs and shout.
Rifle at the ready on our shoulders,
Hup! Hoo! Hee! Hoh! We'd yell out.

And then the war ended and the WACs all became secretaries for
the real
soldier guys.
I was never going to be a WAC.

At twelve, I set my stars for Lois Lane,
Ace Reporter, friend to Superman.
She wrote for Perry White hard-driving stories,
A shapely, strong-willed writer with élan.

Dreams of Lois' exploits continued into college. And then a funny
thing happened:
I fell in love, married, and began a far different life.
So much for the Ace Reporter.

Now, at the ripe old age of eighty,
I look back at what I've gained.
It's been a life of love and laughter,
Sprinkled with a touch of pain.

I never saved the world from hurt, but when I kissed an owwie
well, my child
thought I was
Wonder Woman.

Didn't march in uniform, but married a great soldier.
Didn't become an Ace Reporter, but I wrote plenty of school
excuses,
meeting minutes, letters to the editor, and e-mails to grandchildren.
And "shapely" left me about 45 years ago.

My vision of a fearless, strong-willed hero,
Who knows the absolute of right and wrong,
Has ripened to a new, broad-minded wisdom,
Where blame and pride and judgment don't belong.

The trouble is, when you are old and wiser,
And have some insight how events will fall,
The younger folk don't want to hear your blather,
And that's the greatest wisdom test of all.



Endings



*"What the trees can do handsomely-greening and flowering,
fading and then the falling of leaves-human beings cannot do
with dignity, let alone without pain."*

— Martha Gellhorn

The Summons

Diane Stanton – Warrenton, VA

The dim glow of the sun rising fills the room—early
Saturday morning silence broken by the phone
singing a special tone we set for family.

We look at each other, wondering
which parent, sibling, or child it
might be. It's my mother's voice.
I feel my insides chill—freezing
all motion within and about
me. She says my name—
calmly, there's no hello,
simply, a terse
assertion—

you
better
come.

The Stone

Claire McCabe – Elkton, MD

I wake before the sun,
breathe softly,
so not to disturb
my reverie.

You were here.
We whooshed dandelions into the wind,
released vessels of fireflies.
A veil of light illuminated our childhood.

Like perch we slipped
through diamond lakes, then floated,
suspended between all that had passed
and all that would come.

Images arrayed like photos
seem more than dreams,
a gentle grace, perhaps,
balm for the grieving time.

Day breaks.
I roll over to rise and see it still.
There. In the grey light.
That stone.

The one that in your stead is my companion,
as dark,
as heavy,
as unchanged
as my longing for you.

Trilogy for the Dying

Janice Kvale – Austin, TX

Love at Half Century

Independent, yet together
familiar your scent
your body next to me
comfort in the dark. Hands
that tremble grasp
with certainty, my love.

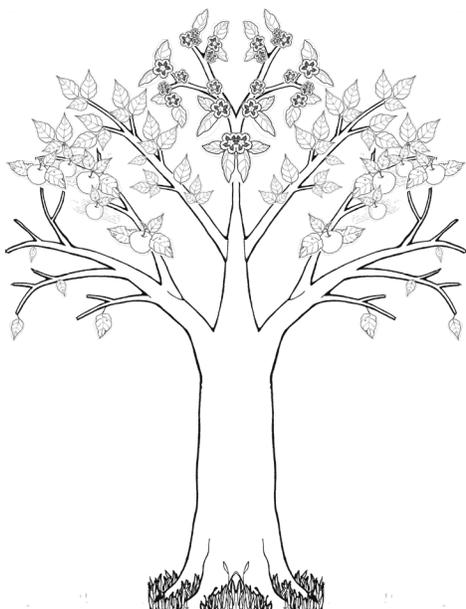
The Vigil

She sits at the bedside, listens,
knows from labored breathing
the hour of passage draws close.
Dim light reflects faces of family,
their waiting almost finished.
She administers morphine,
caresses an arm, holds a hand,
waits. Breathing slows, seconds
pass between breaths.

She bends close to an ear, whispers
You are close now. I will stay with you.
It is all right to go. I love you.

As You Go

Leave the world whatever wisdom
you have learned along the way.
A peaceable parting from those you love
and who love you. Perhaps you will pass
into a celestial cathedral, listening
to the thunderous, triumphant music
of a pipe organ of many ranks
announcing your arrival, welcoming you
to the symphony of stars.



Stories from the Heart VIII

Story Circle Network's
Eighth National Women's Writing Conference
April 15-17, 2016
Wyndham Hotel, Austin, Texas

Stories from the Heart VIII Registration Form

Send this form with your check to:
Conference Registration, Story Circle Network
PO Box 1670, Estes Park, CO 80517-1670
To register online and use your credit card, go to
www.storycircle.org/Conference/fmregister.php

Name _____
Street Address _____
City, State, Zip _____
Email _____ Phone _____
Current Member of Story Circle? yes no

Registration Type	Members-Only Registration (through 12/27/15)	Regular Registration (12/28/15 to 3/11/16) member/non-member	Late Registration (after 3/11/16) member/non-member	Amt Due
<input type="checkbox"/> Full Registration (Fri keynote / Sat / Sun)	\$325	\$365/\$420	\$405/\$460	
Partial Registration (please check all that apply):	<input type="checkbox"/> Friday (Keynote/ dessert reception)	\$35	\$40	\$45
	<input type="checkbox"/> Saturday only (includes lunch)	\$166	\$195/\$220	\$224/\$249
	<input type="checkbox"/> Saturday lunch only	\$35	\$40	**
	<input type="checkbox"/> Sunday only (includes lunch)	\$122	\$130/\$155	\$138/\$163
Friday Pre-Conference Workshop (Not included in full registration: optional, extra charge.)	<input type="checkbox"/> Noon-1:45 pm session	\$30 each	\$40 each	\$50 each
	<input type="checkbox"/> 2-3:45 pm session			
Saturday/Sunday lunch preference: <input type="checkbox"/> chicken <input type="checkbox"/> vegetarian			Total due:	



Story Circle Network Mission

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

Story Circle Network, Inc
PO Box 1670
Estes Park, CO 80517-1670

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Stories from the Heart VIII

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Plan now to join us for a unique and exciting event: the eighth national women's writing conference of Story Circle Network! If you have never been to a conference we know it will be a memorable and worthwhile experience. If you have been to conferences in the past, you will find that this one is a little bit different...and better. Based on your feedback, we have made some changes! For example:

- Presentations will be 60 minutes rather than 90 minutes, which means we are offering four additional sessions; 24 to choose from rather than of 20!
- Two types of presentations will be offered: workshops with writing opportunities and (a new addition) interactive and engaging lecture-style presentations.
- We've expanded the topics to include fiction as well as non-fiction, memoir, personal essays, poetry, drama, dance, music, art and more.
- For the program, we've moved away from "tracks" to "Topic Areas" covering a wider variety of writing and publishing activities. Our topics will include the writing craft, the writing life, publishing, marketing, and writing as a business.

Of course we will repeat our favorite conference features... the Silent Auction, Heart-to-Heart Coaching, presentation of the Sarton Literary Award, Works of Heart Marketplace, Story Wall, Heart-to-Heart Table, and Open Mike Saturday Night! Also NEW this year is the Hot Flash—Flash Fiction Contest.

Don't wait!! Register today at:

<http://www.storycircle.org/Conference/frmregister.php>