

**OSHER LIFELONG LEARNING INSTITUTE**

**AT**

**AUBURN UNIVERSITY  
AUBURN, ALABAMA**

# Writing Our Lives

2024

Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Auburn University  
Auburn, Alabama

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Cover by Leslie Beard

## Writing Our Lives

Except for one term during the Covid pandemic, Writing Our Lives has been offered by the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at Auburn University three terms each year since 2004, taught by the two retired educators who organized the course, Cathy Buckhalt and Terry Ley. Thirty to forty class members gather for ninety minutes each Monday morning to remember, reflect, write, and share their life stories. Class members wrote the stories that appear in this anthology during the last three or four terms.

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# A Poet's Voice

**W**e often find our memories or our motivation by attending to the voices of professional writers, especially when they share their own lives with us, as Ted Kooser does in "Selecting a Reader."

When we write, we usually have an audience in mind. Who will pick up our work, read it, and take it to heart? Perhaps that thought motivated Kooser to write this poem. We can find comfort in his sense of humor.

Kooser, a Nebraska poet, is a former U. S. Poet Laureate and won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2005 for *Delights & Shadows*.

We are glad that you have begun to turn these pages, whether you are wearing a raincoat or not!

## Selecting a Reader

**Ted Kooser**

First, I would have her be beautiful,  
and walking carefully up on my poetry  
at the loneliest moment of an afternoon,  
her hair still damp at the neck  
from washing it. She should be wearing  
a raincoat, an old one, dirty  
from not having money enough for the cleaners.  
She will take out her glasses, and there  
in the bookstore, she will thumb  
over my poems, then put the book back  
up on its shelf. She will say to herself,  
"For that kind of money, I can get  
my raincoat cleaned." And she will.

# The Grandmother I Never Knew

Ken Autrey

My maternal grandmother, Lelah Barrall Harrison, died of scarlet fever on December 8, 1931. She was 47 years old and left behind three children, Lois (16), Harvey Jr. (15), and Vera (13), my mother. My grandfather, Harvey, lived to age 84 and never remarried. As a teenager, I came to know him well when he lived with us in Alabama for a couple of years, and his life is amply documented in snapshots. But I have only a single photograph of my grandmother, perhaps taken on her wedding day in June 1914. It's a formal portrait showing her in a full-length white dress with a somewhat loose bodice and three-quarter-length sleeves. Her hands, extending straight down, loosely grip a single white or yellow rose. She gazes off to her right. With her high cheekbones, delicate nose, dark eyes, and mass of black hair, she could easily be mistaken for my mother at that age.

Sixty-eight years after my grandmother died, Mom pointed out the room on Gates Street in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, where her mother spent her final days. Our visit to that childhood home came the afternoon following my Aunt Lois Housley's funeral in 1999.

Janne and I stopped in Wilkes-Barre to attend the funeral en route to our annual sojourn in the Adirondack Mountains at the Debes family camp. We arrived early at the Dorranceton Methodist Church, where my aunt was laid out in the parlor wearing a light blue dress, a matching purse, glasses, and jewelry. My cousin Barbara had tucked some Kleenex in the purse because her

mom went nowhere without it. Barbara was there with her brother Howard, whom I hadn't seen in maybe 25 years. I'd never met his second wife Mary and daughter Laura. Mom and my sister Janice soon arrived from Baltimore, as did a number of Housley family friends. The most memorable part of the service was the gorgeous piano music played by students my aunt had taught over the years.

Afterward, there was a brief ceremony at Hanover Green Cemetery, at the plot where other family members are buried. After lunch, back at the church, and some time for photos, Mom asked if we'd like to take a drive to see old family locations in the area. Janne, Janice, Barbara, Mom, and I went along. First, we drove to the old Housley place at 12 Cherry Street in Kingston, which our family had visited numerous times. That house had been inundated by the Susquehanna River flood of 1975 in the wake of Hurricane Eloise. My aunt and uncle had stashed a treasure trove of family photos (including many of my grandmother) on shelves in an upstairs closet, assuming the flood water could never reach that high. But in fact, it nearly covered the roof, and the photos were lost.

Then, we crossed the river to Wilkes-Barre to visit 49/51 Gates St., where Mom lived from age six on. The three-story duplex was built around 1924 by my paternal great-grandfather, a contractor. From the street, Mom pointed out the front room where her mother took her last breath.

Next, showing an unerring directional memory, Mom directed us to Meyers High School, which she and her siblings attended, and where Granddad taught math. Then, she showed us Firwood Methodist Church, where she and Dad were married in 1942. She pointed out an area near the church where the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus set up when she was young.

Then we drove to Lee Park, just southwest of Wilkes-Barre, 26 Regina Street, where Mom was born and lived until the family moved into the city. When we arrived at the house, although rain had started up, I insisted that Mom get out so that we could take her photo there. At that point, the owner of the house, Mary Derr Lesho, came onto the front porch and asked if she could help us. I explained that Mom had lived in the house when she was young, so Mary immediately invited us in. Although the stairway had been altered, Mom reported that the house was otherwise much as she remembered it, including the bathroom upstairs with the original old fixtures and the front bedroom where Mom was born in 1918. Mary's family had moved there when she was four years old after Mom's family moved out. She and Mom had gone to the same elementary school. Mom remembered sledding on the street and how Granddad would stop traffic for them. Behind the house is a Jewish cemetery. I recently looked up the house on a real estate site. It looks much as I remember it, still with the original fixtures in the upstairs bathroom and with a sign outside advertising "James Lesho, Lawyer." It is valued at \$145,000.

Finally, our afternoon tour took us to Askam, the adjacent town, where my great-grandfather Harrison lived on Orchard Street.

Mom often recalled how, following her mother's death, Granddad told his three teenagers that they would be OK as long as no one got sick. I imagine this as an expression of anguish over his wife's illness but also the level-headed practicality that characterized his outlook and became a salient feature of Mom's temperament as well. The Harrisons are pretty much all like that—at times to a fault. In fact, Mom took her father's admonition to heart and was seldom sick. Until late in her life, she was under a doctor's care only when giving birth to me and—two years later—my sister. Her attitude was that if you go to doctors, they'll find something wrong with you. She was around eighty when she fell when visiting us, probably broke a rib or two, and then when forced her to see a doctor, was diagnosed with high blood pressure. From then on, she took a daily pill, often noting that it was "only a small one." Although somewhat athletic in her younger years, with a particular love of swimming, past middle age she never once took a walk or indulged in any sort of exercise. Arthritis slowed her down as she aged. But rather than submit to knee replacements, she soldiered on, assuring us she felt no pain and relying on a shopping cart for support as she walked the grocery aisles. She lived to be 91 and was finally done in by a stroke that had kept her essentially bedridden for a couple of years.

From an early age, I was aware of my maternal grandmother's early death, but I never thought much about the emotional toll it must have taken on the family—particularly on my mother, the youngest, who was then in the throes of

early adolescence. Mom referred often to her father's pragmatic response to this loss, but she never spoke of the emotional side of this family calamity.

Recently, one morning at the Debes family camp in the Adirondacks, I was drinking coffee with my brother-in-law Pete's wife Kathy while our spouses went out for a bro and sis hike. Kathy told me how her grandparents on both sides had immigrated to the U.S. from Sicily early in the twentieth century. I told Kathy about my grandmother's early death and how my mom had pointed out the very room in which she died. Suddenly I got choked up as I thought about my mother's loss. Somehow the gravity of it hit me then for the first time. I had never before felt the least bit emotional about the grandmother I never met and the toll her death must have exacted on my mother. How would Mom's life have been different had her mother been present for her high school and college graduations, her marriage, the birth of her two children?

Family history, pieced together with the help of Ancestry.com, suggests that in her youth, my lost grandmother was likely far more traumatized than my mother ever was. Lelah, born in 1883, was the youngest of three, just as my mother was. Her mother, Mary, sued her husband Charles Barrall for divorce in 1891, and it was finalized in 1892 when my grandmother was ten years old. The critical part of the divorce decree asserts, "the said Charles Barrall committed adultery ... with one Catharine Everett in the fall of 1883, with deception kept the same from her and by her said husband refusing to care for, maintain, and support her and by indignities resulting from said

adultery and other indignities to her person and cruel and barbarous treatment at the hands of her said husband she was forced to withdraw from his house and family on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of March AD 1887, and she has lived separate and apart from him ever since, and not until after the separation from him was said deception revealed to her."

This suggests that my great-grandmother left home when her youngest daughter was only three years old. Lelah's older siblings, Oscar and Jennie, also remained with their philandering father. Following the divorce, Charles Barrall married Susan Smith, and after her death, Jane Davenport. According to my mother, this third wife is the only grandmother she remembered. Mary Steen Barrall died when Lelah was 13, the same age as my mother when Lelah died. It's unclear whether Lelah was even aware of this or in fact whether she had ever seen her mother since the divorce.

Who knows what wounds this fragmented early life left on my grandmother? I have a copy of a letter hinting that even after the potential stability of marriage to my grandfather, she was not altogether contented. On January 5, 1915, seven months after their wedding, Granddad wrote to her while she was apparently staying with friends or family members in Allentown, Pennsylvania. She was pregnant with her daughter Lois. The letter is a gentle plea for her to return home. It reads, in part:

"I would have written to you before only, as I told you, I thought you would not be able to stay away from me

so long. Now I am beginning to feel that you would rather stay away.

“I must confess to you that I am getting most ‘awful lonesome.’ Really more so the first few days.

“You suggested Saturday to home. If I were you I would try to get home on that date. Of course don’t give up any pleasure. But I just would like to have you because I’m lonesome and feel as tho I had been deserted. It just seems to me that I shall have to begin all over again.”

He goes on to say that he’ll be in Wilkes-Barre to meet the train Saturday, hoping she will be on it, and concludes, “Good night. Yours sincerely, Harvey.”

It’s hard to know whether to attribute the letter’s formality, albeit heartfelt, to the prevalent style of the day or to take it as an indication of latent unrest in the early days of their marriage. It was written on January 5, suggesting that she made a holiday visit to Allentown. There is no record of whether she in fact returned on that Saturday. And I’ve not been able to determine who she was staying with. Certainly not her father, who did not live in Allentown. And not her birth mother, who had died nineteen

years earlier. Out of curiosity, I looked up her temporary address (which was on the envelope), 1033 Turner Street in Allentown, and found its current appearance online, a rather plain-looking city rowhouse. But there’s no easy way of determining who lived there in 1915. This is one of a number of mysteries embedded in Harrison family history. Even if I had known enough to ask Mom about all this before she died, I’m not sure she could have shed much light.

As well as we may know our parents, no matter how much they’ve told us about their pasts, yawning gaps remain in our awareness of their younger lives. Most of us, I suppose, have questions we wish we had asked our parents. In my case, some of these questions never occurred to me until my parents were gone. Above all, though, I wish that I had simply acknowledged to my mother how wrenching the early loss of her mother must have been. Now, as a parent and grandparent, I wonder how best to convey the realities of my life to my survivors.

*The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.*

--Mark Twain

# Fireflies

Leslie Beard

It rained midafternoon, that daily late summer dump of warm water onto the feverish earth. Steam rose from the street, and the asphalt released smells of tar, engine oil, and tadpoles. After supper, we—my sister and two brothers—poured out of the house into the backyard to play before the sunset. Rainwater caught by the wide emerald blades of St. Augustine grass splashed our ankles as we ran. Canvas tennis shoes protected our feet from spiky sticker weeds and sweet gum balls, but they were soaked through in minutes.

Our yard had been carved out of hardwood bottomland, part of the Mississippi River alluvial plain. The woods that surrounded us on three sides grew thick with willow oaks, hackberries, sweet gums, and green ash trees; greenbrier, poison ivy, and trumpet creeper vines; and underbrush of dwarf palmettos, ferns, and crowds of struggling saplings.

All kinds of creatures lived in the woods and ventured across the yard to our house. The crawfish and cottonmouths in the bayou stayed put, but rabbits, lizards, blue skinks, and the occasional king snake came visiting by day. At night we watched raccoons and opossums eat our cat's food on the patio. I don't remember birds except for quarrelsome bluejays and pairs of cardinals. And some birds ate overripe wild cherries and then flew in drunken loop-de-loops before passing out on the grass. Perhaps I exaggerate.

The insect populations never seemed to abate, for we had mild winters. It was a tossup whether we'd need the air conditioner or the heat at Christmas every year. Of course, there were the "good" insects—damsel flies, sulfur butterflies, and doodle bugs—but they hardly made up for the fire ants, dirt daubers, wasps, horseflies, roaches, stink bugs, carpenter bees, and the Louisiana state bird, the mosquito. Particularly loathsome was the Daddy Longlegs. They gathered in great upside-down clumps under the eaves and bobbed up and down in unison. You could almost hear the war drums beating out the rhythm.

Summer twilight shimmers in my memory. The air cools almost imperceptibly. Maybe it's only the absence of the overhead heat lamp of the sun. The sky remains light after the land loses color and darkens. Then, when the sky darkens, the night orchestra starts up. Instruments are tuned randomly, by croak and screech, chitter and buzz, and then a steady crescendo of sound swells from the woods. Crickets chirp and katydids join in raspy imitation. Soon the bullfrogs' low bellows and tree frogs' high-pitched belches are keeping the beat. A fox's scream and an owl's hoot may startle but *belong* as exclamation marks in the enduring song of courtship.

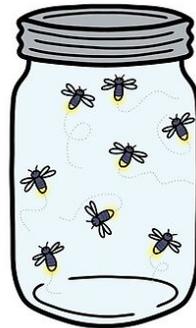
That particular night—so vivid in my memory—began much like every other. The inky darkness bloomed with tiny winking lanterns: fireflies. Mama had told me how, as a little girl, she had filled a jar with fireflies and sneaked them into her bed to read by. I dug about in the boxes of junk in our utility room off the carport until I found an old jar. I

unscrewed it, shoved the lid in my pocket, and then ran back into the yard. Fireflies were thick in the air, and I scooped some into my jar, covered the top with my hand, then hand off and another scoop. I laughed with the sheer joy of it. After I'd caught a dozen or so, I screwed on the lid and sat in the wet grass, beaming with success.

I sneaked inside with my jar and hid it under the covers of my bed. I couldn't wait to read in my snug cave of sheets and bedspread, so I scrambled into pajamas, shut my door, and turned out the light. Once in bed, I opened *Frederick* by Leo Lionni. It's a tale about a mouse who gathers beauty while the other mice gather food for winter. When the food runs out, Frederick feeds them warmth, color, and poetry. I knew the story well, so the inadequacy of my firefly lamp hardly mattered. I was enchanted.

When I woke the next morning and remembered my fireflies, I dove under the covers, scrabbling my hands about as I sought the jar. Ah, there it was! I pulled it out into the light. Small still bodies lay at the bottom. I shook the jar a bit, but they didn't wake up. I had killed them. I hadn't thought about what they needed, hadn't even thought to punch air holes in the lid. Mama found me in tears with the jar of dead bugs in my lap. She told me ignorance was no crime and I'd know better next time. I took the jar outside and emptied it into the grass.

Surviving a small loss as a child prepares you for the one to come after, and that one prepares you for the next, and so on until the end. Each grief teaches you how to suffer, how to hold the pain. You also learn not to chase after joy but just let it wink at you from the darkness.



*What I like in a good author is not what he says, but what he whispers.*

– Logan Pearsall Smith, *Good Advice on Writing*

# Lagomorpha

Leslie Beard

Twenty years ago a new tenant moved into a rental house on our street, a cul-de-sac of seven homes. Situated close to the university, we'd seen faculty, undergraduates, graduate students, and young families move in and out. The most interesting residents up until then were a young family with a wolf-dog hybrid, a comedy hunting video, and a habit of butchering deer in the front yard. You just never knew.

I walked down the street to introduce myself and welcome the new neighbors. A passel of children ran in circles around their mother in the front yard. As we talked I learned the father wasn't home, but he was an army chaplain relocated here to work on a master's degree.

A couple of the little girls took my hands and led me to the backyard to meet their pets. A canopy of old water oaks blocked the sun. As my eyes adjusted to the shade, towers of wood-and-wire cages loomed into view. An apartment complex for rabbits.

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My family had a pet rabbit when I was young. It, too, lived in a wood-and-wire hutch under the trees. My older brothers don't remember us having a rabbit, but I can still feel the moment of shock when I found him, stiff and cold, stretched out in the cage. I think he died from neglect because the memory comes with a sick wave of guilt.

Of the fourteen million pet rabbits in the world, three million live in the U.S. They're the fourth most popular pet animal, or the third if you don't count aquarium fish.

My friends with pet rabbits belong to the more than eight-thousand-member House Rabbit Society, a nonprofit that promotes the fostering and adoption of rescue rabbits. One couple I know has a room exclusively for their rabbits. Beds, play structures, toys, and litter boxes cover the floor. The litter-trained bunnies are free to hop around the house during the day. The owner-parents take them outside in strollers with netting over the top. Like dog and cat owners, they have constructed complex emotional lives for their animals.

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The girls pulled me to the nearest hutch and began pointing and naming the rabbits: "This is Jumper and his wife Velvet, this is Flopsy and his wife Polka Dot. And this is King Hops-a-lot and Queen Spotty Meg. We ate their babies."

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Humans have been eating rabbits since before they were homo sapiens—as early as four hundred thousand years ago. We have used snares, traps, dogs, falcons, ferrets, and guns to capture and kill wild rabbits.

Today, more than 1.5 million Americans go rabbiting, or rabbit hunting, every year. I grew up in the city, and no one in our family hunted rabbits. My uncles and cousins shot ducks, dove, and quail, all of which my mother enthusiastically threw into the gumbo pot. In my hometown in south Louisiana, we regularly ate food that most other Americans considered inedible: frogs' legs, alligator, turtle, crawfish, boudin, and hog's head cheese. My brother recently sent me a t-shirt that reads: *Louisiana. Let's have lunch and talk about dinner!*

Two hundred million tons of rabbit meat are produced globally each year. That translates to one billion, two hundred million rabbits. The Chinese eat more than half of all the harvested rabbits (I found a recipe for Sichuan spicy rabbit heads), but the Maltese have the highest annual per capita consumption at nineteen pounds, ten ounces.

In Malta, the national dish is *fenkata*, rabbit stew made with onions, garlic, red wine, potatoes, and carrots. Italians have *coniglio alla cacciatora*, the French *lapin à la creme*, and the Spanish *conejo con arroz*. One of my husband's favorite dishes is the smothered rabbit served at Ye Olde College Inn in New Orleans. (And yes, we joke about how big the pillow had to be.)

What we don't eat is largely determined by our culture and primarily concerns animals. Taboos include religious prohibitions such as pork, inborn and cultural constructs of disgust such as sheep's eyes and rats, and emotional prejudice such as animals we consider pets. Many Americans view pets as family members and don't consider them a source of food, whereas dogs are regularly eaten in China, cats in Vietnam, and horses in France and Spain.

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Looking back to that season twenty years ago, I think the family was struggling with money. The combination of family size and clothing style hinted at conservative politics, homeschooling, and traditional gender roles, so my biases, I'm ashamed to say, blinded me to their need. There were many mouths to feed, and raising rabbits for meat makes sense. Start-up costs are low and a continuing supply is guaranteed.

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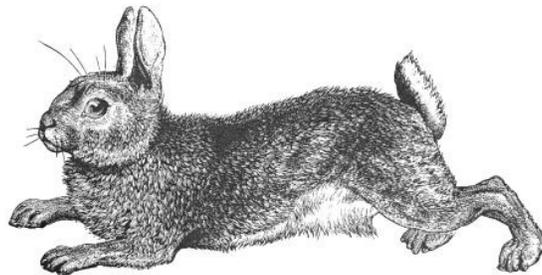
Many internet sites are devoted to the practice of raising rabbits. They advise on available breeds with attention paid to weight, kits per litter, age at harvest, and the quality of pelts and fur. The most popular breed is the New Zealand, which has up to fourteen kits per litter and a quick maturity, ready to eat at eight weeks. The Flemish Giant, on the other hand, has a poor meat-to-bone ratio. American Chinchillas produce prized pelts. Californians have six to eight kits per litter but the pelts are worthless. This list goes on.

Some websites offer instruction in housing, feeding, and breeding rabbits. Videos demonstrate butchering and tattooing, and photographs show examples of nest boxes for kindling and raising bunnies. Blogs warn of impediments such as local cruelty laws and zoning prohibitions. Articles educate readers on rabbits' territorial defense behaviors and their tendency to freeze when under stress. As modern homesteading gains in popularity, meat rabbits join laying hens, dairy goats, and honeybees as ingredients of a self-sufficient lifestyle.

I know that *I* could never slaughter a rabbit for food. On large farms, rabbits are harvested by electrocution or beheading, but homesteaders typically kill them with the broomstick method. Unable to imagine how one kills a rabbit with a broomstick, except perhaps to beat it to death, I watched a YouTube instruction video on this method. I looked away at the end of the video, but not before I saw the neck break.

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We didn't see much of the rabbit-raising family. They didn't stay long—only one semester—but shortly before they moved, a friend of mine who also raised rabbits (but for pets) visited them. The father was home and gave her a tour through the warren of cages. He opened a hutch, reached in for a rabbit to show her and the startled rabbit bit him. He grabbed the rabbit by its hind legs, dragged it out of the cage, and swung it hard against a tree trunk. The animal was smashed to a bloody death. My friend said all his children were there: still, silent, and staring.



*Write your first draft with your heart. Rewrite with your head.*

– From the movie *Finding Forrester*

## I Don't Resolve

**Bill Brown**

What I don't do on New Year's Eve is make resolutions. I regard them as Samuel Johnson regarded second marriages: the triumph of hope over experience.

It is easy in a burst of holiday enthusiasm to vow to tackle an array of challenges in one fell swoop. We will stop smoking, get more exercise, eat a healthier diet. While's we're at it, we'll find a cure for cancer and achieve world peace.

Chances are that even as we are composing our ambitious lists, we are demonstrating the futility of such ambitions. How many of us entered the season with a promise to ourselves that we would be abstemious when it came to alcohol, would pass up that second slice of pecan pie, the one with the whipped cream topping? How many of us found in January that the scales were malfunctioning and adding five or six pounds to our weight?

I've found the advice I got years ago at a stop-smoking program has merit. When you stop smoking, they said, food will taste better. You will gain weight. DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT. If you try to conquer too many problems at one time, you will fail at all of them. (I did stop smoking, perhaps a validation of their advice.)

So, I scatter resolutions—I prefer to think of them as goals—throughout the year. Still, I can fail at a goal unless I heed Emory Folmar's maxim. I disagreed with the late Montgomery mayor about many things, but I thought he was spot on when he averred that it's not what's expected that gets done, but what's inspected.

Writing down a goal and entering dates on the calendar to check on progress helps.

Well, perhaps I should make one resolution: look at the darned calendar.

*The good writing of any age has always been the product of someone's neurosis, and we'd have a mighty dull literature if all the writers that came along were a bunch of happy chuckleheads.*

– William Styron

## Eulogy for Donnie

**Bill Brown**

Cooktown, the late 1940s, early 1950s. There were more farms then, more woods and fields, fewer people. Almost everyone was kin to one degree or another.

Sonny Cook, Ronald Taylor, me, and Donnie. Cooktown boys. Donnie was 4, 4 1/2 years younger than the rest of us, but I do not recall a time when he was not a part of the pack.

It was here, in this place, among these people, that our essential character was formed, and no matter how far you go or how long you are away, it remains a part of you.

It was here that Donnie Brown became the man that he was.

I never got to spend as much time with Donnie as I would have liked—the usual barriers: distance, work, family, other obligations—were ever-present. In recent years, after an autoimmune disease reduced this strong and vital person to a shadow, he would put me off from visiting, saying he would be stronger later and the weather would be better, and we could go off and do things and have fun.

I came anyway. I did not expect that it would be our last visit, nor did he. But, looking back, that day had the air of a valedictory. He was tired, and we sat in recliner chairs in his and Nancy's home in Hilly, reminiscing, but also reflecting on our lives, as older people are wont to do.

It can be surprising, I said on that day, to look back and realize that the person who had exerted the greatest influence on you was not someone you would have thought of earlier.

He agreed, and almost simultaneously we named our grandmother, Miss Lois or Aunt Lois to others, but Memaw to us. We said that hardly a day passed when we did not think of her, did not see her.

So, to understand Donnie, you need to know about Memaw.

A poem I wrote a few years ago painted part of the picture. It was called "Intercessor."

*We Baptist boys did not need  
the Virgin Mary to intercede  
for us. We had Memaw,*

*who could grow a garden, wring  
a chicken's neck or bind up*

*a careless cut with equal aplomb,*

*and whose gray eyes never  
gave away what was going  
on behind them.*

*She always knew more than  
she said, including what we  
boys had been up to, even*

*transgressions that would get  
our grandfather's dander up:  
Liberating lumber to build*

*a fort in the woods or  
leaving hand tools afield  
to be brushed with rust.*

*When we were found out  
and he was doing his best  
to be angry, she would look*

*at him levelly and say,  
"They're just boys, Mac,  
they're just boys."*

But Memaw was much more than our protector. She was a daily example of how life should be lived.

We never heard her speak ill of anyone, never saw her jealous of someone else's good fortune. We never heard her long for what she did not have, never heard her complain about misfortune. She knew what she believed, and she never wavered.

The thing is, she never lectured about any of these things. She was not given to lecturing or talking much at all. She lived these things, and we absorbed these values without thinking about them.

If Memaw had had a motto, I think it would have been, just get on with it.

I saw Memaw the day before she died. Adelaide and I had been visiting her folks in Shreveport and stopped by to visit Memaw as we headed back toward Georgia.

She was sitting in her rocking chair on the back porch reading the Baptist Message. "You know, Billy," she said, "if I died tomorrow, I would be right where I want."

All the things I saw in Memaw, I saw in my brother Donnie.

In all our talks, he never complained about the unfairness of the malady that had been inflicted upon him. He never said, "Why me?" He accepted the reality of what was. You do what you can and trust the Lord to take care of the rest, he said. Whatever the rest was, he was prepared to accept it.

Like Memaw, he was one to just get on with it. Like Memaw, he knew who he was and what he believed. Like Memaw, he was where he wanted to be.

And, like Memaw, he could repeat the words of St. Paul: I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Brother, I will miss you.

## **Morning on the Farm**

**James C. (Jim) Warman**

My parents moved from city life in Morgantown, West Virginia, to a six-acre farm about six miles out of town. I was only 2 1/2 years old. As the years went by I grew into responsibilities for chores around the little farm. Morning started, of course, with me still in bed, hearing my father's admonition, "Get up, Jim. You are wasting the best part of the day."

It's time for me to jump into some work clothes, grab the milk pail, and head for the barn.

Patiently waiting for me are my two friends, cross-bred Guernsey-Jersey cows. The Guernsey part of the cross provided quantity of milk, and the Jersey part lent richness—fuller flavor, cream, and butterfat. Yes, we churned our own butter.

My two cow friends know the routine. A pitchfork of sweet-smelling alfalfa hay and a scoop of ground feed from the farmers' co-op entice the cows into the milking stalls. Wooden stanchions close gently behind the cow's head. Metal hobbles on the back legs are persuasive reminders that "Bossy" should not kick either the milk pail or the milker. After washing the udder, we are ready to get down to business. Perched on a one-legged wooden stool with my forehead against the cow's flank, I start milking. First, there is a sharp ping as the milk hits the bottom of the empty pail, quickly changing to "splash-splash." That sound is the cue for the barn cat to come for breakfast, first catching a squirt of milk in the air and then lapping into her bowl of warm milk.

When we are all done it is time for me to head to the house with a full pail of milk.

## A Good Life, A Good Death

Cathy Buckhalt

When the phone rings past six on a Sunday evening and Paul is not yet home from the Shelter, I know intuitively the call will be a request. “Will you come meet me? There’s a dog here I think we could foster.”

On this warm evening, he speaks quietly. “There’s a Golden here you should meet.”

Magic words to me. “I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

It is not easy to walk the rows of dogs at the Shelter. There are so many sizes and breeds, all looking for the same thing—a home.

Paul releases the latch on one kennel door. I kneel, oblivious to the water and dirt, and reach to stroke matted fur. Hesitantly, a head, then a body, nuzzles my hand. A small, emaciated Golden looks at me with hopeful eyes. I gently pull him into an embrace and whisper close to his velvet ears. “You’re safe now.” At that moment I feel what mothers must feel when they hold their babies for the first time.

Cooper is warmly welcomed by all our animals that night. The cats bathe him; our other Golden shares his bed. Cooper’s eyes radiate love throughout our home.

For three months Cooper works his magic. He lets the cats bat his tail. He and Hayes chase and tussle in the backyard. In the evenings, his head finds one of our laps. When he sighs deeply, we all know it is time to sleep.

We begin to plan holidays at the beach. Each day is a celebration. Looking back, though, I think I always knew Cooper’s life with us would be short.

Still, on the night of his death, our hearts shatter. Heavy breathing alerts us to call one of our vets. The AU vet school confirms the worst, liver cancer.

Years of loving animals has raised our awareness of how stoically animals suffer and have squelched our selfish desire to hold on to them. Cooper would enjoy his home, his cats, his dog, his yard, his bed, and his parents for as long as he could. An afternoon at the park and dessert ice cream tops a beautiful day.

Dr. Laurel Gardner arrives and tells us she prefers a family death. We all gather around Cooper, who rests on his blankie. Matilda cat lies on Dr. Laurel’s leg. Jaguar cat nudges a favored toy toward Cooper. Hayes lies nose to nose with his brother. Our circle is complete, and we all thank Cooper for sharing our lives.

When Cooper is still, we wrap him in his blankie to begin his next journey. Certainly his death is not one we desired, but it is a good death, one we can all hope for, a sendoff surrounded by friends and family and love.

# Yuck

Frank Chappell

She gave birth to twins, then seventeen years old, and a second husband later, she gave birth to me. It's not like she was a rookie to what could go wrong when raising a child. I don't think my being a boy should have had anything to do with it. Maybe some would blame it on my sex, but I am just not buying it.

Come on now, I am not going to say that my momma made a stupid decision. She was my momma; she wanted only the very best for me. She loved me and I loved her. I have always said that looking at a loving momma was seeing God in action.

What I am going to say is that we humans must suffer the consequences of our choices. Sometimes it affects only us and other times it affects those who are involved with us. In this particular case, both Momma and I suffered. In my opinion, she may have suffered to a greater degree.

I cannot recall what was physically wrong with me that morning. More than likely, it had something to do with my tummy. Whatever it was, it had gotten Momma's attention in such a way that she felt obligated as a mother to take action in an attempt to relieve whatever problem her son was having.

She summoned me to her, telling me to hop up on the counter next to the kitchen sink. Doing so put us at a face-to-face level with one another. As she walked toward me, I noticed that she had a spoon in her right hand and a bottle in her left. It was castor oil. In our day, castor oil was the cure-all. If there was something wrong with a child, pour a dose of that nasty stuff in them. It would kill or cure them. Once that stuff got in them, they would forget whatever was bothering them.

Parents swore by the slop. One friend told me that when he and his cousins spent the night at an aunt's house, she lined them up and gave them a dose just in case they might get sick. That mess should have been outlawed in all fifty states.

I told Momma I didn't think I could swallow that awful stuff. She said I would be okay, as she poured a spoonful. Whether it was a teaspoon or a tablespoon, I don't know. It looked like a snow shovel to me.

I started to squirm, I wanted to back up from her, but the wall was behind me. I couldn't go sideways because of a corner on one side and the sink on the other. It became obvious that she had thought this out! There was nowhere to retreat to. She had me pinned down. Brilliant strategy on her part.

Once more I pleaded not to be given that medicine, that I could not swallow it. She said to open wide and just swallow fast and that it would be over with. The spoonful of

what looked like motor oil was coming straight at my mouth. Her left hand now rested on my forehead to prevent movement. The smell was retched, I was beginning to gag, just from the odor.

When the spoon entered my mouth, the reflex gag was instant. The speed of the vile medicine leaving my mouth was lightning-fast. The amount of splatter that occurred when it hit hair and flesh was unbelievable. Her eyes had closed in self-protect mode.

The only sound that was heard was of the spoon as it dropped into the porcelain sink. Momma didn't say a word. She moved aside so that I could hop down from the counter. She leaned over the sink and began the slow process of cleaning all that sticky substance from her face and hair.

To my remembrance, castor oil was never given again in our home. It would be replaced by a slightly less awful stuff called Syrup of Black Draught.



*Most of the basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen.*

– Willa Cather

## **Blackie**

**Frank Chappell**

I was about seven or eight when we got the first dog that I remember being in our family. He was a black cocker spaniel. His name was Blackie. Yep, we spent a lot of time picking out that name for sure.

Whether he was a pure breed or not, I don't know. He was given to us by my Dad's friend whose dog had had puppies. A free dog was all I knew. I don't remember if I was told he was coming; he just did. That is the way it goes when doing someone a favor.

Blackie was an outdoor dog. Not by his choice, but by my parents'. Because he was my first pet, I didn't know that some people allowed their dogs to live in their homes. I just figured all dogs lived outside.

During the hot days, our Blackie stayed under the house in the cool shade. I guess he slept there at night as well. When I crawled under the porch, I could smell cotton poison that was used to keep bugs and fleas away, never thinking that it might be bad for him.

As I grew older, I started to see dogs as more than something that lived outside. I thought back and came to realize that our dogs were not taken very well care of. Blackie was the first of several dogs that we would have throughout my childhood. Since he is the subject of this story I will stick to his timeline in our family.

His hair was often badly matted, for there was never any thought given to brushing him. Dog grooming was unknown in our home. The regular shot for rabies was all the medicine that Blackie would get. That in itself probably had to do more with the fine for not getting it than with him not getting sick.

My Dad loved to sit in the swing on our front porch. Blackie would come on the porch for petting and enjoy the coolness of its boards. I can't say if I ever remember my parents talking to Blackie. Never saw an interaction with him.

Summer afternoon storms are a regular part of life in east central Alabama. We had never known that Blackie had a fear of bad weather, probably because we just did not pay the little dog enough attention. Mom often had the house opened up to catch any movement of air possible, for there was no air-conditioning. One afternoon a storm hit with a lot of thunder and lightning. Blackie came crashing into the screen door, tearing a hole in the wire; he then bounded into the living room and hid under the couch. My mom was not happy at all. I don't remember him mentioning anything about the poor dog being scared, I just remember how upset she was with the mess he had made.

Dad later repaired the door with new wire and put a piece of "hog wire" over the lower half of the screen door. "That won't happen again," he said. I don't remember if he checked to see if Blackie had been hurt in any way. The sad part was that more effort was given to keep Blackie from finding comfort from his fear than was given to helping him find safety and comfort. Blackie was an outside dog, for sure.

## Plan B

### Wendy Cleveland

On Wednesday, we buried my father, and on Thursday morning, my older brother and I headed up to Ithaca where we had an appointment with the Ithaca College bursar to figure out how I could pay for my senior year of college. The shock and ensuing grief were overshadowed by financial uncertainty. At 53, Dad had cashed in his life insurance policy and used the money to start his own business, hoping to be successful enough later to provide a tidy retirement plan, but life doesn't always work out the way you want it to. At 55, on Mother's Day, he died instantly of a cerebral hemorrhage.

Bob helped me to navigate the embarrassing journey of finding money to get through the next year. I spent hours applying for student loans and scholarships. My academic advisor rearranged my student teaching assignment; instead of renting an apartment in Rochester and teaching high school English in the Greece school district, I would live on campus and intern with the staff at the local junior high school in Ithaca. Social Security kicked in at \$100 a month, not nearly enough to cover tuition and books for spring, so the bursar set me up with two jobs for second semester. During the evenings I would sign out tape recorders to Speech and Drama students, and in the mornings I would set up and tear down biology labs, which meant scraping and washing nasty dissecting dishes and utensils.

Two days later, brother Bob flew back to Palo Alto and brother Dick drove

back to Minneapolis, so my mother and I were alone in our quiet apartment for the first time since the funeral. On Monday I visited the Pennsylvania Unemployment Office and interviewed with a kind woman who understood my need to make as much money as possible in the next three months.

"You won't be working in glamorous settings," she warned me.

"I realize that and I'm willing to do what it takes to make money."

The next morning, I reported to the chocolate factory and began my job as an Easter egg inspector. My boss was a kind man who took me to a small room with a very large and loud machine that wrapped chocolate eggs in colorful tin foil. My two responsibilities during the eight-hour shift were to reload the roll of foil when it ran out and to sit in front of the chute and look for defective eggs that shot out into a plastic basket on the floor. If an egg was not totally covered, I threw it into a waste bucket. Someone else came by later to replace the full basket of good eggs with an empty basket. Only an hour into my shift I thought I'd go out of my mind. The big clock hands on the wall dragged, and my eyes grew sleepy looking at the same thing. Just once in my shift did the rolling machine run out of foil. It was a welcome diversion and, somehow, I managed to replace it correctly and went back to my job as inspector. To ward off boredom, I unwrapped many eggs and popped the chocolate candies into my mouth. This job paid a fair amount, but I

knew I couldn't stand to be an egg inspector one more day. At 3:30 I turned off the machine and went to my supervisor.

"I'm sorry, sir. I need to find another job." He didn't ask why, but I think he knew.

That night I broke out in ugly red hives, and when I called the chocolate factory the next day I was informed that the eggs I had eaten were made of diet chocolate and my hives were an allergic reaction, a fitting penance for boredom binge eating.

My next job took me to the sixth floor of the Vanity Fair textile mill, where I would spend the rest of the summer as a needle packer. I had to wear a long-sleeved shirt, long pants, socks, and sturdy shoes, my new armor of protection from sharp needles. There was no air-conditioning in the sweltering mill. My job was to weigh and insert 100 thin needles into blue waxed paper envelopes and pack twenty envelopes into a box. Because the needles were so slender and difficult to count, I learned to weigh them on a very sensitive scale. They were manufactured in oil to prevent rusting, so I had to wipe my hands several times an hour. Workers were paid piecemeal, which was my incentive to work fast and not join in the gossip that flew around the long table. I did, however, laugh at the crude jokes to give the appearance of wanting to fit in. During mandatory breaks, I read James Bond paperbacks in the corner by the open window.

Midway through the summer when employees went on vacation, various other jobs opened up. My supervisor sent me down to the second

floor, where I was assigned to inspect chicken vaccination needles. If you've never seen a chicken vaccinating needle, envision a tuning fork with two prongs formed from a U-shaped bar of metal. Before I packed these needles, I had to inspect them and ascertain that both prongs were perfectly symmetrical. I was the only worker at this station, so it took just a day for me to fall into a rut of boredom. I brought a bag of red licorice on the third day and ingested enough sugar to keep me buzzed for a month.

When my two-week stint was over, I returned to the sweat box upstairs and resumed my regular needle packing, but I sensed a change. At lunch and breaks groups of people congregated and talked quietly, nodding, and once I thought I heard the word *strike*. This didn't bother me too much because I wasn't a union member, which infuriated the union president who harassed me on more than one occasion and always turned away, muttering *college bitch*. I would work my summer shift just short of the 100-day non-union commitment. Or so I thought. Once again life had a way of upending my plans.

Two weeks before I finished my summer stint as a needle packer, union workers walked off the job, everyone on my floor. I had no idea what this meant for me.

"You can't risk walking across the picket line," my mother warned. "It'll get nasty and you might get hurt."

"But that's two weeks' pay for spring semester books," I countered.

I went to my supervisor and asked him if I could continue to pack, and if so,

how would I get into the mill each morning.

“I’ll have a policeman escort you across the parking lot if you’re strong enough to ignore the nasty comments, and believe me, there’ll be plenty.”

I did cross that line with the help of a man in blue and I did hear some pretty mean shouts, even from women who had worked at my table. The word *scab* hurt the most. Once inside the mill, I worked alone, consumed for eight lonely hours by grief and anger. The prospect of living in an apartment with three girlfriends and student teaching in a premier high school had evaporated in less than sixty seconds back in May, and I was now facing eight weeks of living in the dorm and teaching seventh graders in a musty old inner-city junior high school.

What I did not know in those last two weeks of August was that I would be thrust into a teaching situation much like one in which a baby is thrown into the water. My supervising teacher, two months pregnant and nauseous, turned over all her classes to me the second week. “Go get ‘em,” she encouraged me. “Whatever floats your boat in there is

okay by me.” All day, twelve-year-olds and I would diagram sentences, recite poems, read short stories, and act out *Alice in Wonderland*. We’d make paper mache masks and dribble flour paste all the way down the hall, clog up the lavatory sinks, and infuriate the janitor. I would grow to love those wild children who untapped my lifelong love of teaching.

When my final day of needle packing ended in August, I walked through the parking lot one last time on the arm of Officer Blue and glanced at the angry faces of people without paychecks, their picket signs looking a little faded in the hot sun. I would return to Ithaca in another week, and most likely they’d still be walking in circles. Losing my father upended my life in so many ways, forcing me to work through grief, poverty, and disappointment. During those quiet hours in the last two weeks at the mill, I began to forgive my father, knowing he would not want me to end up in a picket line or drop out of school. And I knew for certain that I would never end up examining tin foiled eggs, scrubbing petri dishes, or packing needles.



## **The Best Christmas Present We Ever Gave Ourselves**

**Betty Love Turney Corbin**

A few months before Mama's 90th birthday, my sister Jean, my mother, and I decided that we would have a 90th birthday celebration. Mama insisted on being involved in the planning and even insisted on helping to pay for it. Thrifty person that she was, she said she could justify the expense because she didn't have a big wedding and had never had a big birthday party.

We started with the idea of keeping the guest list small and then said, "To heck with that" because we had to invite all Mama's brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, and all of Daddy's nieces and nephews. (He and his siblings were deceased.) Since Mama was from a family of eleven and Daddy from a family of five, there were a lot of relatives. Many of them lived within a two- to four-hour drive and were likely to come. Since Mama had lived in the same house since 1945, she also had longtime friends she wanted to invite.

Mama was born December 18, 1908, and we picked Saturday, December 19, 1998, for the party. It was a luncheon at Saugahatchee Country Club near Auburn, Alabama, where she lived. It was a lovely day, clear blue sky, and warm for that time of year. Mama felt well and looked pretty. She wore a bright blue dress and pearls, her white hair neatly styled by her hairdresser. Each table held a red-and-white Christmas flower arrangement, and we enjoyed the view of the rolling hills and trees on the golf course.

Before we ate, Mama's brother Philip said a prayer of thanks for the food and for the "dear lady we are honoring here today." After lunch, many of us said words of tribute to Mama. I talked about what a wonderful cook she was and how much I and many others enjoyed eating the meals she prepared. Cooking was an activity she truly loved.

At the time of this party, I lived in Houston, Texas, and spoke often with Mama on the phone. If I was trying to determine how well she was feeling, I would ask if she was cooking. If she said "No," I would know she wasn't feeling well. Then I'd ask if she had been to church that week. If that answer was "No," that was worse, but if she missed her weekly appointment at the hairdresser, I knew she was feeling so bad that she could hardly get out of bed. When I made these comments, she looked at me like she wasn't happy. She didn't want folks to think that her hair was more important to her than church, and it wasn't. But I commented that we were glad she wanted to look good.

Her sister Anne, who lived in Iowa, was the guest who had traveled the furthest distance. She talked about what a generous person Mama was and named many of the gifts Mama had given her and her children. She also told of Mama's determination to overcome broken bones and illnesses that came her way.

Her sister Lig said, "She's my sister, and I think she's perfect," and kissed her on the cheek. Lig is not as talkative as some of us.

Daddy's niece Virginia talked about how important it was to her three daughters to spend time with Mama and Daddy when they were students at Auburn. She agreed that Mama was a great cook.

Daddy's niece Colleen talked about Mama's tremendous energy even when she was up in years. She told of a day when Mama had been to Montgomery for a meeting and arrived home ready for the evening's activities. She also recalled her dad's comment when he first met my mother. He said, "Dewey couldn't have done better if he had searched the world over."

Mama's friend Lucy reminisced about Daddy before he married Mama. He wondered if he would ever find someone who wanted to can and freeze vegetables the way that Lucy and her husband Ben did. Then she added, "When Dewey found Mary Love, they put up more food than anybody I know."

One of the last people to speak was 21-year-old Sarah Beth Allen, daughter of Mama's nephew Jim, who lived in neighboring Opelika. She said, "One of the important things about Aunt Mary Love is that she keeps us together." And that was true. Mama always stayed in touch with both her family and Daddy's family and tried to keep us together.

After the party, Mama said, "I feel like I've been to my own funeral." She, Jean, Carl, and I agreed that this party was the best Christmas present we ever gave ourselves. Mama had always loved others, and now they showed their love for her in a very special way.

Since Mama was given the name Mary Love at birth, Love was literally her middle name. And it was appropriate.

*In the long, silent hours, I am trampled by memories, all happening in one instant, as if my entire life were a single, unfathomable image. The child and girl I was, the woman I am, the old woman I shall be, are all water in the same rushing torrent.*

– Isabel Allende, *Paula*

## Practical Lessons

Carole Corsby

As a child, I loved to help Mama with the daily rituals of housekeeping: making the beds by tucking pillows neatly; sweeping beneath things to get the dust out of corners; shaking rugs outside and sweeping the porches. When I grew taller, I learned to iron T-shirts, underwear, and sheets. Mama ran the wringer washer herself, but I helped to hang out wet clothes and bring in the dry. Mama did most of the cooking, but I washed mountains of dishes in hot, soapy water in the kitchen sink and rinsed and dried them.

During the school year, Mama did most of the housework by herself. Every spring, my parents planned a big vegetable garden, and Mama loved to spend her time there: planting, hoeing, weeding, or fertilizing. In summers, I did a lot of the morning chores while she gathered baskets and buckets of produce. Mama taught me how to prop a book in a dishpan and read while shelling beans. She also taught me how to read while churning.

On the other hand, Daddy taught me few practical lessons about daily living. When he taught my younger brother how to mow grass, I asked him to teach me.

He said, "You don't need to learn to run a lawnmower. They're too dangerous."

When my parents gave me a car for graduation from AU, Daddy showed me detailed procedures for checking and adding oil to the engine, but he said, "You don't need to know how to change the oil or fix a flat because you'll have a husband to do those things."

While working and in graduate school, I lived on my own for over ten years. I taught myself how to run a lawn mower, and a friend showed me how to change the oil in my car. With my shovel, hoe, and tiller, I worked my big garden. Purchasing wooded acreage, an ax, and a machete led to my learning to clear land. My landlords dealt with plumbing and electrical problems. I learned to manage quite well living on my own.

In 1980, I met the man who would become my husband. He had strong muscles as well as a keen intellect. While falling in love, I remembered my father's words about the chores my future husband would take over from me. By the time we married in 1981, I had realized that, in our case, my father had no idea what he was talking about.

My husband was a city boy, born in New York where he lived until his family relocated to Alabama. Doug's mother catered to his father's every whim. His family never had a vegetable garden, and his mother mowed the lawn. Doug was young when he started caddying at the country club. He and his siblings may have had chores, but his mother did it all. It's no wonder that, by the time we met, she was a chain smoker who always kept cigarettes burning in several rooms of the house. Second-hand smoke was not yet an issue.

Early marriage is exciting, being in love with all that passion and romance. Doug was big on passion and romance, never forgetting an anniversary, birthday, or holiday.

However, when I asked him to help with housecleaning, his reply was, "Dusting is useless, and I don't do windows."

He would vacuum but only when he deemed it necessary. He was an excellent cook when he chose to be, but his cooking left a big messy kitchen for me to clean.

When the grass needed cutting, he told me, "I don't mow lawns."

He relished garden-fresh vegetables but seemed puzzled that I enjoyed growing and preserving them. He did not hoe, weed, dig, or till.

When I announced that it was time to change the oil in my car, his response was, "So...do it however you've been doing it."

Doug did not handle heat well; the house had no air conditioning. Soon after moving in, he had mounted an industrial exhaust fan in the window on the end of the house opposite our bedroom. He could create a strong breeze blowing over our bed by setting it to blow out on its highest setting and closing all doors and windows, except for the fan window and one bedroom window. The fan sounded like an airplane readying for take-off.

The vow "til death do you part" is non-negotiable in my family; however, I came very close to losing it on a blistering hot day in the summer of 1982. We had yet to reach our first anniversary. After spending hours mowing grass and tilling the garden, dripping with sweat and covered in grunge, I went inside for a drink and to check on my husband.

He was lying buck naked, spread-eagled on his back in the middle of our queen-sized bed reading a book. The wind funneling over the bed was so fierce it was sucking small insects through the screen and the curtains were standing straight out from the window. I had to shout to ask my rhetorical question, "**What** are you doing?"

He replied, "Babe, your face is beet red. I think you're working too hard."

The next week, my astute husband hired our wonderful neighbor to clean our house twice each week. In my estimation, Miss Willis deserves full credit for saving our marriage.

During the next seven years, while working full-time jobs, we built our house in the woods. During those years, I learned what Doug was happy to do with and for me: cut down trees with a chainsaw; design the house on graph paper; build a house model with balsa wood and glue; lay out a level foundation; dig footers with a shovel and tiller; mix and pour concrete from a wheelbarrow; lay blocks for the foundation; cut timber and saw it into lumber on a sawmill; build the frame; roof the house; do the plumbing; run the wiring; and build, build, build. We moved into our "not quite completed double A-frame house" in 1989. Today, the house remains not quite finished, but our marriage survived it all, and we were mostly happy until he died in 2014.

Some of life's lessons come easily; others require patience, perseverance, and time.

# **Losing Mama**

**Carole Corsby**

On August 15, 2023, we celebrated Mama's 96<sup>th</sup> birthday with a potluck at my aunt's house. Over twenty relatives were present; the tables were groaning under the cornucopia. I counted no fewer than five birthday cakes, one of which was made from scratch by the wife of my (one of forty) first cousins. All of Mother's eleven Hallmark siblings have passed on except for Mama and three of her sisters. Present on this occasion were family members from all except two of her siblings.

Hallmark gatherings are boisterous with everyone talking over one another and continuous laughter. Mama, the oldest living member, is consulted often to verify facts of whatever story is being told. Her astonishing memory can be overwhelming.

Once my brother told her, "Mama, when someone asks you what time it is, they don't want you to tell 'em how to build a watch."

Everyone in our huge, extended family adores her, and they love her stories. Mama's main vexation with aging is that she sometimes forgets names. She gets frustrated if she can't recall something like the maiden name of the girl that her third cousin's grandson married the second time around. An avid obituary reader, she knows many of the deceased and their families. In our daily phone calls, I love to hear her voice tell about people whose names were once familiar; I'll never be able to keep the relationships straight.

On August 14, I drove Mama to Tuscumbia to renew her driver's license. The gracious lady at the courthouse never even blinked at Mama's request.

The clerk said, "There now, Mrs. Corsby, your license is good for another four years."

Mama replied calmly, "That ought to see me on out."

She doesn't drive far: church is within a half mile of her house, and the Dollar Store is only six miles away. If she has to stop driving, I don't plan to be the bearer of that news.

Last Thursday, I drove to Mama's for a couple of nights. Mama told me that she needed to go to Walmart. On Friday, I found a parking spot fairly close to the store. As if arranged, two buggies were waiting right by our parking place. Each of us took one to hang on to for better navigation. Walking in a straight line isn't easy for either of us anymore.

In the pharmacy area, Mama placed Magnesium, garlic capsules, and hydrogen peroxide in her buggy. Hair spray was next on her list. It's been at least forty-five years since I bought hairspray, so I had no idea where to look for it.

After moseying down several aisles with no luck, she said, "Just forget it. I've still got some at home, and I'll get it another time."

She turned her buggy to go elsewhere in the store.

Hating to give up on something she wanted I said, "Mama, I'm just going to check these next couple of aisles."

She must not have heard me; when I came out of the second aisle, Mama was nowhere to be seen. Moving slowly down the main walkway toward the cash registers while looking down the aisles toward the back of the store, I saw no sign of her white head and skinny frame.

Mama always uses manned registers instead of self-serve ones because she's sure that the self-check-out method is just a way for the store to get rid of more employees. Having heard her opinion on this several times, I knew to go to an open register that was being operated by a real, live person. Two were open. I stood in the main walkway near these two, peering around the store, hoping to catch sight of Mama.

Within minutes, a supervisor came up to me and asked, "Ma'am, are you all right?"

"Well, yes, but I've lost my ninety-six-year-old mother."

She asked, "Will she know her name if I page her?"

That seemed a strange question to me. I replied, "Sure. Her name is Donnie Corsby."

She trotted over to the customer service desk and said into the PA system, "Donnie Corsby, your daughter is waiting for you at the front registers." At least, that's what I thought she said, but I could hardly hear her. I felt sure that Mama wouldn't, either.

The supervisor approached me again and asked, "What does your mom look like?"

I described her totally white hair pulled back into a ball on her neck.

Then my rescuing angel stated, "I'm going to go look around the store. Will your mom let me approach her? Will she talk to me?"

Finally, I understood the strange questions. She wanted to know if Mama was still of sound mind! Hastily, I reassured this kind woman that my mother is fine and will talk to anyone at any time, particularly if there's an opportunity to explore family connections.

Within a few minutes, the supervisor returned with the news that she had found Mama. Looking over her shoulder I saw my grinning Mama pushing her cart my way. In the car, as we left Walmart, we had one of those boisterous Hallmark moments as I relayed how perplexed I had been by the supervisor's questions. Laughing like teenagers, we drove on to our next stop, maybe Aldi's where they have eggs for \$1.05 per carton.

What will I do if I ever have to let her go?

# Letter to My Younger Self

Carole Corsby

October 22, 2023

Dear Carole at Twenty-Three,

Leaving home for college at the age of nineteen was a huge deal. No longer bound by your parent's restrictive rules, you behaved like a wild child released from prison. You made impulsive decisions, and some of those got you into serious trouble. You and your friends used Dean Cater's rule book as a hilarious guide, checking off each rule as you broke it.

The time has come to take a good look at yourself and ask, "Where do I want to go?" Surviving the '60s is proof of your good luck. Develop a plan. Proceed thoughtfully with deliberation instead of reacting spontaneously and whimsically. Realize that your actions may have consequences that will plague you for years to come.

For you, teaching consists of three things: love of the subject, love of the process, and love of the students. Respect these three things. Curb your impulsive nature and go forward responsibly. Enjoy your students but maintain a necessary distance; you can't be an effective teacher as their friend. During your first year of teaching high school, don't smile before Thanksgiving.

When the topic of sex, drug, and alcohol education is moved from the PE department and given to the biology teachers, realize that your students know more about drugs than you do. They know how to do sex, but they know little about the human reproductive system. They do know that STD cases are seen on Wednesdays at the Health Department. Give them fascinating information about how all of the systems of the human body work. Try to give them the desire to learn as much as possible on their own.

It's true that some of your parents' rules were far too archaic. In rebellion, you have sown your wild oats. Get over it. Acknowledge that some of their rules do have merit, and live accordingly.

With love and tenderness,

Carole at Seventy-five

## The Art of Making Do

Dennis Drake

I still have the quilt. It is one of my prized possessions. The history of this hand-stitched masterpiece stuffed with real cotton batting began some seventy years ago, when I was five years old.

My parents were rural Alabama public school teachers. In those days there were no summer school sessions. My parents had a summer sabbatical working on our farm. They also needed a break from my constant questions and my kinetic energy. In my rural Alabama community, children were not tested and medicated for hyperactivity and attention deficit disorder. A visit with relatives was often a temporary solution or at least a reprieve for tired parents. This was the situation in my case. That is how I came to spend a week with an aunt and uncle who lived on a working farm nearby.

Aunt Minnie and Uncle Jack owned beef cattle, dairy cows, chickens, honeybee hives, and a bass fishpond. Uncle Jack even maintained an earthworm farm to supply bait for his bass fishing. Since he worked on the county road crew, I was Aunt Minnie's responsibility during the day. If he was not too tired after work, Uncle Jack would take me fishing. He taught me the technique for baiting my hook with the giant, squirming earthworms.

Aunt Minnie was a seasoned cook who always served a bountiful meal. I was especially fond of her eight-layer chocolate cake. The first morning I ate breakfast with them, I asked for a cup of

coffee. With a whimsical smile, Aunt Minnie asked, "Do your folks let you drink coffee?"

"No, ma'am," I confessed.

Then she reached for the gurgling electric percolator and poured some of the dark forbidden liquid into a cup. She filled it with rich cream and a teaspoon of honey. I savored the frothy liquid and enjoyed the ritual of drinking my caramel-colored coffee each morning during my visit.

I don't remember Aunt Minnie ever saying no to any of my requests or frowning when she responded to a litany of my questions. I was not given a curfew for bedtime. I often stayed up to watch the late show on the small black-and-white screen of their RCA television.

After a hearty early morning breakfast, the farm chores began. My first task was to help gather eggs from the chicken nests in the cavernous red barn. I quickly learned that not all chickens want to give up their eggs. I was also warned to keep an eye on the cocky giant rooster who sported his sharp spurs like a strutting cowboy. Next, I helped guide the prized Jersey milk cow into a stall where Aunt Minnie milked with practiced strokes until the white enamel bucket was filled to the brim.

Later that morning, Aunt Minnie announced that we were going on a hike to pick wild muscadines. Fortunately, I

had persuaded my mother to let me wear my battered red leather cowboy boots. Aunt Minnie led our expedition along some worn red clay cattle trails until we reached a copse of trees covered with clusters of the purple fruit. After filling our stomachs and buckets, we hiked back home.

When we reached the white clapboard farmhouse, Aunt Minnie began preparing our dinner in the sweltering kitchen. She suggested that I enjoy the cool luxury of a hose pipe shower in the backyard. "If you are tired," she said, "you can take a nap."

Eager for the next adventure, I responded, "No, ma'am, I'm not tired at all."

After dinner, Aunt Minnie began making muscadine jelly. She stewed the hulls to bake a pie for supper. That tart and flavorful hull pie was more delicious than any gourmet berry pie I have ever eaten.

Aunt Minnie never wasted anything. Years later, when I heard the motto "the art of making do," I argued that it must have been written for my Aunt Minnie instead of being an Italian proverb.

After supper, we sat on the screen porch, where we were serenaded by a giant humming floor fan and the static-infused music on a Zenith radio. Aunt Minnie never knew an idle moment. She shelled purple hull crowder peas and snapped fresh beans from their garden. Uncle Jack drank a second glass of sweet iced tea before snoring into a sound sleep. I studied a *National Geographic* magazine and wished for exotic travel. Aunt Minnie

and I were up long after Uncle Jack retired for the night. Although she was much older than I, Aunt Minnie and I seemed to share the same energy level.

"When you are ready for bed," she said, "I have made you some pajamas." They were adorned with large white shell buttons and blue musical drums. I felt very special in my tailor-made pajamas. I didn't know until later that they were made from cotton chicken feed sacks. A more urbane cousin was determined to enlighten me on their origin. I didn't care. They were made especially for me.

During my visit, I was given the front bedroom, which was reserved as the guest bedroom. Aunt Minnie had painted it a dark Robin Hood green, much to the astonishment of some of her neighbors. That December, they were even more shocked when Aunt Minnie decorated her Christmas tree with blue lights. The telephone party lines were buzzing with the news: "Have you seen Miss Minnie's Christmas tree?"

The following days of my visit continued in a busy rhythm. When Aunt Minnie was not busy with cooking, canning, gardening, and farm chores, I could hear the staccato whine of her Singer sewing machine. She was an accomplished seamstress who sewed for ladies in several surrounding counties. She also made curtains and custom slipcovers. Toward the end of my visit, I observed Aunt Minnie stitching together colorful scraps of material into a pattern that resembled the design in my toy kaleidoscope. She worked quietly with the adroit skill of a magician.

When my father arrived to take me home, Aunt Minnie said she wanted to

show us something in her bedroom. We followed her. There on the bed were the scraps of cloth I had seen her assembling. Now they were transformed into the most beautiful quilt I had ever seen. As she hugged me, Aunt Minnie said, "This is a gift for you. I want you to have the quilt to remember me."

I do remember Aunt Minnie. How could I ever forget such an extraordinary woman? She was a woman who with an economy of resources produced a wealth of creativity. I remember the woman who

treated my hyper condition not as a malady but as energy to be spent on new adventures. Aunt Minnie helped shape my independent spirit, my confidence, my love of nature, and my appreciation for art and beauty in the simple gifts of life. And, on a cold winter night when I relish the warmth of my special quilt, I am grateful to Aunt Minnie, who perfected the art of making do.



## If You've Ever Really Been in Love

Stephen Gresham

If you've ever really been in love, you know there's a ghost in everything.

Most writers know that line, and some even claim it as their own. But I've more than borrowed it. Writers can steal, you know, and maybe they should.

When I was seven years old, alive to the infinity of all things, I was in love with my Grandma. Her name was Ruby Davis Kennedy. Having finally abandoned the husband she had been contracted to marry, she lived with my family in the picturesque, greener-than-green, tall grass prairie of north-central Kansas. We were dismally poor, as penny object as the Joads of *The Grapes of Wrath*, but with no California as an escape plan.

I was an oblivion seeker and often sinfully unhappy.

Granny was my savior.

How did this strange, witchy woman with one eye larger and higher on her face than the other come to beat as the heart of my story is beyond the reach of words? Close as I can come to an explanation is to say that we were both very lonely, both locked in a hopeless, yet eagerly meaningful attempt to create some kind of identity. To respect ourselves. To like ourselves. We were buddies before that concept was even invented.

We enjoyed the same things: baseball, fishing, feeding the chickens, making peanut brittle and, above all, reading books and telling each other stories. Regardless of narrative context, Granny's stories gravitated back to the hellish realm of the Dust Bowl days in eastern Colorado and western Kansas where the man she had been sentenced to wed raised sugar beets and got into fights at various pool halls. For many years she managed to tolerate his darkly Saturnalian ways—even gave birth to five children. But the "black blizzards," the gigantic rollers of dust chased along the landscape by howling winds, proved more than she could stand.

They broke her spirit.

To recover, she needed great calm and deep peace.

The Flinthills north of Emporia and south of Topeka offered that.

I like to think that I helped some. I was a small shadow within her larger one.

And I thrilled to hear her call out my name.

We did everything together: played games and dug fishing worms in the manure compost heap, capturing some really big ones the color of cigars and bigger around than a #3 pencil. While Granny shoveled, my job was to retrieve these squirming leviathans and place them in an empty Folger's coffee can filled with the good earth from our garden.

"Now Steve," Granny would say, swiping at a moustache of sweat and pointing at the latest worm I held pinched between my fingertips, "do you really think any ole yellow cat or flathead could resist a worm like that one?"

Drunk on the liquid moment, I would giggle and say, "No. No, they couldn't. I bet they couldn't."

Cane poles on our shoulders, we would march off to Catlin Creek, striding as proudly as if we were headed to see President Eisenhower or to be received by Queen Elizabeth, the new, young monarch across the Atlantic, she who happened to be about the same age as my Aunt Phyllis who, in turn, was beautiful and unwed. The crush I had on my aunt both dizzied and confused me. What I did know was that, when older, I would marry her. I said as much to Granny one day.

"Oh, Lord," she muttered in response, patting benignly at the contorted side of her face.

"What's wrong?" I followed.

She sighed. Wiped her hands on her apron. Grinned. Looked hard at me. Grinned again. And then shook her head gravely.

"Well, don't you know that if you marry a relative, your children will turn out like deformed chickens? They'll probably have a noggin as big as a basketball and oink like a pig instead of talking words. They won't never play baseball or read a book or drive a John Deere tractor."

Breathing kind of funny, I whispered to myself: "Gosh, that's not good."

And thus ended my immediate designs on Aunt Phyllis, though about ten years later my feelings for her would flame up again; Granny would be there to serve as my confessor for a bizarre, ghostly episode in my life.

It was Granny who helped me see the wonders of our farm animals, especially the placid, ruminating loveliness of our two milk cows—"Belle, our superstar, milk-producing Holstein, and "Tillie," our smallish, ladylike Brown Jersey, who was always kind enough to let me grip her udders with impunity. Her almond-shaped eyes, blacker than darkness, would sweep across me like a broom and forgivingly brush aside my lack of skill at coaxing sweet milk from her.

The villain among our domesticated creatures, one I both disliked and feared, was a treacherous Muscovy duck who possessed an unrelenting sexual urge that often led him not only to pursue our female ducks but also every hen (white leghorn or bantam); nay, his appetite extended to other targets as well: the list included our farm dogs, our sheep and even a pig or two. Whenever Granny released the Muscovy from his wire prison, she would first call out to me: "Steve, make sure all the cats are safe somewhere."

Granny would arm herself with a pitchfork and flash that ole Muscovy a warning look, and should the big white bird with stunning wattles press his luck as well as his flesh against some other living thing, Granny would leap into action, jabbing with her fork and shouting her disapproval: "You are disgusting! You are evil!" And, my favorite: "You are vile!"

*Vile.*

I adored that word. Tried to find ways to use it as often as possible: "This broccoli is vile. The new Sunday school teacher is vile." Etc., etc.

One day, however, Granny truly emerged and flowed and shaped herself into my heroine: it was an inchoate Kansas morning—windy and capable of mutating into a storm. In Kansas, you knew about storms. You respected them, for they inhabited you. I was gathering yesterday's eggs from the nesting boxes in the hen house, something I had done many times. It was routine. But this day would be different.

Not being tall enough to see over the rim of every box, I needed to reach up and finger through the straw for each egg. I had collected a half dozen or so when my efforts put me in contact with a new sensation: a cold, scaly coil of potential menace.

It was a black bull snake with orange stripes, four feet long if an inch.

And it had swallowed one of our eggs. I knew because I happened to touch the bulge of the egg.

I shivered. And then I ran. I ran like little boys in their nightmares. I ran screaming to the house for Granny to come quickly. Truth to tell, Granny hated snakes even more than she hated our Muscovy duck.

Bearing a hoe and a face filled with fury, she dashed to the hen house, and I pointed to the nesting box in question. Granny sprang into action. In later years I would imagine the soundtrack of Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" as the scene unfolded.

Granny was magnificent.

She handled that much-surprised snake like a whip and thrust it out into the bare, dusty yard where, stunned and bogged down with our undigested egg, it couldn't slither away.

Granny hammered home. She hacked and she hacked and she hacked some more, and then she took a deep breath and hacked some more. Bits of skin and flesh flew about like a swarm of insects. Flecks of blood showered the scene; several landed on my chin and bare arms, and I clapped and cheered.

Seized by entropy, Granny's fury eventually relented.

In a dozen or more bloody, shimmering pieces, that snake lay immobile.

I stepped close and spat upon it.

"You are vile!" I shouted at its remains.

As if not certain it was over, Granny caught her second wind and raised her hoe. I ran to her side and said, "Granny, I think that snake is mostly dead."

Best of all, we retrieved the egg from one of the severed pieces.

Granny smiled.

"Steve, that egg will be magic for you."

Strange to tell, at this moment I don't recall what happened to that bucolic talisman—probably turned rotten and got tossed into our two-hole outhouse.

As a concluding note, I must add that Granny could even be a touch existential, claiming to me that there is mystery in beauty and beauty in mystery. She taught me to practice what I came to see as a private alchemy, that even though Kansas might be an inhospitable realm, one could still be large in spirit, nourished by a secret amplitude, that there are no revelations awaiting us, and that one exists alone and that alone is safe.

But then again, life is always better if you have a good friend.

And I had one—my Grandma Ruby, an old woman with a blood-stained hoe and a need to go fishing as much as possible. She was a woman in full-fledged childhood, perpetually enraptured by the novelty of living.

A woman with long-ago dust in her throat, but solid gold in her heart.

## Fruitcake Weather

Stephen Gresham

“Oh, my, it’s fruitcake weather.”

It was a moment in late November, the month of the drowned dog, a chill in the air. It was six months before my wife, Linda, officially entered the dementia portal, before brain atrophy began to expunge her sense of identity.

The line, of course, is from Truman Capote’s “A Christmas Memory,” a line among several that Linda enjoyed reciting. She and I had one of those deeply private husband-wife rituals: Once a week or so I would read to her, she in the rocker recliner, me sitting cross-legged at her feet, a book in my lap. Our favorites included Capote’s magical tale. We would laugh together at many of the lines as if we were in the cast of some trite and banal Hallmark movie; Linda always kept a box of tissues handy, ready to respond to the tender, tear-jerking conclusion of kites hurrying on to Heaven.

For days after our reading, Linda would quote from the tale: “Mrs. Haha, anyone to home?” or “. . . one of these days I will, Buddy, lo-cate you a bike.” Or, on Christmas morning the elderly cousin blinking awake and, through her excitement, whispering to Buddy: “I can’t sleep a hoot.”

My God, my wife loved that story.

But her own story, the pages of which she and I were forced to read, wasn’t something one could love. And yet, early on, Linda said to me: “Stephen, I know I’m losing my mind, so please promise me one thing: let’s not be all the way sad about this---let’s try to find some good moments. Let’s try to laugh at some of this. Promise?”

I did.

And some lighter moments, in fact, played out. For example, one morning just before noon, I looked up to find that Linda was in her nightgown.

“Goin’ to bed kind of early, aren’t you, sweetheart?” I said.

She looked down, studied herself, and then burst into self-deprecating laughter.

“Stephen, what on earth is happening to my brain?”

“What does it feel like?” I said.

“Like there’s a huge traffic jam in there. Like everything’s too big and too fast and too loud.”

Or the time she insisted on fixing dinner, certain that she still had the touch. She expelled me from the kitchen, and I did not return until I smelled smoke. I found her standing over a frying pan poking at the charred lump of a pork loin with a meat fork. Naturally, we tried to salvage her efforts, but that blackened mess was a long, strange way from being edible. We tossed it at the far end of our backyard and had to laugh when we saw that even the neighborhood’s stray cats avoided the burned meat as if it had been cursed by a witch.

As things started truly “goin’ South” and the risible scenes fewer and fewer in evidence, I continued to read “A Christmas Memory” to her. At times it was all that would quiet her in the face of her fits of anger and her neurotic tendencies to hide things and toss objects into the trash or the toilet, including forks and spoons, dimes and quarters, her wristwatch, and, once, even her wedding band.

“Oh, my, it’s fruitcake weather,” I would intone, and she would smile shyly and find stillness if only for a few moments.

As days passed, increasingly, she grew unable to tend to herself.

Then the nights became nightmarish, crowded with eerie hallucinations. For example, we were visited by “good” Stephen and “bad” Stephen, the latter enraged Linda, leading me to a temporary solution: I told Linda that I had confronted “bad” Stephen and warned him that I would rough him up if he ever came into our house again. It worked for a time.

But then one day there was no Stephen at all.

“I don’t know who you are,” Linda said with a puzzled grin, “but thank you for taking care of me.”

I remember that day as if it were yesterday—the sensation of being hit in the chest with a fist of thorns. My wife—my beautiful, intelligent, creative, loving wife of 53 years—*did not know me*. I shrank to being the stranger beside her with clumsy attempts to bathe her and comb her hair and brush her teeth and change her diaper and spoon apple sauce and scrambled eggs into a slack mouth.

One night she woke in total consternation. Her face hovering over me in the darkness, she said, “Hey, you, who said you could sleep with me? I don’t know you. Who said you could?”

I had to scramble on that one. I took a deep breath and scrubbed my face with my hands. Eventually, I gathered myself and an answer rose in my thoughts: "God did," I murmured.

To my surprise, it seemed to satisfy her.

As the inevitable approached, Hospice and Home Care Assistance, truly like angels of mercy, arrived to give me some relief from the 24/7 demands. They assured me that Linda could live another six months. But a rare form of brain atrophy had other plans.

She lasted only three more weeks.

Oddly enough she passed quietly just at the coming of dawn, plunging my life into the sudden-ended always of grief and disorientation. She had been all day busy dying, and I didn't fully realize it. She transitioned from somewhere inside darkness into the cold, implacable reality of first light. I couldn't bring her back. When I stopped resuscitation efforts, I apologized and gave her a long, wordless hug. She was gone. No sign of her ghost escaping her body. No flights of angels. No divine voice. God was sleeping late, I guess. Still holding her, all I could feel was the unsentimental embrace of all existence.

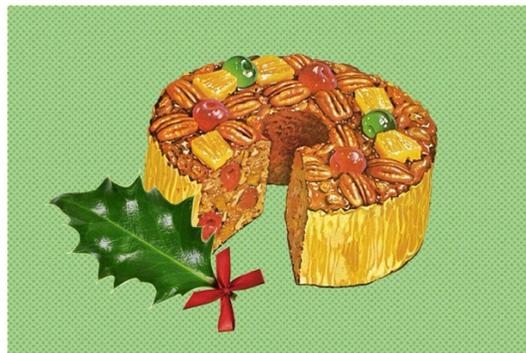
I stepped back from her.

She was as cold and silent as a stone.

Now, this year, when late November comes along and perhaps a rainy chill is in the air, Linda won't be here to say, "Oh, my, it's fruitcake weather."

And so.

I will say it for her.



## Westerly Summer

Daydrie Hague

Before the age of four, I have very little to say for myself. Beyond those years, memories of a New England summer abound—intense, fragmented, and shimmering. They do not rise in my thoughts as a narrative but, rather, as a collection of vivid sensory images that coalesce to define a specific place, time, and experience.

The time is the late fifties and early sixties. The place is Westerly, Rhode Island, a coastal community in the southwestern corner of the state. My family shared a comfortably weathered clapboard cottage with the Love Family. Yes, Love; Howard Love was a Methodist minister, and his wife Louise was a labor and delivery nurse who presided over my birth. Over time, between the two families, there evolved a pleasantly rowdy group of eight children in our summer collective.

The house was surrounded by a small pine forest in the front and a salt pond in the back. The pond, or its more romantic appellation, coastal lagoon, was the first place we ran to after enduring a four-hour drive along the Massachusetts Turnpike. Confined in a crowded station wagon with irascible siblings, our legs all scratchy with graham cracker crumbs, we were eager for release.

The pond ran the length of the property, and after being set free from the car, we rushed to take off our sneakers and step into the slightly brackish water, navigating the mossy rocks and tiny crabs, the air redolent of salt and sea and

honeysuckle. We breathed differently in that place, our imaginations alert and open to all the possible adventures the Westerly wind seemed to invite.

I think these memories are so enduring because we were allowed the freedom to roam this vibrant landscape and explore its common and amazing forms of life. Liberated from all the trappings of our ordered lives in suburbia, our days were given over to investigation and play.

Surprisingly, my recollections of the human dynamics within this summerly world are indistinct. I do remember the household was governed by a firm matriarchy, one that was at its most relaxed, since our mothers too had been released from at least some of their daily routines. Our fathers' presence, which loomed so large "at home," was intermittent and therefore less powerful. Even the children I played with every day, including my siblings, have been rendered, through selective memory, background figures in a drama in which I am the principal explorer.

We spent a great deal of time at the pond, paddling in the clear water, evading the fiddler crabs that pinched your ankles as you tried to catch them in makeshift nets, navigating the green and slippery rocks to inspect the minnows. And always the salty smell, and the omnipresent rhythm of the ocean beyond.

After these scientific excursions, we would arrive for lunch with

windblown hair, soggy clothes, and covered with mosquito bites. Each child took their turn being doused with a stinging burst of alcohol on every bite, followed by a swab of cold and chalky calamine lotion, which would then have to be reapplied after the afternoon swim. This was a ritual we endured; it was the price we paid for our freedom.

To a five-year-old, one of the great accomplishments of the summer was to participate in harvesting the blueberries that grew in bushes all over the property. While the bushes were tall, a small person could pluck berries from the lower branches to get a sizable haul and feel that they had had a significant part in the hunting and gathering. While there were no prizes for foraging, the sense of accomplishment when devouring those sweet and piquant blueberry pancakes for breakfast was extremely satisfying.

Another empowering adventure was a successful climb to one of the pine trees in the front yard. A dendrologist could tell you what kind they were—pitch pines? white pines? I have no idea, but from my perspective, their defining feature was: VERY TALL. The magic of these trees was that the branches were so uniform and close together, that you could climb them like a ladder. There was always a strong foothold and something secure you could grasp as you were climbing up. For a child who was neither brave nor strong nor especially coordinated, this was a feat. So what if you were covered in sap or resin afterward? Again, the price of freedom, and the novelty of self-discovery in a new environment. This was something an introverted middle child might claim to set herself apart from her siblings. Once, my older sister told me that as a small

child, I was a watcher. Here, I was a doer. Perhaps my memories are imprinted so deeply because these new experiences taught me something affirming about myself.

One liberty we could not claim was visiting the beach by ourselves. East Beach, not far from the cottage, was a three-mile-long barrier beach that separated Ninagret Pond from the Atlantic Ocean, not always child-friendly. We followed the vigilant mothers, trudging down the sandy path from the cottage like little pack mules laden with towels, pails, provisions, and Coppertone.

On East Beach the sky seemed so wide, the light so radiant, and the surf so powerful, I was always awestruck upon seeing it. The older children plowed into the breakers, but I was content to dance at the edges of the waves, to watch the mystical play of the water crash and recede, unveiling tiny sparkling pebbles on the sand. Then too, I could use my little pail and shovel and execute simple architectural plans, integrating seawater into my design. The sun on my head, the water at my feet, the sand in my fingers, I was thoroughly engaged, out of time, and wholly present.

In writing of this time, this place, these gifts, I am newly awakened to how my young self understood, without words, that I was part of this divine landscape and, therefore, home. The poet John O'Donoghue speaks to this blessing: *"May your senses always enable you to celebrate the universe/And the mysteries and the possibilities of your presence here."*

## What Am I—Ten?

Sandy Halperin

In the late summer and early fall of 2021, I read in three months, straight through, in order, all of Louise Penny's Chief Inspector Gamache mystery series. That was not the dumb thing I did. Only the context, I am pretty sure.

I was alone, feeling a little depressed. I had fallen in love with the intuitive and compassionate Chief Inspector, his gentle and wise wife, Reine-Marie, and the whole gang. I loved Three Pines, the small village in Quebec, so much that I'd move there if it existed. But as long as there was another Gamache mystery to be read, I could still visit.

I could stay at Gabri's quaint little B&B and hang out with Reine-Marie, Myrna, Clara, and Ruth, in front of the fireplace in Olivier's Bistro. We could laugh, drink wine and scotch. They could catch me up on all the latest happenings. I could visit Myrna's bookstore and discuss our favorite books over tea. Or maybe I could drop into Clara's art studio and admire the raucous brushstrokes and striking blues and reds in her latest painting. I would not be offended by the poet Ruth's insults but rather garner affection from her by admiring the brilliance of her pet duck, Rosa. Do you see how wonderful it was for me as I devoured those characters and stories?

I sadly sat in my study as my last Gamache mystery was solved. I felt such a loss. I didn't want it to end! It meant that my "life" in Three Pines was over—for at least a year anyway, until Louise published the next in her series! (There MUST be a next!)

Alas, nothing on my bookshelf or in my Kindle could comfort me. I was hungering for more Gamache tales. I longed to eat a chocolate croissant from the Boulangerie; to sip hot chocolate at the Bistro with Reine-Marie and Gamache listening closely to the details of his latest case.

And then it happened! I eyed a brown paper bag hiding in a corner on top of my desk. It was a large bag of Lindt's 70% cocoa extra dark chocolate truffles. I kept the bag upstairs to keep the truffles away from my husband, Michael. He cannot tell the difference between fine Swiss dark chocolate and Hershey's kisses. He pops the whole thing in his mouth and chews. A waste of good chocolate! Hence, the truffles resided upstairs and were within my sight and easy reach.

Now a good chocolate needs to be savored carefully, slowly, tiny bite by tiny bite. Oh, yes. I savored, all right. One dark chocolate truffle after another. Before I knew it, I had consumed half of the bag. By then I was so shocked by my greedy, self-pitying indulgence that it was too late! The drowning of my loss of Three Pines in chocolate was quickly replaced by a queasy churning in my stomach, nausea riddled with guilt and shame! All I could think of was: Can I get any more stupid? What am I—ten?

Were these two events related in real time? I honestly don't remember for sure. But they popped up together in my memory when I mused about "a dumb thing that I have done." Certainly, it isn't the dumbest thing I've ever done. But at the age of 75, you would think that I would have known better!

The next time I finish the latest in Louise Penny's Chief Inspector Gamache series I will go downstairs and invite Michael to share a glass of fine merlot with me. A much more mature response.



## **Don't Work—Now or Ever**

**William Tolliver Squires**

If you hate work, but you enjoy receiving a monthly check, you may be living on some else's dime. If you are living on a government dole your distribution may have a bothersome "seek work" or "must work" requirement. The following application letter may strike just the right tone to keep you comfortably out of work.

Fill in the blanks and fax or email your completed application letter to job recruiters, human resources departments, or other employers. You are guaranteed to keep your current endowment secure!

.....

Dear Prospective Employer:

Please accept my sincere apology for the need to use a form letter in applying for your open position in \_\_\_\_\_. Due to an unexpected wealth of opportunities, I have been forced to resort to this impersonal format. Rest assured, already I can see myself as \_\_\_\_\_.

I am narrowing opportunities quickly and will be giving prompt consideration to your opening. It is a pleasure to be on your list!

(X) \_\_\_\_\_

## Never Join a Catfight

Julia Hannay

Hara was an “indoor-outdoor” cat as we sometimes call them nowadays, but not back then. Of course, the dreadful diseases that cats seem to get from each other these days were either unknown to us or not yet present in the environment. But I digress.

Hara was a hunter. She was a seal point Siamese that could readily hide among plants and under bushes or up in trees. This was probably in large part because of her ability to be immobile but tense, ready to explosively take off through the air and over the ground. Maybe her fur markings helped. Her face was dark brown as were her ears and nose. Only crystal blue eyes and cream-colored fur marked the space between her facial mask and ears. Her head, back, sides, legs, paws, and tail were almost fully brown.

Birds, mice, and shrews were her main prey. An unexpected skirmish with a rat was costly. A nasty bite through a rear leg led to a veterinarian visit. The treatment was unpleasant, with wound cleaning, but I do not recall if sutures were involved along with a shot, bandages, and medicine. Worst of all was house arrest for an extended period until her leg had healed fully! Whether she was indignant about the whole episode or not, I do not know. If I were she, I would avoid rats, squirrels, and larger animals. I wondered if being a hunter and mistress of her domain, the house and yard, would change many habits. Or did she, like many humans, ignore the risks and “live to fight another day”? How can one know for sure?

One afternoon, through an open window, the “banshee” screaming of cats in a serious fight filled my head, and I ran out the back door, not thinking to take a broom with me. My darling Hara must be in trouble and might need me! The two cats were hissing loudly, with backs arched and tails held high as they circled a bit. The fight ensued before I could reach them, but clearly, Hara was in control, and maybe the approaching human had a tiny effect, probably not, because the cats were so focused on the now somewhat tangled fight. They broke off, with Hara in hot pursuit of the foe that had dared to enter her domain. At this point, you may be yawning and thinking, just another catfight, like others I have seen. Ho, hum. I would be also. Just wait. I guarantee that you have never heard such an ending to a catfight!

I chased after the warriors and saw Hara suddenly stop as the foe bounded through a front yard and across the street. I walked over to Hara, but she did not acknowledge my presence. She was shaking, the aftermath of the fight, I guessed. Then I behaved as only a youngster would. I picked Hara up to take her home. When her body reached the height of my chest, she, almost instantaneously, dug her fangs into the first finger of my right hand and held on.

In shock, I tried to fling her away from me, producing a cat in the air attached to my finger. I shook my arm several times, and she let go, falling to the ground. Blood was

streaming down my finger, dripping to the ground. I don't know how long this incident took and never will. Time can stand still. I ran home. I guess Hara walked home. After an explanation to my parents, I was quickly taken to emergency. There, the wounds were cleaned. I was given a tetanus shot and some medication to prevent infection.

Hara was not at fault so there were, of course, no consequences for her. We happily snuggled that night. Purring and loving were involved. I learned a lot that day. How little do we humans understand the behavior of not only wild animals but also those that we share our lives and time with ? They try to understand our behavior and give us much joy and companionship. We need to understand and appreciate their behaviors. I know that I have sometimes been slow to learn about humans as well.

Is there a moral to this story? Never join a catfight.



*When you sell a person a book you don't just sell twelve ounces of paper and ink and glue—you sell a whole new life. Love and friendship and humor and ships at sea by night—there's all heaven and earth in a book, a real book.*

– Christopher Morley, *The Haunted Bookshop*

# Poetry

Gerald Johnson

Poetry. What is poetry? Haiku? Free verse? Sonnet? Acrostic? Villanelle? Limerick? Ode? Elegy? Ballad?

One definition proclaims that poetry is “literature that evokes a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience or a specific emotional response through language chosen and arranged for its meaning, sound, and rhythm.”

How about doggerel?

Over the years at holidays, birthdays, weddings, even memorial occasions, I have written pieces that I have always dogged as doggerel. Doggerel is defined as “comic verse composed in irregular rhythm, verse, or words that are badly written or expressed.”

I can do that!

I have a file of my doggerel—perhaps over a hundred pieces. I think all the pieces qualify under that definition. They have always prompted laughter, general good humor, and a sense that something was being said. Perhaps the audiences were never quite sure of what was being said, but they sensed truths among the gigs and gags.

My definition of doggerel is it’s the worst verse written. However, high doggerel must meet some high standards. It has words that rhyme, a low standard. It is satire and hyperbole-medium standards. It tells a true story that evokes, that moves, that touches, that has a high meaning standard.

In all my years of doggerelling, I don’t think I ever fully reached that high standard until a very recent piece entitled, “Silver Sneakers.” “Silver Sneakers” was written for a luncheon at Ole Times Country Buffet & Bar-B-Que for members of Silver Sneakers, a MaxFit fitness program for seniors or wannabees. That’s why they are in Silver Sneakers. They want to be seniors someday.

When the doggerel was presented, it was very obviously well received with oodles of oohs, aahs, smiles, and laughter. That has been the normal response over the years. Yet, this time was different. It touched. It communicated. It moved. It had meaning.

How I know is that days, weeks, months, later, when I go to Silver Sneakers, younger olders and older olders touch my shoulder and, smiling broadly, call me a poet, even, and often, a Poet Laureate. They want to talk about what kind of poetry I write. How can I do that? Did I study that in college? One even asked if I got a degree in doggerel.

Well, no. I never understood poetry in Freshman English. All I knew was that T. S. Elliot said the readers of his poetry had to rise to his level of understanding; he would not write to their level. I think he was writing to me. I never got to his level. So, how do I explain my Poet Laureate status?

Clearly, it's not the writing or the composing. It's not gifted. It's just stuff. But it is good stuff. It tells a story that Silver Sneakers readers or listeners have all lived, experienced, and loved. They knew the meaning of every word, sentence, and expression, and every word, sentence, and expression had meaning. They knew hyperbole and satire and they loved it. They had done it all.

So, I now bask in my new status as Poet Laureate. It is so much more fun than Auburn University Professor Emeritus of Political Science.

Doggeral is the name of the verse I writ,  
Full of hyperbolic stuff and fluff and wit.

T. S., they don't have to come to my level at all,  
I rise to their level rather than fall.



*I've always tried out my material on my dogs first. You know, with Angel, he sits there and listens and I get the feeling he understands everything. But with Charley, I always felt he was just waiting to get a word in edgewise. Years ago, when my red setter chewed up the manuscript of *Of Mice and Men*, I said at the time that the dog must have been an excellent literary critic.*

– John Steinbeck

## “Given your age...”

Gerald W. Johnson

I live in an eighty-four-year-old house. Not literally. Well, yes, literally. That is, I am eighty-four years old and I am the house in which I live.

Any eighty-four-year-old house is likely to have some problems—façade, electrical, plumbing, roof, maybe even foundation, serious stuff.

When I go to the doctor, here’s what I say: “Doctor, I live in an eighty-four-year-old house, and I have a problem. You know, any eighty-four-year-old house has all kinds of problems—façade, electrical, plumbing, roof, maybe even foundation. I need you to find it and fix it. Want you to do three things.

One, I need a diagnosis. What is the problem? Two, what are the options to fix it? Three, what do you recommend? We don’t get cost estimates from doctors. Maybe we should.

This approach seems to work. My doctors immediately know what I mean, and some smile and appreciate it with a comment like, “Well, I am the plumber.” Doctors are organized to fit this approach. I start with my GP. If the GP determines I have a plumbing problem, I am sent to the plumber—Urologist. For electrical problems, I am sent to the electrician—Cardiologist or Electrophysiologist. And so on.

It works. So far, I have a stent in my kidney and stones removed, plumber (Urologist); a Pacemaker, just under the

skin on my chest, vascular plumber (Cardiologist); a Watchman in my heart, electrician (Electrophysiologist); foundation treatment (Oncologist); skin repair (Dermatologist); disc surgery (Neurosurgeon); hearing aids (Audiologist); eyeglasses (Optometrist); dental care (Dentist); and some ten prescriptions and supplements (Pharmacist). I have also visited a Nephrologist, Neurologist, Physical Therapist, Gastroenterologist, Hepatologist, and, of course, my Family Doctor.

At one of my fixing-it stays, I was asked and I volunteered to be a part of a genome study, and I now have a complete genome map. Quite interesting. I can tell you from whence I cometh, what foods I tend to like, and an assortment of dispositions. I have no gene changes that cause Familial Hypercholesterolemia. Boy, was I glad to learn that. Also, I don’t have Lynch Syndrome. I am obviously doing well.

I did learn one especially meaningful thing from the genome study. I grew up believing I had some indigenous genes in my makeup. That was because my dad often said that my genealogy was simple. Mom’s folks came across on the Mayflower and his folks met them. He believed that. Not so. Not one iota of indigenousness. I am, surprisingly, five percent Ashkenazi Jewish, a population that originated some 1,000 years ago in the Middle East and migrated to Eastern Europe, originating the Yiddish language. I think I am more pleased with that than I

would have been with the indigenous genes. Life is interesting.

All of this makes for a busy life. Hard keeping up an eighty-four-year-old house. My calendar is primarily driven by appointments with plumbers, electricians, and other tradespersons, with some time to work on a few other activities. Those few other activities make my eighty-four-

year-old house a home. Family, friends, food, faith, frontiers, and fun.

There is one change I have noticed, related to my doctors. Since moving into my eighty-four-year-old house, they all now begin my appointment with "Given your age...."



*Memory is selective and by nature faulty. That statement is probably doubly true for my memory. Add to that my penchant for exaggeration and the fact that I have changed some of the names for obvious reasons, and you have a memoir that may not stand up to close historical scrutiny. So be it.*

*– Chris Crutcher, King of the Mild Frontier: An Ill-Advised Autobiography*

## Pretending with a Four-Year-Old

Linda Lee

My four-year-old granddaughter, Johanna, and I are playing grocery store in her playroom at her home in Peachtree City, Georgia, to pass the time on a hot August day. She is the cashier, and I am the disoriented customer, not sure about the rules of our imaginative game.

“Mia Mia, write down these things on your list: one hamburger; blackberries; and 21 plants,” she instructs.

“Now bring your list to my store and buy the things on your list.”

I dutifully walk to the other side of the room where she has set up her pretend store along with her toy cash register. As I start to enter her store, she scoldingly tells me “Mia Mia, can’t you see that my store isn’t open yet?”

“I will let you know when I am ready to open,” she says. “Wait outside!”

Again, I dutifully do as I am told and wait for her to announce on her pretend microphone that the store is open.

Using her pretend microphone, she announces to all her pretend customers, “You can come in now. The store is open.”

She takes my list and begins to scan it with her pretend scanner. Her frustration is evident when she requests, or more accurately, demands, “Your list needs to make the scanner ding!”

I give her a puzzled look and she responds by repeating her demand. Once again, I respond with a puzzled look to let her know that I was not getting it.

With a heavy sigh and a tone of frustration, she gently touches my arm and says, “Mia Mia, this isn’t that hard.”

Having been duly put in my place, a light bulb comes on for me, and I realize that she wants me to draw the pretend bar codes for each item on my list.

After adding my bar codes, the scanner responds with a satisfying ding, and my granddaughter responds with a much-welcomed smile.



## My Name

### Bill Lee

In the 1970s, Bill Saluga was a founding member of the improvisational comedy troupe, Ace Trucking Company. His cigar-smoking, zoot-suit-wearing character was offended when someone called him by his last name. He shot back, "My name is Raymond J. Johnson, Jr., but you can call me Ray, or you can call me Jay, or you can call me Johnny, or you can call me Sonny, or you can call me Junie, or you can call me Ray Jay, or you can call me R Jay Jay, but you doesn't have to call me Johnson."

In 1948, when I was born William Henry Lee, Jr., our housekeeper, Annie Bell Stiner, said, "Let's call him, Bubba." And that was that.

In 1954, when Grace Dial, my first-grade teacher, called roll, I became, Bill.

In 1962, as an eighth grader, I won first place in the county science fair. My live honeybees crawled all over the place inside a large glass box and made honey. With a loud enthusiastic announcement to our class, Ronnie Wilkinson, said, "You're now Honeybee Lee."

In 1968, as an Auburn sophomore, I was elected fraternity treasurer. Not long afterwards, I became Scrooge. Most of the time, my fraternity brothers said, "That [expletive] Scrooge." I'm sure it was their way to express their brotherly love for me.

Since 1971 when we got married, my wife, Linda, has sometimes called me the invincible *Energizer Bunny*. I'm not sure she has always meant that as a compliment.

In 2009, when my niece, Sydney, was two years old, she named me Crazy Uncle Bill because I was always ready to play games and read books to her.

In 2010, when there were too many guys named Bill in my golf group at the lake, I became Wild Willie to differentiate me from the other guys named Bill.

In 2019, our granddaughter, Johanna, was born. To stop her from crying, I held her in my arms, walked around the room, and I sang "Be-Bop-a-Lula, she's my baby," a rockabilly song recorded on Capitol Records in 1956 by Gene Vincent and His Blue Caps. Now she calls me Bebop.

So, you can call me Bubba or you can call me Bill or you can call me Honeybee or you can call me Scrooge or you can call me Bunny or you can call me Crazy Bill or you can call me Wild Willie or you can call me Bebop, but you don't have to call me Mr. Lee.

*The beautiful part of writing is that you don't have to get it right the first time, unlike, say, a brain surgeon.*

– Robert Cormier

## My Bushwacker

Bill Lee

The right lens of my tortoise shell glasses was taped to the frame with an 18" length of white medical tape from a first aid kit. The broken fishing line that fit underneath the lens was dangling in midair. The nose pad wires were twisted. The right arm was bent outward so that it didn't fit over my ear anymore. And there was an inch-long cut beside my right eye.

"It looks like you could use some help," said Mike Halsey. That was on May 4, 2023, when I walked into the Medical Arts Eye Clinic in Auburn, Ala. Mike is my optician. He didn't even ask what happened. He said, "I think I can fix your glasses." Then, he took my glasses to his lab and went to work. He replaced the fishing line, bent the arm back into place, added new nose pieces, and cleaned the lens.

After I thanked Mike, I said, "I was in Gulf Shores on Tuesday and I went to the Flora-Bama Lounge, a bar on the Alabama-Florida state line. I was about to take a drink of my Bushwacker when a guy walked by my table. His baseball cap was on backward, and it had a picture of an elephant on it. His crimson t-shirt was emblazoned with the words 'Roll Tide' in large white letters. He must have noticed the Auburn logo on my jacket when he said, 'Auburn don't belong in the SEC.' I don't remember my reply, but the next thing I remember was that my Bushwacker tumped over, and my glasses got knocked off my face. One of the lenses made a 'clink, clink, clink' sound as it bounced across the concrete floor."

Mike said, "I'm sorry that happened."

I replied, "Thanks, but I must confess that I just made up that story because it sounds a lot more exciting than to tell you I ran into a sliding glass door at my brother's beach condo. I plan to pack a couple of Aubie Tiger stickers in my suitcase and mount them to that door when I make my next trip to the beach."

I told Mike, "These glasses are special to me. I got them at Lens Crafters in Laguna Beach, Calif., in 2014. They replaced the glasses I lost in the ocean when I grabbed my three-year-old granddaughter, Kaiya, when the fierce undertow tried to take her out to sea."

Now, I'm happy that my glasses are repaired. Each time I put them on, I'm reminded of how thankful I am that Kaiya is alive. She will celebrate her twelfth birthday this month.



## Never Saw it Coming

Bill Lee

Never saw it coming, never saw it coming, and I only had myself to blame.

I was about thirty when our oldest son, Austin, was born in North Carolina and close to forty when our youngest son, Brian, was born in Miami. I was still under fifty when Austin graduated from high school in Georgia. Never saw it coming.

I guess my attention was on the biweekly payroll, the monthly loan payments, and the equipment repair invoices of our restaurant business. My attempt to avoid bankruptcy loomed large. I was still taking out home equity loans to meet payroll during January and February.

Right in the middle of all of this, Austin graduated from college in New York and Brian graduated from high school. Austin married Sharon. Brian married Ally. And we sold our restaurant business when we were 58. Never saw it coming.

We sold our home in Marietta and moved to Lake Oconee in Greensboro, Ga. Camden and Kaiya, our first two grandchildren, were born in Berkeley, Calif. Social Security and Medicare called to set up my account. Never saw it coming.

We moved to Auburn to live in a townhouse. Austin's family moved to Atlanta. Johanna, our third grandchild was born in Pasadena. At age seventy, when we flunked downsizing, we built a new home in Auburn and sold our townhouse. Never saw it coming.

In October 2022, David, Dr. Mendoza's nurse practitioner, did a physical exam (DRE) of my prostate and found a hard mass. He said, "I'm 80% sure you have prostate cancer." An MRI followed in November. My anxiety has been running wild since I began this journey.

I'm 74, and I've been blessed with good health all my life. I've only had a couple of minor surgeries, and my only medication is Lipitor, 20 mg. per day. The only smoke I've ever had was a cigar in college, and I got bronchitis. I've never been much of a drinker because all the alcohol goes to my left eyeball, and it stays red for days. Even with my Whopper sandwich addiction, I'm only slightly overweight. My wife, Linda, calls me the invincible Energizer Bunny.

A targeted biopsy in January confirmed I have prostate cancer. However, my PET Scan in February indicated "no spreading" outside the prostate. On February 28, I went to Emory to discuss treatment options not available in Auburn. On March 23, I met with a radiation oncologist in Auburn. I chose Emory for my treatment which begins April 5.

A few months ago, I thought I'd live to be a hundred. Now, I'm just thankful for each new day. Somehow, I thought old age would never find me, but it sneaked up on me and caught me by surprise. Never saw it coming. Never saw it coming.

## Elvira

Bill Lee

In the two weeks between my CT simulation on May 16 and my first radiation treatment on June 1, a medical physicist and dosimetrist worked with my radiation oncologist to prepare my radiation dosages. I wondered just what “witches’ brew” they would concoct.

My 25 outpatient treatments (fifteen minutes each) are Monday through Friday, June 1-July 6, 2023. I will not be radioactive, and I don’t have to follow special safety precautions at home.

At 1:00 p.m. on June 1, I checked in for my first treatment, drank 24 ounces of water as instructed, waited to be called, and walked down the hall as I followed the other “Lemmings” who were there for treatments.

Keith, my radiation therapist, asked me to “drop my drawers” and then gave me a small white towel to cover my privates. Next, he asked me to lie down on a cold stainless-steel table. He put my feet into a leg mold to hold them in place, put a towel under my head, and lined up my body, using my three Sharpie “X Marks the Spot” drawings located below my belly button and on my hips.

Then he turned on the large External-Beam Radiation Therapy (EBRT) machine that directed high-energy rays from outside my body into my tumor and surrounding tissues. The radiation slows the speed of cancer growth or stops it completely, to kill the cancer.

The machine, which I named Elvira, looked like a monster to me. As Elvira’s rectangular, square, and circular white arms rotated around me, I wondered if any second she might decide to grab me up and take me to her lair. She made buzzing and whirling sounds as she rotated, and she had what looked like an umbilical cord shrouded by 36 “vertebrae.” Some of her arms were held together with long, straight steel tubes. Her circular arm had a round glass “evil eye” that seemed to look into my very soul.

I wondered if the fact that I had lain perfectly still was the reason Elvira ignored me and I experienced no pain. Regardless, I plan to repeat the perfectly still approach for my next 24 treatments.

*I can't play bridge. I don't play tennis. All those things that people learn, and I admire, there hasn't seemed time for. But what there is time for is looking out the window.*

– Alice Munro

## Flying Squirrels

Bill Lee

Today is August 19, 2023, my 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. I'm standing waist-deep in the Moore's Mill Club swimming pool wearing my navy-blue swimsuit and orange swim shirt. My Nike goggles are hanging from my neck.

My four-year-old granddaughter, Johanna, is standing on the edge of the pool just past the three-foot-deep marker on the side of the pool. She is shoulder-to-shoulder with her 3½-year-old second cousin, Ila.

Johanna says, "BeBop [that's what she calls me], come a little closer."

I reply, "Johanna, I think it's a trap."

"No BeBop, it's not a trap."

"Well, let me count to three." As I say the number one, I see two flying squirrels, arms outstretched to the sky, heading right at me.

While in midair, they yell, "It's a trap!" I'm totally drenched by their monstrous splash. I lift each of them out of the pool and onto the side. And for the next hour, it's *dêà vu* all over again, just ten years later.

One might think I was caught off guard. However, thanks to my 2013 experience with my 14-year-old grandson, Camden, I knew what to expect. It seems like yesterday that Camden wore a mischievous smile and stood with all ten of his four-year-old toes curled around the deck board of the dock at Lake Oconee. He lured me in with "Come a little closer, Grandpa."

Camden is now six feet tall and weighs two hundred pounds. As I lift Johanna and Ila out of the pool for what seemed like the one-hundredth time, I feel Camden's hand on my shoulder and I hear him chuckle and say in a soft voice, "Grandpa, it is. It is a trap, and I love you."



## The Third Party

Terry C. Ley

A third party—one who did not sign the lease—showed up to stake her claim on our cottage several days before we moved in.

Like the squatter she was, she had left her possessions on the premises—two empty Cool-Whip cartons, the sole occupants of the patio on the day I was there to measure spaces that we planned to fill with beds and books, towels, and trinkets.

Meow!

While in the master bedroom, I heard not just one meow but a succession of plaintive cries to signal something, but I do not know cats well enough to interpret their language or their personal dialects. After searching a closet or two and finding nothing, I followed the sound to the door leading to the patio.

Miss Kitty was the first to greet me at our new home. Whatever she was telling me that morning, it soon became clear that those Cool-Whip cartons were hers, and she was there to stay.

Our new neighbors seemed anxious to tell us Miss Kitty's backstory. A feral cat, she had benefited first from the care of the woman who once lived in the cottage next to ours. When she moved, Bud, who lived in our cottage, had assumed responsibility for providing food and water—and, we learned, generous amounts of Southern hospitality. He sometimes invited her indoors for food

and comfort, turning her outdoors to do whatever feral cats prefer to do instead of sleeping in front of the fire or playing with squeaky toys or yarn on a stick. Since Bud had moved to live near his daughter in Florida months ago, other neighbors had filled the hospitality gap.

After Mari heard Miss Kitty's story, she whispered to me, "We're not going to be this cat's family." For several good reasons, we thought, we had not owned any pets during our long marriage. We had both had pets as children, and we had both experienced Mari's mother's late-in-life devotion to two cats, a mother cat whom Peg invited in one day and one of the kittens that Mother Cat had surprised Peg with several days later.

Although we had help with our moving that was skilled and personable, moving day was hectic for us—some heavy lifting, lots of snap-decision-making, and not much caffeine or food. Mid-afternoon, while Mari spent some time in one of our rocking chairs on the patio, Miss Kitty came to visit, perhaps to survey what sorts of goodies she could come to expect from us.

Because I was not present then on the patio, I do not know what transpired. But when Mari returned to the tasks at hand, she whispered, "I think we need to buy some dry cat food."

Mari had been hooked by a wise not-so-feral cat.

Shy at first, Miss Kitty sniffed the hand that fed her but quickly turned to her private buffet. Soon, though, she sniffed, waved her tail, and lingered for soft rubs on her head, around her ears, and under her chin. Within days, her switching tail, her purr, and her throaty trilling assured us that she would return the next day—and the next.

Mari is faithful in dispensing dry cat food several times a day, along with fresh water. (Today, a very hot day, she put a few ice cubes in the water.) Because of an incident with Peg's cats when I was alone in her house on a hot summer night with them and a billion fleas, my primary contribution has been defensive, purchasing pills to prevent fleas and ticks and spiriting them into Miss Kitty's tuna entree once each month.

Where Miss Kitty goes when she leaves our patio, we do not know, and we do not ask. Miss Kitty is very private, and a meow can tell us only so much. But she spends much of each morning and afternoon on our patio, eating, drinking, grooming, and snoozing. She has become very friendly with Mari because Mari is her provider—food, iced water, and incessant scratching and petting.

I have warned Mari that she must not become too intrusive by checking on Miss Kitty too often or invading her privacy on her patio too often, but Mari pretty much ignores my counseling. It is generally not hard for us to keep track of each other in our cottage, but when I can't find Mari, I know where to look.

Mari will be on the patio, consulting with her therapy cat.

## **Murder at Camellia Cottage**

Mari spends a few minutes with Miss Kitty on the patio every night before lights out. When she opened the door last Wednesday night, she called me to witness what she saw: a rat (quite dead). Miss Kitty stood, proudly, I guess, in the midst of evidence of the carnage. Had the intruder attempted to take some of Miss Kitty's seafood kibbles and tangled with the wrong feline? Mari disposed of the body, and we both cleaned up the crime scene the next morning.

Two nights later, a dead bird lay in front of the patio door. Miss Kitty had fled the scene, but she was our prime suspect. Again, we disposed of the body and swept up the crime scene.

Mari has had a chat with Miss Kitty about why we don't want such gifts. Did her meow signal her understanding? We shall see.

I sought some information from Purina about why cats bring dead animals home. "The simple answer to why your cat brings you dead animals is because it is a survival instinct," according to their website. "Your feline is a tiny predator and although they have been domesticated for thousands of years, this instinct to hunt can still be seen in your pet." And, according to a British cat behaviorist, being the recipient of gift prey might be seen as a compliment, for cats will bring home the prey that they have hunted and killed to an area where they feel safe, comfortable, and secure. Such behavior cannot be stopped, she says, but it can be minimized. Moving our bird feeder further from the patio may be a good idea, but some of her other suggestions are less practical for feral

cats, such as putting a bell on Miss Kitty's collar, letting her out at certain times, or redirecting her energy through play.

When I look into Miss Kitty's soulful eyes, I have trouble imagining her as a serial killer, but the recent evidence belies her innocence. That British cat behaviorist says that cats in the United Kingdom alone probably kill one hundred million creatures each year. That's a lot of carnage.

Last week, while Mari sat with Miss Kitty after dark, a doe ambled by. A couple of nights later, a doe (the same one?) ran by. What was chasing her? One of the other feral cats on the Camellia Place campus?

Is it possible that, some night next week or next month, Mari will open the patio door and see Miss Kitty's latest gift...venison?



Miss Kitty goes shopping

*If it can't be read aloud, it's no good. I don't mean by this that your narrative is supposed to represent actual speech. But your prose must have the rhythms of speech....Behind every novel is a man telling us a story face-to-face.*

- John Braine, *Writing a Novel*

## **Mama's Ambrosia**

**Charles Julian McDonald**

Classical meaning: Ambrosia - "the food of the Greek or Roman gods."

Humph! No matter what Mama had on her mind, her product had nothing to do with those dudes!

To Mama, ambrosia was a citrus dish prepared at Christmastime with mainly oranges, other citrus, and coconut slivers. I worked at the Jitney Jungle (food store) where Woodrow, my boss, would get in a big shipment of oranges, grapefruit, tangerines, and navel oranges to make good ambrosia. The coconuts were shucked; that is, the outside of the coconut was removed.

As soon as Woodrow got his shipment to the store, I would deliver a load of citrus and nuts home so Mama could start working on the blessed mixture and other dishes. Mama would start peeling the oranges, to get them down to the pulp and juice. Other fruit would be added as needed, and don't forget the coconut!

My job was to crack the coconuts on the concrete back porch. I was armed with my Daddy's hammer. After I had cracked the coconuts, I dug the meat out and collected the fruit into a large bowl.

When I entered the kitchen with my part of the feast, I noticed Mama had a lot of the fruit all over her apron, and all. It was time to grate the coconuts, add the slivers to the ambrosia, and then put it in the refrigerator.

Skip to Christmas Day. The dinner was ready. There was turkey and dressing (stuffing as it was called in the north), gravy, rice, varying vegetables, home-baked bread with butter from the cow, and so on.

We were to have guests, the Windburns. This was not usual, but Daddy wanted to have them. There was Henry, Dora, and Mr. Kennedy (the caretaker of Henry's farm), and then there were the two old maid schoolteachers, Ellie and Maudie.

They were greeted at the door. Their coats were collected and piled in the front bedroom. We sat around making small talk, and a few presents were exchanged.

We were finally seated. Daddy sat at the head of the table. Mama and I were seated near Daddy, next to Miss Nellie. Henry was seated next to Daddy on the other side of the table. Dora sat next to Henry, and Maudie sat at the other end of the table.

Daddy was busy carving the turkey, putting a generous serving on each person's plate. Finally, after everyone had been served and about 45 minutes had passed. I noticed

that Miss Nellie was busy passing dishes to my dad. It was “Mr. Mac, won’t you have this and that?” to the point that my Dad was getting bothered. It went on and on until Henry said, “Mac, don’t pay any attention to that old heifer. Tell her to leave you alone...but she can’t hear herself pass wind!”

My dad didn’t say anything because Miss Nellie had passed my Dad some homemade peanut brittle, and he tasted it to the point that he could not say anything. His teeth were stuck together! Somehow, with giggles, this broke up the evening and the forgotten ambrosia never got passed!



*Delay is natural to a writer. I walk around straightening pictures on the wall, rugs on the floor—as though not until everything in the world is lined up and perfectly true could anybody reasonably expect me to set a word down on paper.*

– E. B. White

# The Panama City Store

Diane Miller

The store building still stands close to State Road 229, its brick-patterned asphalt tarpaper not much worse for being almost eighty years old. Granddaddy's house beside it burned long ago, but that's another story. The store building has a history of its own.

The original plan was grandiose, boasting upstairs living space and a lower half-level meant to house an appliance repair shop, in addition to the main floor sales area. It shortly became apparent, in those days before good heating and air-conditioning, that the uninsulated upper floor did not lend itself to occupancy. The lower level likewise proved useless for housing an on-call business, because there was no telephone service available. The central area, however, soon became a popular spot for local general commerce.

The big front porch was the first draw. Even in the sweltering heat, the concrete floor stayed cool, and the high canopy roof caught breezes. A couple of ancient rockers and an assortment of benches invited visitors to stop and pass the time. Many customers came on foot from homes more than a mile or two away, or sometimes they would arrive in a wagon or on the back of a mule. The respite of a rocker was a welcome break for these travelers. They'd drop their salted peanuts into a cold RC Cola and spin their yarns while they and the animals rested. (I learned then that mules like peppermint sticks.)

Even in the '40s, 229 was a good, paved road, and so there was automobile traffic also. Passing motorists could gas up at the towering pump shaped like a lighthouse, with a red metal base and a round logo on top that resembled a giant lollipop. Between the two was a large cylindrical glass gauge that held the measure of gas being purchased, filled by cranking a pump handle on the side. A hose would then drain the fuel into a vehicle or a metal can for transport.

When the weather was more moderate, the activity took place inside. In the back corner was a sitting area with a picnic table and several comfortable chairs. Grandmother could turn out lunches of cornbread and collard greens, field peas, and ripe tomatoes there, on the battered electric stove that sat high on spindly legs. She could mind the store, feed the farm hands, and visit with the neighbors without a minute wasted. Mornings and afternoons, the corner was just for visiting. When it got really cold outside, a big Franklin stove kept that corner cozy and took the chill from the whole building.

The store held its own brand of magic. Granddaddy sold products from his land, garden vegetables and site-butchered meat and fresh milk, butter, and eggs. Most of the shelves held staple goods, like flour and coffee and grits—even homemade jellies and home-canned vegetables. (Regulation was much less stringent then, though I never heard of anyone getting sick.) There were even some manufactured products that bore labels printed with Granddaddy's name and logo, thanks to a fast-talking stock salesman. Jars of penny candy and bubble gum lined the counter beside the cash register; Moon Pies and

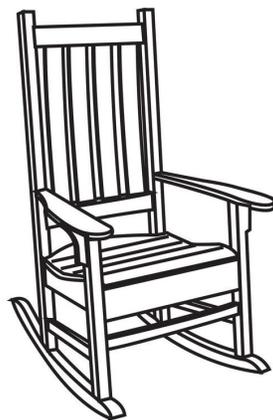
pork rinds and Baby Ruth bars hung on a rack. Besides food items, there were bolts of fabric and small hardware items, like nails and hand tools and garden rakes. Best of all, at Christmas there were toys and decorations.

The walls were a source of wonder. Everywhere you looked were ads posted for Prince Albert tobacco or BC headache powders, Feenamint or Ovaltine. Calendars for several years, too pretty to throw away: the Dionne quintuplets smiled down from 1944, 1945 Coca-Cola beauties held on to their picture hats, Lionel trains pictured stepped-up post-war production for 1946. Still, my favorite wall décor was the red Mobil Oil Pegasus. In summer, these fascinating items competed for wall space with curling strands of sticky flypaper, which also hung from the pullcords of the lazy overhead fans.

Close to the front door was a chest cooler full of soft drinks—Nehi and Grapico and Buffalo Rock, along with Coke and RC. Each customer would put a nickel on the counter and plunge a hand into the icy circulating water, searching for their drink of choice. If Granddaddy could catch it, he would never sell the last one of any type of drink. He said he just hated to be completely out of anything people wanted. The logic may have been questionable, but the sentiment was real.

Granddaddy died when I was only eight years old, and the Panama City Store went with him. Despite its name, the store was nowhere near any town named Panama City. In fact, Granddaddy never even saw a town by that name. To him, the name simply evoked exotic wares and experiences. I guess the store did have those, just not as usually envisioned.

Yes, the building still stands close beside State Road 229, a tribute to the craftsmanship of novice builders with limited funds. It's been empty for most of the years, largely used for storage, though it did enjoy a brief incarnation as a ceramics shop. The gas pump is long gone, but the front porch still beckons those who wish to rest. Perhaps the store is not completely out of the things people want.



## Memorable 1960 Summer

Jack Mizell

My most memorable summer was in 1960, the summer between my having graduated from high school and wanting to head for college so that I could experience a successful career.

So far, I had learned by experience that an idea is only as good as its possibility of being executed. Most people considered that I had executed well the idea of having a highly significant and successful high school experience. I graduated in the top ten of my class, was the president of the Student Council, and was a member of the honor society and the Beta Club, as well as participating in many of the school's social events.

Wenona Martin, the high school counselor, had deduced that since my father was an electrician I should want to go to college and major in electrical engineering. She arranged for me a scholarship to Vanderbilt University that offered me a tuition scholarship plus a room in a university dorm.

The problem was that I did not want to be an engineer, and Vanderbilt was too far away. My turning down the scholarship offers disappointed my mother, who knew that the family had no funds to enable me to go to college unless the college was like a high school, without a cost burden.

Seeing the disappointment on my mother's face, my father immediately said, "If God can get the children of Israel across the Red Sea, he is not going to have any trouble getting you through five years of college." Nothing else was said.

The question that remained was clear, the idea of going to college, which appeared to be good, but was worthless because there were no adequate funds to execute the idea.

In May 1960, I applied to Auburn University for entry into the School of Architecture and was accepted in August. I had been reared to believe that in the physical world seeing was believing. Also, believing was seeing when you submitted to the Spirit that controlled everything.

Auburn was then on the quarter system. Tuition was \$75 per quarter, and it took a minimum of \$300, including tuition, for each quarter's cost. Transportation for frequent round trips to Auburn would be an additional cost.

Realizing that essential funds were absent, I believed that I could effectively compete and successfully finish five years of architectural school even though my physical stature was limited by the environment from which I came. I lived in northeast Dale County on unpaved roads and in a house with no modern facilities. The closest neighbor to the house was a mile or more away, and the family had only one car, and my father was employed as a technical school instructor at a campus

that was thirty miles away. Becoming an architect was not a goal I had seen before, but my father worked on construction projects materializing plans drawn by an architect. I believed it best to set my career sights on the highest professional planner; after all, organization was the accumulation of assets without instruments of coercion.

The execution of a college degree, especially a five-year course, was deemed a good idea, but survival of the idea seemed bleak. There was no paying summer job available to me.

I began selling needle threaders house to house for one dollar per needle threader for which I had paid \$0.27. I had to borrow from my grandfather a car that would carry me on my daily journeys. Some customers, when they learned that I was trying to work my way to college, voluntarily bought five needle threaders. It seemed that going to college to better oneself was a noble idea that everyone supported. My grandfather was extremely supportive because I was one of his 38 grandchildren, and with his help, I might be the first to have earned a college degree.

The lasting experience taught me submission and when to stand still and when to move forward. The lesson began in early August when I had been out selling and arrived back home to find that Sam Peebles there waiting for me. The first question he asked was if I could type. I told him that I could because I had taken a typing class in high school and had taken two years of Latin if he needed that rarity as well. He told me that there was a seasonal job for me at his father's cotton gin five miles away in Clopton. The job entailed making out cotton bail loan papers. The pay was \$.75 per bail. I immediately agreed to take the job. I was to report the next morning at 6:00 a.m.

The Auburn fall quarter starting date required me to be on campus at 2:00 p.m. on September 17. On the Friday before September 17, Mr. Grover Peebles called me into his store, which is also the post office in Clopton, and handed me a check, saying that it was in the amount I earned so far. Mr. Grover insisted, when he gave me the check, that I make myself available every weekend throughout the remaining weeks to come to his place and spend the weekends preparing cotton loan papers, bale loan papers that would be held for me to fill out. I told him that I would if I could arrange transportation because I had none.

He said nothing but handed me the folded check. The check amount was \$617, enough for two quarters. The rush of emotion that overcame me was decidedly beyond words. He said, "I believe that you will do as well as or better than Festus Walker, who I helped and is at Auburn three years ahead of you. I believe in you, and I need you to come back and finish this crop year's loan papers." After regaining my composure, I simply said thank you and that I would. That's all I could say, fighting an imminent tearful expression. God must have had his hand in the matter.

At times, events occur that escape understanding. The culture of the times when these events occurred must be understood before the motives can be communicated. Mr. Peebles believed that everyone's object was a top priority. He

believed that I should keep Jesus as an object, not personal popularity or a mental persuasion that fraternal relationships would generate opportunities for success. Trusting God was the secret to every successful career. Success comes from His intervention, not from man's involvement as a dependent object. He believed that if you were obedient to God, God would be responsible for the consequences.

There was a lesson to be learned. Studies in the school of Christ continued even after I graduated in 1966. The world changes normally for the worse, but He is continuously conforming you, as His adopted child, to the image of His beloved Son, and delivers you, a believer, from darkness into the light of the Kingdom of His dear Son.

He will supply all your needs through His riches in glory. First, after submission to His commandment to believe in the name of Jesus Christ and to love one another, which is his will. Therein is the promise that confirms His will. "The Lord not only places Himself with the power of God unto salvation between us and our sins but also places Himself with power between us and our circumstances.

True wisdom in all times of perplexity and difficulty is to stand still to wait only upon God, and he will assuredly open the way for us and then we can peacefully and happily go forward.

To know how it came about, I moved from despair to hope, not knowing what was to happen or how. I spent several days trying to sort out what had transpired.

Difficulties vanished. All my doubts and fears were chased away. My heart became established, my conscience relieved, and my understanding now enlightened. I came to realize that it is impossible that one who forms a part of Christ's body can never perish: we are members of His body and of His flesh and His bones. The essential fact to remember is to lay claim to His statement. "My sheep hear my voice and know them, and they follow me, and I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish, either shall any (man, devil, or anything else) pluck them out of my hand. My father which gave them me is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand."

It is the perseverance of the Holy Ghost in opening the ears of the sheep. It is the perseverance of the Son and receiving all ears are opened. It is the perseverance of the Father and keeping through His own name, the blood-bought flock in the hollow of His everlasting hand.

The matter concluded that unconditional intervention is a gift given by an Almighty God. God the Father was again the source. God the Son was his channel, and God the Holy Spirit ghost was the power of application and enjoyment. It was all of God from beginning to end, from foundation to top stone, from everlasting to everlasting.

In summary, the path to be taken was exposed upon which going forward was commanded. In truth, to know myself I realized that there was nothing that I could

do better than to stand still. If the Lord is fighting for us, in truth we had better stand back. Shall we run before him? Shall we busily intrude ourselves upon his sphere of action? Shall we get in His way? There could be no possible use in acting when One is so perfectly competent to do all. Move forward only upon His leading.

However, when God, in his great mercy, opens the way, faith can walk therein. Believing is seeing. To see before believing leads to no peace and finally death itself. Self-distrust was ever-present and replaced with that element which answers thereto is confidence in God. It is when our eyes have seen God's salvation that we can walk therein, but this can never be distinctly seen until we have been brought to the end of our own poor doings.

The light exposed that eventful summer has lighted the path for three decades as a registered architect. The world would highly appreciate the fact that I also successfully created six businesses and rose to the top of aviation by achieving an FAA license that was given to a multi-engine, instrument-rated commercial pilot who owned three airplanes. To rely upon one's worldly achievements is considered an abomination to the Lord.

What other seed has grown from that first 1960 summer planning? Four healthy children, intelligent and prepared for an honest livelihood, is a definite cherished gift. The first mention of love in the scriptures is that of a father's love for his child.

The wife of 58 years, Alice Faye, the blessed gift, has steadfastly and unmovably sourced what was a primary instrument of joy for me in this earthly life. The death of our first son is beyond our mortal understanding. We desire to meet the son again by going to where he is.

There can be no greater joy than to know that it is God who works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. He has declared that we should esteem others better than ourselves. He promises to keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Him because one trusted in Thee.

He is the great architect whose plan is comforting and whose power is such that the plan can be enacted. How do I know, was it not visually confirmed in the summer of 1960? Believing is seeing.

*A blank piece of paper is God's way of telling us how hard it is to be God.*

--Sidney Sheldon

## Six Grandmas on the Loose in Japan

Lili Muljadi

We are childhood friends who were born in Indonesia. We all grew up on Surabaya and went to the same school, Petra Christian School. Some of us were together from kindergarten through high school, some only from kindergarten through sixth grade, and some only through middle school. Now, three of us live in the United States, one in England, one in the Netherlands, and one in Japan. We had not kept in touch with each other until the invention of social media. Now, we talk to each other through WhatsApp almost every day.

Tik Sie, who has lived in Japan since she graduated from high school, agreed to be our guide and translator for our reunion in Japan. She arranged everything for us. She lives in Fukuoka, the capital of Fukuoka Prefecture on Kyushu Island. Our tour consisted of visiting small towns around Fukuoka in a van with a driver.

Our first impressions of Japan were that it is very clean, that people were very friendly, and that everything is high-tech. The airport security guard was a robot. When we rode a taxi from the airport to our hotel, the driver kept making wrong turns. We were worried about how much we needed to pay him, but he turned off the meter.

When we arrived at our hotel, we got another surprise. There was no receptionist. There was only an iPad on the counter. We had to register ourselves and scan our passports and credit cards. The iPad also took our pictures. When everything was completed, we got a code to unlock our room. The room had three full-size beds, a sofa with a coffee table, a full bathroom, a kitchenette, and a washer/dryer. Our first Japanese culture lesson: no shoes beyond the entrance. Sandals, room sandals, and bathroom sandals were provided.

Because we were hungry, we went to a café near the hotel. It was past lunchtime, so the only available meal was a hamburger. The three of us from the United States were ready to leave, but Tik Sie warned us that we might not be able to find another restaurant that was open because most restaurants are closed in the afternoon. The hamburger was delicious, totally different from American hamburgers. The hamburger was seasoned, and it was served with rice, salad, potato, salad, noodles, and Japanese gravy. I do not drink alcohol, but this time I made an exception, to try sake. I did not like it.



## Acronyms

Kim Murdock

In the world of selling software, there are a lot of acronyms. You learn them and you have the “keys to the kingdom.” Of course, many of those acronyms could be obsolete by the time you learn how to inject them into a discussion with the CIO (Chief Information Officer). “Latest and greatest,” “cutting edge,” and “soon to be released” are easy phrases to memorize and use even for the technology noob (newbie). But HRMS, HTTP, SaaS, WWW, OAUG, OFA, OFSS, ORDBMS, and about 400 other just-Oracle software terms might take an expert some time to figure out. Yes, Figure Out because experts don’t want to appear dumb or not cool. You have to figure them out. You don’t ask your colleagues. No one wants a DUH response. At the time of this story, I was in the telco vertical; we sold *big-time, expensive* applications software (no acronyms needed there) to the world’s largest telephone/communications organizations, cable companies, and investor-owned utilities. Sometimes my group fought for a piece of the oil/gas industries, making the point that some of them are utilities. My favorite acronym in my group and an icebreaker question is POTS. Rarely did our prospects guess it, although it was their business. **Plain Old Telephone Service**. The answer would get a laugh or a groan in meetings.

Y2K (essentially, January 1, 2000) was a crucial acronym for me, for everybody. That term represented a lot of work, a lot of hard *brain* work, and even physical work (climbing through ceilings to drop cables wasn’t in my job description, but I frequently did it). I battled through a frantic pace and a revolving door of colleagues, all wanting a piece of the real deal. Everyone in the world, at home and work, was worried about Y2K or midnight on January 1, 2000. Wow, the year 2000! Would any software service or application or even the hardware or even our little Nokia flip phones work? My tennis friends of the decidedly low-tech world asked what would happen. Was I worried? They were concerned about their microwaves working or whether their PCs would boot up. What about their cell phones? Was I worried? Nope, I wasn’t worried. Not scared. I promised them all that the sun would come up, the earth would keep spinning and rotating, and our cars, phones, and microwaves would perform as usual. On that day, I would be sleeping late. Don’t worry, be happy!

However, in my professional life, the Y2K era of selling software was based on selling FEAR! Not an acronym but real FEAR! Of course, I pled, you must buy the latest and greatest or upgrade to the current release and BUY, BUY MORE, BUY BETTER, BUY ORACLE!

My days for about two years were spent flying coast to coast, up and down, meeting with prospects (BUY NOW!) and existing customers (BUY MORE NOW, UPGRADE NOW!). I went to Oracle Applications User Groups meetings (OAUG but add NY, LVNV, DFW, ATL, or CHI in front of OAUG to know which region I was in that day, this day, any given day) to assure them Oracle was prepared for Y2K, and they must prepare as well. The best way to prepare? BUY! The world whirled by as I fine-tuned proposals, talked IT directors off the

ledge, and assured them that they too could wake up on January 1, 2000, confident that all was well. I convinced decision-makers that our products solved any Y2K dilemmas. Easily, Safely and Compliantly. There would be no FOMO (fear of missing out). Of course, in my personal life, I had a great sense of FOMO: I wasn't home to have a personal life except to dump my suitcase out, repack it, and play tennis on Sunday. But unexpected things happened.

The biggest deal that would impact my Y2K performance was the hardest deal to get to geographically. Or even, culturally. This was no sophisticated Southern Company, located right there in Atlanta and spanning the region I knew so well. Georgia Power, Gulf Power, Alabama Power, and all their subsidiaries. You could say Southern Company was my comfort food; I knew them well, I knew when, what, and how much they would buy each year. And they were like me, Southern. No acronyms needed. But my bigger deal was a large investor-owned power utility for Northern Indiana (about half the state). Fly to ORD (O'Hare Chicago never, ever MDW), drive south through farmland for two or three hours. No scenery. Stop at the Cracker Barrel halfway there. There was no fine dining in Merrillville, Ind., and because all of the people on the Oracle Bus were coming from all over the U.S., Cracker Barrel was right off the highway and worked for most of us. Comfort food! We did this roundtrip journey about seven times in a year, convincing them to come to Chicago only twice. Who didn't want a meeting in the Sears Tower? It's a 110-story building right there in the Loop with miles and miles of magnificent view. Okay, it was slightly shaky if you were looking out the windows, but it is a great Oracle Center. Well, folks from Indiana didn't want to drive to Chicago any more than we wanted to drive to the middle of nowhere.

This same deal caused a day I still describe as "Black Friday." Another story for another day. My team and I almost quit this \$10 million deal. Unheard of! Conference calls up and down the chain, and when the chain reached the COB (chairman of the Board of Oracle, Larry Ellison, a Chicago native), we had to back down off our ledge, regroup, and get back to work. We needed to show up, perform the required dog and pony show, and wheel and deal until the end. Our new time slot was the three days before Thanksgiving. Crazy! But we weren't handing this big deal in terms of money and geographic turf over to SAP. Just not an option.

Okay, back to the Y2K mania. The frantic rush was FY99 (Fiscal Year 1999), which started in 1998. I spent decades doing this and never knew what day it was! Or year or time zone. My life was a series of airport codes—ATL>ORD>LGA>DFW>ATL and then all over again.

By 3:00 a.m. EDT on June 1, 1999 (midnight California time), the deals were booked or they slid into FY00. Organizations around the world were either on the Otrain (Oracle train) going towards a bright and sunny beginning of the Year 2000 or they were not. Alas, poor lost souls.

By December 31, 1999, it was time to party and dance like it was 1999! (Thank you, Prince, for that anthem!) However, on the night of January 1, 2000, mid-FY00, I was OMW

(on my way) to MIA (Miami) because of SSDD (same stuff, different day) and having FUN (finally understanding nothing). I was not understanding how the largest power company in the state of Florida had scheduled a three-day meeting starting on January 2 at 8:30 a.m. Wasn't this only the second day of the new millennium? Standard protocol. I remind the reader that I did predict everything would go on as the year began as the last year of the 20th century. No stopping. Keep going. Sell. Sell More. Sell More Now.

In September 2000, well into that life-changing year professionally and personally, I was using other acronyms. Replaced ORD with CDG - Not Chicago but Charles De Gaulle. OMD - O Mon Dieu! MerciBCP - Merci, Beaucoup NISOURCE. Thank you very much, Northern Indiana Public Service Utility! I should thank Southern Company too; they contributed to my Y2K success. Of course, they did - Southern is their name!

And I thought "ooh la la" as I stepped inside Palais Garnier (the Paris Opera House) with the ethereal Marc Chagall ceilings while wearing a gorgeous, satiny ball gown complete with evening gloves from Miz Scarlet's. This was surreal for a small-town girl from Alabama. Miss America wore evening gloves! Oracle's Sales Club for doing astoundingly well in FY99 during FY00 was a spectacular, beyond my imagination, first-class week in Paris and a few steps beyond. And right beside me was my handsome boyfriend wearing a tuxedo. No, not quite Bond. James Bond. But close enough! Soirée cravate noire à Paris! Working Hard, Using Acronyms, Dream Fulfilling!

The End/La Fin



## My Grandmother: On Living Gracefully

Nancy Penaskovic

My maternal grandmother was a paragon of living gracefully. Born in Northern Ireland as a Roman Catholic, she struck me as a strong, independent woman. She knew, only too well, the prejudice against Roman Catholics and held a grudge against English rule and dominance. Because she was a warm, supportive, and wonderful storyteller, I spent many a day sitting on her lap, listening to stories about her early life in a pictorial area of Ireland.

Grandma took personal pride in her appearance, and I was amazed at the lotions and paraphernalia she assembled in her dresser drawer. She was determined to manage her aging lines. She worked hard and often held a New Year's party for her fellow workers. As a youngster, I did not know what she did. All I noticed is this: on separate Saturdays, she would take us to her workplace, the Central Park Junior High School where she let us play with the equipment in the gym, while she worked like a beaver.

It wasn't until I entered junior high that I noticed a note with the name of the principal and workers listed. Anna Tracy was listed as "the Matron." It then struck me that she was a female janitor. That's why she had the keys to every room. Reflecting on that, I think she taught me that one should be proud of one's position since every job is important. My grandma never felt inferior to others and thoroughly enjoyed her work.

Grandma had a hairdresser to keep her grey hair at bay. She had her hair carefully coiffed. She always wore a special "Sunday bonnet." Though she had her share of pinching pennies, she never felt deprived. Instead, she reveled in the riches of every day. One never grows old when one considers it as an opportunity to improve and to treat another person kindly. A person remains forever young if one cherishes one's memories, loves one's grandchildren, and tells them stories that they will remember as they look forward to tomorrow.



*I find out more and more every day how important it is for people to share their memories.*

– Fred Rogers

## A Letter to Myself

Nancy Penaskovic

I am soon to change my present name, Sister Nadine, and return to my family name, Nancy Hare. It has been a wonderful eleven years, and now I will endeavor to live the wisdom given to me each day. In 1962, I entered the convent of the Sisters of Mercy in Albany, New York, to learn how to examine and live the interior or spiritual life. Living as a religious nun taught me order and discipline. I often resisted the invitation to grow in maturity. I moved from a world of science and practicality to one of meditation and contemplation. It was difficult to let go of the nursing profession as a consecrated nun.

I needed to forget the idea that I failed as a religious sister. I was certain that the calling to be a nun ought to be a lifelong commitment. Now I must take the greatest risk of all, to return to the life of a layperson. Paramount in my heart was this question: How will my lessons learned as a nun enrich the lives of others?

Will I have the chance to show that others mean more to me than my self-interest? Will I be able to provide the resources and help that I gave the disenfranchised as a nun? Hopefully, I learned the ultimate value of cold silence. Those long nights of practicing the “grand silence” taught me to feed the moment with new insights. One easily hears the subtle voice of wisdom in the space of silence.

Eleven years of nursing practice have certainly taught me the art of healing comfort. How one chooses to use this art is an open invitation to help the needy and the vulnerable. The convent provided me with master teachers and professors. The world of literature opened to me the richness of poetry and story-telling. I was given a brand-new thermometer to measure my internal temperature. The narrow parameters of my life greatly expanded my vistas. As one door closed, another door opened, thus expanding sparkling new vistas. My final journey took me to open the first freestanding, in-patient hospice in the State of Alabama. The years I spent as a nun made this possible, thanks to the grace of God and the Sisters of Mercy.



## When War Was My Rival: A Woman Ponders the Men She Lost to Combat

Charlene Redick

The day is packed, and Interstate 85 is jammed on this trip to Montgomery to give an 8:15 lecture on her book of essays *When War Was My Rival - A Woman Ponders the Men She Lost to Combat*. Lunch at 11:30 with an old friend in physical decline, back to Auburn by 2:30 for a meeting, and rain with tornados predicted near the Georgia line. Has she checked her oil this month? No. Was the ache in her thumb joint any better? No. Did she like this new tint in her freshly shampooed hair—golden, not ash blonde? A little brassy. Was she on time? Barely.

Now here she is exiting at Mulberry Street—Jackson Hospital to her right, Huntingdon College to the left—with fifteen minutes to spare; and at the foot of the ramp a geezer combat veteran is hauling a luggage rack with a backpack tied to it, and a sign: *VIETNAM VET WILL WORK FOR A QUARTER*.

Not what she needs today, although seeing him dressed in camouflage fatigues and a beige canvas jacket and with longish hair under a clear rain poncho, you could have mistaken him for an E-3 on bivouac, except there are no Quonset huts, and his left-side limp has him moving like a crab, his abdomen under his thorax, as he hails three cars in front of her with a smile at the money dropped into his canvas-wrapped cup.

Does he rent a room in this modest neighborhood of plainspoken houses? Has

he enough money for a razor and shampoo, for he is clean-shaven and with the mottled skin of a man who spends his time outdoors—the attenuated mirage of a bronze watercolor?

Two cars ahead now, a guy in a red Hyundai rolls down his window and gives the vet a dollar, then struggles to merge with traffic to the right. Another dollar from a grey Buick Black executive is dropped into the container. Her fingers rummage through the dash tray for change: a quarter, a dime, and two pennies. She moves her car up, rolls down the window, and then as he turns expectantly to her, she hands the vet the 37 cents.

*Not a lot today. Hold on, here's another quarter.* She gives him the second quarter.

He is looking at her as though in a trance: his amber eyes enraptured, raindrops threading his golden eyebrows, and on his face reverential respect mixed with wonder. She smiles at him. *Be careful in this rain. Tornados.*

He stares as if in awe at the sacred sublime. *You are so pretty,* he says.

She is startled into hesitation but then recovers. *Lovely of you to say that.*

She would like to speak with him about when he was a warfighter, young and dumb and doing what he was told in a

conflict her generation loathed. Death, in countries far from her, of classmates, brothers, cousins, fathers, boyfriends, husbands in victories bargained away at the war operations table the next day; hills and bunkers paid for with lives; grenades in tunnels making minutiae of everything that moved; bamboo traps over jungle gulleys rigged with poisoned bamboo shoots; the birth of the drug crisis in America; and the loss of war heroics when a man's courage meant nothing against the grinding, calculating Asian fighters who, in their war of attrition, killed robotically, and weed, alcohol, or heroin was the anesthesia for dealing with the pain and isolation of the ill-conceived battle of five deadly years.

She wants to know where he had served, who he had loved, what hits he had taken, what injuries he had survived, how he had ended up here soliciting spare change on a major highway, and generally, why, fifty years later, he works for a quarter, which is not that different from the \$40 a month Uncle Sam paid for the gift of his life on the line but that amber glow and his state of awe hold her back, and the congested traffic on the ramp commands her attention.

She has never understood giving herself over to worship, which speaks to her of powerlessness and a fear of inadequacy, but this man has it pegged as a longing for attainment and is on a first-name basis with the moments in life when profound respect is called for. It gives him an advantage, things can change in a second as he declares what he sees and wants, asks for help to get it, and bows to the journey of attainment. She, on the other hand, when she is not a moralist questioning everything, makes it up and figures it out as she goes along.

But she must move now, for twenty drivers behind her are trying to get to the hospital, to class, to the Capitol, and she has a block to walk in the rain to her lecture.

*You take care of yourself.* He nods. She nods. *I'll pray for you. Bye now.*

*An angel.* He murmurs, his amber eyes following her.

She merges onto Mulberry Street.

He was her contemporary in times of lethal chaos and as a man and woman, they led lives of entirely different trajectories. Now in late midlife, nothing is a challenge for her but arthritic joints and the residual limitations of a broken ankle when she was thirteen, and a need for an upgrade in her eyeglasses. A lifelong journey free of addiction, injury, disease, bad choices, she manages her health with over-the-counter remedies for her maladies and, as a writer, turns discomfort into a poem, play, or story every day. Four children are grown and in good shape, four grandchildren doing well, a spouse at home who adores her, friends who love her, a pretty cottage in the woods—literary and artistic—packed with art—cardinals and chickadees outside her windows that wake her with song, a digestive tract that can deal with almost any food she favors, a bowl of honey crisp apples on her desk—a life well lived with very few regrets.

And he: hauling a carrying cart along sidewalks and interstate ramps, wrapped in camouflage and a poncho on this cold February day, wet from head to toe and almost invisible—a wounded man, perhaps caring shrapnel, mesh patches, surgical wire, titanium rods in his bones, plaque in his skull, propped up

by weed, pills, liquor in a flask in his pocket, a former prisoner of war of the chicken cages of Hanoi, torture, malnutrition, untreated injuries, killing fields, carpet bombing, war insanity from crazy politicians, surgery without anesthesia, tunnel bombs, loss of eardrums, vision, locomotion, mental instability, the wearing down in this war of wars of attrition, agent orange, friendly fire, battle fatigue, a family that didn't work out, dead parents, forsaken children, or maybe now living with his elderly father or his son, with church on Sunday transported in a church van, grateful to be alive, nursing a battered life force of a brave but poor soldier, resigned but still open to awe, an aficionado of possibility, with such blind pride in being an American it never occurred to him to even whisper what other men were screaming: HELL NO, WE WON'T GO! No bone spurs, flat feet, no conscientious objector, Canadian emigrant, Peace Corps volunteer for him. A child of a veteran, perhaps, he went, foolhardily some would say, to do his time, to dodge shame, or Leavenworth, or the FBI, to face combat in a no man's zone, hippie demonstrators lined up at the airport at his return, being spat upon, mocked by protestors, his feet on American soil finally with his wounds wrapped and his discharge papers in his pocket, still living to compliment a beautiful woman whose protection he took seriously.

Down College Street now, thinking of March when she will be in Montgomery again on perhaps a more pleasant day and how she might park under that redbud tree at the corner of the ramp that should be in bloom, and they might speak, the two lawn chairs in the back of her car planted on the intersection rise, she offering coffee and donuts, he grateful for the food and care, pouring forth on what

it was like fighting rapid raids and the enemy melting into the forest during the attritional strategies of la Drang Valley, or the bloody 77-day siege of Khe Sanh, a diversionary tactic for the Upcoming Tet offensive, or the bullheaded approach to the grinding Hamburger Hill, and the protective policies of endurance designed to minimize casualties as the war mutated into a broader counter-culture movement, and then the holdout during the Paris Peace talks that had the South Vietnamese defecting in droves at the Fall of Saigon.

But then maybe not.

The news had women in Boston dead from blunt force trauma by men they met at bars, strangulated by Uber drivers and hook-up-site partners, stuffed into the trunks of cars with lime and baking soda sprinkled over their dead bodies, serial killers identified through DNA with 72 victims over thirty years, beheaded, cut into pieces, thrown into lakes, little girls raped and discarded to rot in the woods, elderly widows sodomized.

Today, trust in men was a sketchy idea at best, a death trap at worst, and the joy of the unfolding of the mystery of a woman an irreverent and denounced doctrine. No longer was she what he got up for each day. Making money, competitive sports, virtual thrills, and pornography were where his time went, not on inspiration from a woman. And there was no argument: when a woman was attractive it was dicey being friends with men, dodging misunderstandings all the time.

The war between the sexes, a conflict of distancing and dismissal brought on by the female's pursuit of individuation, fair practices, and non-

hostile workplaces, was on. *Me Too* is not *Miss Reynolds*, there is a typo in this letter. *Come in for your spanking*. It's no longer the way we were when she was young and confined by the rules of men, and he would have killed or died for her, and at the risk of being fired, she marched on Washington and wrote letters to the editor, her senator, and congressman to end the war and bring him home safely, and compensate him with a square deal for serving in this hell on earth.

Pornography-addled, drug-addled, angry at his inability to keep up, absent longing, or the will to risk, complacent, jaded, driven by the endless seduction of the virtual and the superficial, the soulless and the trite, men had hardened into absentee landlords of a woman's

heart. It was the end of the age of male/female exhilaration, when we were moved, roused, stirred, motivated to engage in the delicious tension of sharing ideals, laughter, causes, meaning, intimacy, and bodies—all now ill-advised.

On foot now, under her Paris umbrella in the rain, she hurries to her lecture on the men she lost to combat, weighing one more time the risks of a conversation on a balmy March day under the redbud tree down the street, with this seventy-year-old soldier who still works for a quarter, regarding what their blindsided generation forfeited and pioneered fifty years ago.

Not a good idea.



*We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospection....We write to be able to transcend our life, to reach beyond it. We write to teach ourselves to speak with others, to record the journey into the labyrinth.*

– Anais Nin

## The Truth about Living till Eighty

Charlene Redick

Autumn is a suitable time for goodbyes.  
Look at the cold fingers of winter creeping  
Among the begonias that are clinging to the frigid soil,  
The unpredictable nights and days,  
The glint of yellow—as gold as coins—gleaming defiantly among the rusty leaves,  
Boring in their dying after their showy goodbye,  
Full of pride, slow to acquiesce, knowing it is not yet over.  
*I will hold my head up*, they say as they fall from the branches like suicide cases,  
Clinging like desperados as the cold slaps them repeatedly, forcing their departure.  
And yet it is not yet time to let go?

I tell you memory will whip your ass.  
All you did for me when you could not get enough of me—  
The days of promises kept.  
Now look at us: Interruptions constantly. Soul-sucking conversations about our health. Agony  
when we bend to do yard work.  
A hug from a friend in church yesterday, masked and frail from the ravages of cancer, haunts me.  
Yet here we are waking and groaning.  
*Okay, got another day*, as if I wanted another day of this boring, incessant self-absorption—Old  
age's distraction from panic.

We are stealing each other's existence.  
And I reinforce this behavior by forgiving you.  
The personal plague that contradicts *Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be*  
Is more than I can take.  
I do not like anything that filches one's freedom, steals their faith in the future—including reality.  
I have misplaced gratitude,

I am having a dreadful day.  
I miss the times when all I had to do was want it, and you got it for me,  
Utter what I needed and there you were with your tools.  
Why can't we have the elderly version of lover's inspiration?  
Isn't it enough that it is harder to hear, see, walk, think?  
Do we have to give up touch and imagination in this *stop the steal*?  
I am having a difficult day.

It's your turn.  
List what we can live for,  
Get hope back into our corner!  
Bring me my favorite jacket and I will brush my hair  
And put some of that skin-shimmer on my face,

And tuck that cobalt blue scarf in the neck of my sweater  
And count how we are lucky.  
I'll pack some sandwiches and hot chocolate,  
And we will have a picnic in our car, out of the wind,  
And watch the sun blazing as it sets over the university.

Tell a few jokes about all these absurdities.  
That is what you are best at: not letting it get to you.  
I have cursed you for it!  
But it is damn sure needed now!  
Commence!



*In the long, silent hours, I am trampled by memories, all happening in one instant, as if my entire life were a single, unfathomable image. The child and girl I was, the woman I am, the old woman I shall be, are all water in the same rushing torrent.*

– Isabel Allende, *Paula*

# My Sister, Peggy

Jim Rose

At my birth, she was already nine years old and had been the baby of the family for almost a decade. My other brothers and sisters were young adults at the time. I have been told that Peggy did not immediately embrace my presence because she was suddenly cast into the background.

By the time I was four years old, we had each reached a grudging acceptance of the other and sometimes enjoyed our interactions, though neither would admit it. With childhood came the awareness that my sister could be a very good thing to have around. She read me books and took me to church, ice cream parlors, the swimming pool, the county fair, and countless Saturday movie matinees, where Roy Rogers shot up criminals and always got the girl. I did not know why Roy wanted the girl but decided it was not important.

The only things Peggy asked in return were that I dance and harmonize with her. These were not occasional small requests. We had to do both daily, usually in the late afternoon or early evening when I wanted to be chasing fireflies in the front yard. She begged, cajoled, threatened, and eventually walloped me upside the head to get my compliance. In a testament to her perseverance and my sore head, she typically won out, and I accompanied her through such classics as “Danny Boy” and “Sentimental Journey.” By the way, I still know the words to both some 75 years later.

In my eleventh year, she introduced me to the foxtrot, the jitterbug, and the rhumba. Her introduction consisted of a threat; I would either learn these steps or she would beat me up. I thought I could take her, but caution won out, and I soon mastered the basics.

Life takes funny twists and turns. In the sixth grade, our class was to perform an operetta, *Hansel and Gretel*. An hour out of the classroom was granted each day for practice. All the pretty girls were involved, so I decided to try out, and because my sister had drilled dance and singing into me for years, I played the part of Hansel. Ordeals are often followed by a reward.

During my twelfth year, Peggy gave me a gift that defined my adolescence. His name was Monroe Allen. He became my brother-in-law. He taught me many things. Here are just a few: baseball, basketball, poker, Rook, how to drive a car, and how to ask a girl for a date. In short, though I had birth brothers, he was my brother in residence.

Because of Monroe, I played varsity basketball throughout high school. He and Peggy never missed a game.

During my senior year, I applied for admission to Auburn University, but I had no way to pay for attendance. There was no free money in our family. Peggy found a way. She worked for the Alabama Highway Department, and she wrangled my acceptance into their engineering intern program. The associated summer job paid for most of my attendance costs at AU.

So all of the above was enough, right? Not so fast.

As I neared graduation at Auburn, my trips home were punctuated by Peggy pleading with me to meet a young lady in the Wesley group at Troy University. Her name was Glenda Gregory. Peggy had been trying to play matchmaker for years, so what would be the harm in meeting a girl Peggy liked very much? We met. I was impressed. Peggy and Monroe took us to the State Fair in Montgomery. There was something different about this girl. After dating for over a year, we married. And after 57 years, that marriage is still going strong.

So, as I think of my sister today, I ponder, *What did she really do for me?*

Not much. Just everything.



*Forward motion in any piece of writing is carried by verbs. Verbs are the action words of the language and the most important. Turn to any passage on any page of a successful novel and notice the high percentage of verbs. Beginning writers always use too many adjectives and adverbs and generally use too many dependent clauses. Count your words and words of verbal force (like that word "force" I just used).*

– William Sloane

## Dragnet Valentine

Jim Rose

**Valentines's Day, 1951:** Troy, Alabama, Elementary School. Mrs. Chaffin's third-grade class.

The story you are about to read is true. The names have been changed to protect me from harm. My name is Jim Rose. I am not a cop. But I carry a badge of honor from the slings of outrageous fortune.

**10:05 a.m.:** Mrs. Chaffin handed out to each student small paper bags containing 6 pieces of what would later be called conversation candy. I immediately ate the one entitled "**Giggles**" because it was the first one I saw. The others I slipped into my desk drawer for future consideration. It did not occur to me at that time that the candy could be used for nefarious purposes.

**10:10 a.m.:** We headed out to recess. Some students, including a couple of my best friends, were seen exchanging candy pieces with girls. I found this to be quite suspicious.

**10:35 a.m.:** We returned from recess. Sarah (Bebe) Craft passed by my desk and dropped off a folded note topped with a single piece of candy that said, "**Ooh-La-Lah.**" This was quite unlike Sarah, who generally enjoyed expressing her great disdain. I opened the note. It said, "Ink Pink, You stink!" followed by, "Hold your nose, here comes Jimmy Rose." Bebe used these terms endearingly whenever she met me in the hallway, at the water fountain, or going to recess.

**10:40 a.m.:** I decided to exact revenge on my tormentor. Looking over my remaining pieces of candy, there appeared to be some real opportunities. I shuffled them around enough times that Ben Hicks behind me thought I was playing checkers. With great satisfaction, I looked over the results. I scribbled out a few quick sentences and licked each candy to stick it in the right place on the notebook paper.

**11:00 a.m.:** I admired my handiwork.

I hope you are crushed by a mountain of **Teddy Bears**

**My hero** would be the **mama bear** who put the final **crush on you.**

When finished, you would be **sweet pea soup.**

**I love you** not. Don't **be mine, Valentine.**

**11:10 a.m.:** Mrs. Chaffin went to the toilet. I casually sauntered past Bebe's desk and carefully placed my handiwork in front of her. Quickly returning to my station, I smirked as I waited for her response.

**11:12 a.m.:** Bebe puts her head down on her desk and starts softly crying. Wait a minute! This wasn't in the plan. Did I cry every time she insulted me for the past three

weeks? No, not once. She soon got herself back together and received heartfelt condolences from her buddies. When Mrs. Chaffin reentered the room, all was calm.

**February 14 to May 27:** Bebe continued her verbal assaults upon me with renewed fervor. Thank God for summer break. By the time autumn rolled around, she had moved on to more creative endeavors.

**October 1957 (years later):** We are in Mrs. Kelly's Core class in eleventh grade. Bebe's desk faces mine, abutted one to the other. We have been casual friends for several years. Could it be more than friends? Bebe has put on curves and things. She has long auburn hair down to her shoulders and flashing hazel eyes that scream, "Danger!" Mrs. Kelly is out of the room. Bebe is slowly running her foot up and down my calf while talking to me. This is driving me to consider public sex. She just smiles and continues talking. I would ask her out but she is dating the middle linebacker on the football team. He is four inches taller and forty pounds heavier. He has already made it clear I should stay away from his girl. She looks at me softly and says, "You know why I was so mean to you in third grade?" I thought for a moment and replied, "I have no idea." She winked and grinned, "It was the only way I could get your attention, Dummy."

**October 1957 to the present day:** I have no idea what motivates women and never will.

Vive la difference!

**Case closed.**



*Learn to write by doing it. Read widely and wisely. Increase your word power. Find your own individual voice through practicing constantly. Go through the world with your eyes and ears open and learn to express that experience in words.*

– P. D. James

## Knowing My Life as a Technicolor Story

Mary Ann Rygiel

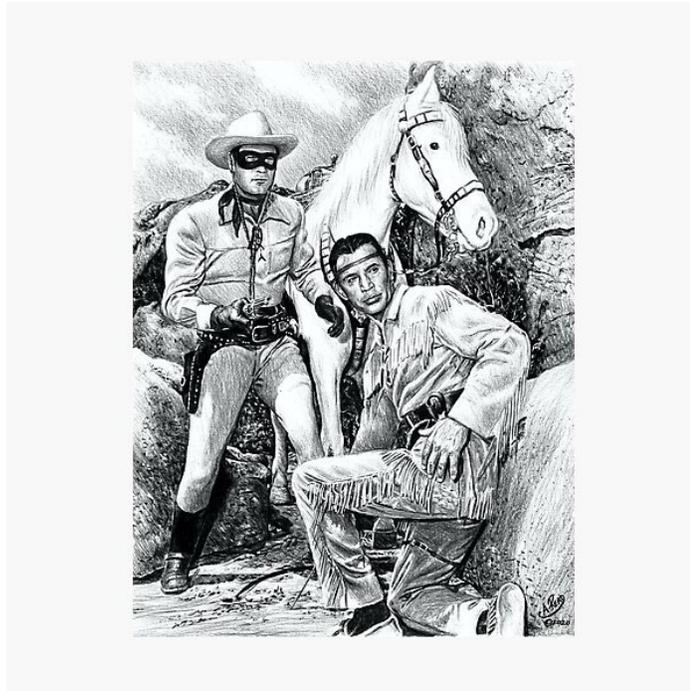
I am three. I sit cross-legged on the floor in front of a large black and white television in my Aunt Helen's living room. Everyone is watching: Aunt Helen and Uncle Ed, her large husband who was a Chicago ward boss; my younger sister is sitting with my dad; and my mother is holding my baby brother, so it must be 1950. Other relatives may be seated, too, all watching an episode of *The Lone Ranger*. Aunt Helen asks me questions in front of everybody about the story. What is happening? Who is doing what? I answer. I know, because I love the story, especially the Masked Man who wears white and rides a white horse, and his Indian friend named Tonto, who wears a bandanna and a jacket with fringe and rides a pinto horse. I always look forward to going to their living room to watch, to see the Lone Ranger ride Silver, who might jump, and Tonto ride Scout, and especially to hear the question at the end: "Who was that Masked Man?" There is always dust when they ride away. They talk about how good my answers are. Aunt Helen says I can come upstairs again and watch with her and Uncle Ed. It pleases me. So many stories will come to me later on, one about a beautiful chestnut horse who has a cruel owner, another about a young girl who leaves her silk purse outside on a night when it snows, another about dances at a small English countryside town named Meryton.

Then I am in a Walgreens with my mother, my sister, and my baby brother. I want to look around, so I do. Suddenly, I see only store shelves and a counter with a cash register and unfamiliar faces. I am too short to see what is on the counter. I wander over and say, "I can't find my mommy." They help me. My mommy isn't even mad at me, just relieved to see me. I don't cry that time. Years later, when I am a grown-up eighth grader I go to a different Walgreens, this one in the 5,000-person town of Steger, Illinois, after school to sit at the soda fountain counter and order a Coke with a squirt of cherry or vanilla flavoring in it. I prefer the cherry.

Another time, when I am crying and only a tiny baby, my father carries me to church and sits in front of the statue of Mary to pray. I stop crying. I don't remember this, but I hear about it later. This is followed by many prayers, novenas, Masses, retreats, and now, talks on Augustine and Just War theory.

One more time, I am walking on a hot, sunny, almost treeless street on the South Side of Chicago in the early 1950s—this is before blockbusting—and I try to jump on my shadow. I don't succeed, but I keep trying to do it from different angles. Later on, I read about Galileo and sounds traveling away from each other, but not at age three or four. A teenage babysitter who helps Mommy sometimes walks outside with me, so my baby brother can sleep. The babysitter takes a picture of me standing in a vacant lot. I am wearing overalls and a tee shirt. My hair is short and brown with a barrette and Buster Brown straight. Only later at the old age of eight will I begin a life of perms.

All of these things have made me who I am—stories I can picture in technicolor, being lost and finding my way, crying and banishing sadness in a church, and trying little unattainable thought experiments in chiaroscuro. Jealous Caroline Bingley says in an irate moment of Elizabeth Bennet, her apparent and unworthy rival for Mr. Darcy’s attention, “In her air altogether, there is a self-sufficiency without fashion, which is intolerable.” In the blended flashbacks, I see myself, someone self-sufficient in society, but ultimately dependent on God’s grace for continuing my life and finding my way.



*Words, so innocent and powerless as they are, as standing in a dictionary, how potent for good and evil they become in the hands of one who knows how to combine them.*

– Nathaniel Hawthorne

## **Sumer Is Icumen In; Lhude sing, cuccu**

**Mary Ann Rygiel**

The yard at our two houses in Steger before my senior year in high school is a vivid, eternal summer for me because my whole family is there: mother, father, me, the oldest, then my sister, and my brother. You are already thinking, resisting “Steger? I never heard of it.” It is about an hour’s drive down Halstead Avenue from downtown Chicago. Surrounding towns are Chicago Heights to the north, Park Forest to the west, and Crete to the south. You know these places: Chicago Heights, refuge of Al Capone; Park Forest, which once had a Marshall Fields two-story store with an escalator, air conditioning, and a fancy café on the second floor; and Crete, where an Ole Miss player, Laquon Treadwell, came from, and Mrs. Craig, one of our landlords. Steger was a town of 5,000 when I grew up, a working-class town.

Our first house in Steger was at 38 W. 31<sup>st</sup> Street, a two-bedroom house for the five of us. The backyard seemed vast for running. An alley connected us with a little plot of ground on a vacant lot facing the street I walked down to my first grade. My sister planted seeds for a watermelon among short rows of corn, green beans, and tomatoes, which our mom cooked or preserved. Just as my sister’s watermelon grew to the familiar elongated spheroid shape, and we looked forward to it as a delectable summer treat in hot Steger, someone walking by stole it!

But it was not so shattering to all the countervailing goodness of backyard summers: warmth on the skin, chasing fireflies with glass jars with lids with breathing holes; a pint of vanilla ice cream sliced into four (none for my mother, who always said she didn’t want any), one thicker than the others for my dad; penny candy like root beer barrels and paper with candy dots on it for sale at the newspaper store, where you could buy a small brown bag full for five cents; a neighbor’s grassy hill that we could go to the top of and roll down; an eight-party phone inside mounted on the wall which I liked to pick up and listen to big Minnie complaining about skinny Louie, until Minnie told on me to my parents; a stack of my mother’s aprons, which my father sold in the neighborhood.

The later yard, from when I entered third grade until I was about to graduate from high school, was full of lilacs, peonies, tulips, and roses in May and June, which we used for our May and June altars; a swing set that jumped out of the ground if we swung too high; a croquet set; a badminton set; summer shorts; a neighbor’s dog named Stubby, who lived in a pen outside his owners’ house; walks to Hartman’s Grocery store to buy a pound of ground beef for 39 cents a pound, or to Oertel’s Meat Market, across from Hartman’s, where the owner’s wife worked behind the counter, and it was whispered she had a thyroid condition. You could tell because of her neck and her eyes, people said.

The summer was full of abundance and joy: Schwinn bikes, listening to the White Sox ball games with my dad in his and my mother’s bedroom, Daddy mowing the grass with a hand mower stored in a one-car garage, the surprise of an occasional garter snake behind

the house, dandelions (“Don’t blow the puffballs, Mary Ann!”), lemonade, iced tea. Happiness.

My summer tee shirt says Summer/Is Not a Sentence/But a Poem. Here is my gloss on it:

**Summer** Sumer Is Icumen In/Lhude sing, cuckoo. Is this one of the earliest poems in English, either Icelandic or in a medieval Wessex dialect? When sung in roundel fashion, it sounds like endless summer.

**Is Not a Sentence** C’est Ne Pas Une Pipe, said Magritte on his painting: “the treachery of images.” But images in the memory, on the canvas of the brain, are a very fine, nontreacherous thing.

**But a Poem** Marianne Moore began a poem with “Poetry, I too, dislike it.” But how can you dislike “Let me compare thee to a summer’s day” or “Then let not winter’s ragged hand deface/In thee thy summer,” also Shakespeare?



*When you set your stories down, that very act charges up every part of you, makes you feel alive, important, satisfied. You feel enlarged, fed, painted in brighter colors by what you have chosen to say about yourself, by the sheer fun of watching amazing words come out of your fingertip, words that were never in the world before.*

– Adair Lara

## Birding with Bill Deutsch

Mary Ann Rygiel

My confessor has listened to me with a discerning look and advised that I pray for a calm spirit. This wise counsel led me to sign up for Bill Deutsch's birding class in the spring 2023 OLLI term. *It would be very calming to look at birds*, I thought.

Bill's first class was held on the porch of the Sunny Slope annex. He covered basics, like migration patterns, snowbirds vs. full-time residents of Auburn, the best time of day to see birds, best weeks of the year, the food they like and their search habits, what binoculars and magnification to use, how to identify birds from the Cornell Merlin app, book guides to use, like Peterson's and Sibley's. A smaller Sibley field guide fell open to a page showing a bird in profile, with his serious face and eyebrow on display. Bill asked whether any of us had traveled to see birds. He knew someone who had traveled worldwide and had sighted 4,000 birds; that birder's son's goal was to see 6,000 in his lifetime.

By the end of the second class, which took place at Town Creek Park, I had succeeded in spotting a hiker I'd seen at dinner tables at a friend's house, and could tell Bill about that man's work in using differential equations in biostatistical work, and where in Germany he was from. He was the only bird I saw clearly and whose search/research habits I could describe. Bill was pleased to meet the hiker and told me not to be discouraged. He suggested that a beginner like me should

just go and sit on a park bench for an early morning hour and look. He also made the clever comparison of the newer way of birding to a scene from *Nunsense*, in which Whoopi Goldberg tells young novices how wonderful/horrible it was in the days when novices and nuns alike had to sleep on concrete floors as part of their asceticism. Likewise, birding from the Cornell Merlin was like having a wonderful mattress to rest on.

By the time we met to walk around the pond behind the VCOM building, I started having tentative success in the parking lot. My first sighting was *a dark, plump smudge on top of a stop sign at the edge of the parking lot. Was it a knob? Was the city making stop signs with knobs now? Or was it a living, breathing bird?* I couldn't get the field glasses up to my trifocals fast enough. In contrapuntal contrast to my staccato lack of success, Bill was showing us how to position and look through a tripod. That day I did have some success—sightings of a palm warbler, an Eastern bluebird, a great blue Heron, Canadian geese on the pond, and a red-shouldered hawk. Ambling along, I told Bill my intention to reread some famous 19<sup>th</sup>-century British Literature bird poetry and revisited in delighted memory the albatross in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Not only could Bill comment knowledgeably on the albatross and its habits, but he genially told me about how much laughter he and his high school buddies enjoyed in class when his high school English teacher was talking enthusiastically about some poems. Bill

and his friends thought the teacher was the specimen, not the poems.

Other times, Bill showed us how he could imitate bird calls and how their rhythms resembled American English sentences like, "Quick, gimme a beer." His imitations of bird calls could be so successful that a bird would fly to him. My mother is the only other person I have known who could do this. It takes someone specially graced by God with an appreciation of His creation to be able to communicate this way. The Book of Job tells us, "Speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee" (Job 12:8). My nature experience is expressed by an occurrence on the day we had a reading at church from the Book of Tobit. No sooner had I heard my pastor give a nice homily on Tobit's blindness, but I went home, took my dog out, and he and I narrowly escaped white droppings falling within a foot of us from a bird on a wire.

Bill shared the tale of a midnight Arboretum caper with us. On another time around the pond by VCOM, we had the good fortune of coming across professional birders who were banding migratory birds after taking careful measurements of their size and weight. The small size of these birds and their search for food brought one of Bill's mantras as an environmental ecologist and biologist readily to mind: "Everybody's hungry." I first heard him say this in his course on ancient Alabama and the contents of dinosaur fossil stomachs. That mantra had set me to pondering, and I even came up with my own English literature teacher mantra: "Everybody's got feelings." Whether we're talking about that wastrel cad Wickham, from *Pride and Prejudice*, or his runaway spouse Lydia, who seeks a position at

court for her dear Wickham, or the central characters in the novel, Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet, "everybody's got feelings." We gathered around the table in the woods where the magical banding operation was occurring like children engaged in a fairy tale or technicolor movie. A photo of the group even appeared in subsequent OLLI mailings.

Bill showed the birders a portable Leopold bench and how to order it. He showed us nature magazines aimed at ornithologists. He shared stories of fledglings learning how to avoid eating poisonous insects in Africa. He shared the bird lore story of the immigrant fan of Shakespeare who thought it was a good idea to populate Central Park in New York City with birds in Shakespeare. Now, an expert on this subject tells us that besides the choughs, wrens, cormorants, nightingales, and larks, there are "some sixty other species" (Jane O'Brien) in Shakespeare, and they cause us trouble, with the way they compete with and take over habitats in the U.S. This story motivated me to reread some Shakespeare to see what is said about these birds, beginning, of course, with *Macbeth* and that darling of Empson's love of ambiguity, "Light thickens, and the crow makes wing to the rooky wood."

In the meantime, I did reread Percy Bysshe Shelley's "To A Skylark" and John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," as a pair of Regency poems, and then Gerard Manley Hopkins's "The Windhover" and Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush," as a pair of Victorian poems. Headnotes in my saved teacher textbook became clear in a way they never had been before. Shelley was talking about a bird of his imagination, not a real bird, whereas Keats, of beautiful, pure spirit as poet, had

sat for two or three hours outside a friend's house in Hampstead, listening and writing. Hopkins meant Christ, the Lord, in his poem, as he frequently did; Hardy wrote his dark turn-of-century vision onto the poor "frail, gaunt, and small" bird.

I haven't even talked about my fellow birds on this scientific journey—the woman in the fedora with a jaunty feather, the man with the jazzy red sports car, the woman in the animal print pants who was going birding soon in the

Cayman Islands, the tall, white-haired, plainspoken woman who walked out of the pages of a Hawthorne short story.

Bill was always ready, Merlin-like himself, with a story in response to anyone's observation, like the time one of his four girls said in the back seat of the car, "Dad's talking about nature again!" This travel piece will give my sons another chance to say, "Mom's talking about authors and characters again."



*Words and sentences and paragraphs are endlessly adaptable, always plastic. It's up to writers—you and me—to discover strategies that produce clarity, motion, density, rhythm, precision, texture, urgency, all the things that in the end can add up to beauty.*

– Bill Roorbach, *Writing Life Stories*

# I Quit!

**Steve Schmidt**

Cattle drives have been an essential part of Western ranching from the earliest days in the 1800s to the present day. They have evolved from long drives to take cattle to market to much shorter drives to move cattle to “greener” pastures. In some cases, cattle paths have become paved highways. Sometimes things don’t go as planned, resulting in unpleasant days; however, the cowboys always seem to find humor in the events occurring along the way.

I remember one such day when Dad sent Jim, my brother, and me to help Tom, our ranch cowboy, move a group of cows and calves from some lower meadows up to an area on our summer range called Center Ridge. We had rounded them up and were trailing them along a ridge above the meadow and willows where they had been. Tom was riding point to guide the cattle, Jim was riding side to keep the herd together and the sides pushed up, and I was riding drag to keep the herd moving and pushing the slower animals to keep up with the rest of the herd.

It warmed up early that day, and the heel flies were out and biting. To get relief, the cows wanted to go back into the willows in the lower meadow, which kept Jim and Tom busy keeping the herd together and pointed in the direction of Center Ridge. Calves got separated from their mothers and wanted to go back to where they had nursed last. The day ended up being long, hot, and tiring...not at all like one of those romantic cattle drives you see in Western movies. We finally got to our destination on Center Ridge and stopped to let the calves rest, “mother up,” and nurse. It was then that we noticed a sick calf. Tom had medicine in his saddle bag.

Jim said, “I’ll rope the calf.” But he missed.

Tom was kind of a cocky, know-it-all type who could get on a person’s nerves...at least he got on my nerves with his bragging. When Jim missed with his rope, Tom grabbed his rope and said, “Let a real cowboy show you how it is done,” and away he went. He caught the calf with his first loop and took a dally around his saddle horn with the rope so he could hold the calf.

The horse did what a good roping horse should do when you catch a calf: he stopped! When the calf hit the end of the rope, the latigo on the saddle broke. The saddle, with Tom still on it with his feet in the stirrups, went flying over the horse's head, bouncing through the sagebrush. Tom could have been seriously hurt, but the whole scene was hilarious, like something you would see in a comic book.

Tom got up and started brushing himself off. Jim and I saw that he was not hurt, other than his pride. We then burst out with laughter. Our laughing made Tom mad, and he proceeded to tell Jim and me what he thought of the whole situation and declared, “I QUIT.” Tom picked up his saddle, put it back on the horse, secured it with another strap, and started walking back towards cow camp, leading the horse.

Jim and I sat there silent for a few moments, and then Jim looked at me and said, “Who's going to tell Dad that his cowboy quit?”

## A Grumpy Guru

William Tolliver Squires

One day a renowned author and illustrator of children's books, Maurice Sendak, appeared suddenly in the art studio where I was teaching a group of college art majors. Likely, every student in the class knew his celebrated book *Where the Wild Things Are*. I was a little awestruck, as were my students. The unexpected visit left me fumbling for what to say, so I asked Sendak a couple of dumb questions, ones I might come up with for a local beauty pageant contestant.

I could have kicked myself. I should have asked Sendak something brilliant, *What is it like being both a hugely successful New York writer and a great artist?* Instead, all I could think of was whether he knew Dr. Seuss or if he had visited Disney World in Orlando. As a native New Yorker, Sendak did admit that he was on his first trip south of the Mason-Dixon line.

Sendak ranted about what he despised in children's literature and art illustration. By the time he left, he had trashed almost everything I was joyfully exposed to during my Southern-fried childhood.

Sendak didn't care much for Sunday comics, the Bible, or *Little Black Sambo*. He was the son of Polish Jewish immigrants and Holocaust survivors. So, understandably, Sendak wouldn't care much for Christianity, Joel Chandler Harris, or Uncle Remus. But what did he have against the funny papers?

My dad read the colorful Sunday comics aloud as early as I could recall. He intoned the funnies in musical rhythms, raising and lowering his voice for emphasis and effect. Throughout our lively readings, we laughed over Snuffy Smith, Little Abner, Popeye, Dagwood, and Dick Tracy. Dad sprinkled his recitations with dramatic BAMS, BANGS, BOFFOS, POWS, WAAHS, YAAAHS, ZAPS, ZOWEES, and ZOOMS.

My mother read to me as early as I can remember. My mom's mom gave me a *Bible Picture ABC Book* for my fourth birthday. I still own that little book. Each page of the ABC book featured a letter of the alphabet, a biblical story, and a row of vocabulary words at the bottom. Mom also read to me from *My Book House for Children*, which I esteemed as twelve beautifully bound and illuminated volumes for children.

I asked Maurice Sendak if he was familiar with *My Book House*. He was, and he loathed everything about the books' editing and what he saw as cartoonish illustrations. That day with my class, our grumpy visitor didn't leave a hint of what he liked in children's literature, but I'm guessing that in addition to himself, he may have been most fond of *Beowulf* or *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* by Edgar Allan Poe.

## A Nearness of Distance

William Tolliver Squires

Distance and separation are not new to my son Gage and me. We traversed many miles to see each other for years, mainly when he was growing up. Unfortunately, job change, marriage, and divorce were allowed to trouble and discourage closeness and intimacy between us.

Despite the obstacles, I wrote letters and made calls and visits. I knew that first-hand is best and real-time togetherness means everything for family. But how often did that happen? Not often enough. I still grieve what I missed. Sadly, emailing and texting have always felt airy and ephemeral. Phone calls and FaceTime can be clumsy and embarrassing, and you wish you had said more of one thing and less of another or hadn't said something you did.

Letters can be integral to intimacy; the discipline required to write ensures your care and deliberation. You can find the right words and are happy with the result when you know you have written well.

One Christmas, it was 2005, Gage was nearing graduation from Cornell University, and he gave me the gift of a book titled *More than Words*. The book is a serendipitous collection of artist letters from the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. I realized I knew one of the letter writers personally, and the founder of the Art Archives was an old friend. Other delightful synchronicities surfaced from the gift. The book predicted that distance, separation, and letters could significantly guide our futures.

Gage's college years had already taken him far from Georgia, where he was born and raised. He would soon begin a business career and marriage in New York City.

Distance is bridged, and intimacy survives in the letters and sketches, illuminating *More than Words*. My son valued the book because the missives he and I shared through the years were sprinkled with humor, drawings, and imagery that came naturally to us both.

Knowledge and pleasure engage you at every stage during an active, textured life. When you share the touch, taste, smell, sight, and sound of things, you share an outpouring of knowledge and joy. Such intimacies and closeness are passionate and personal, and it is through such qualities that you overcome separation and distance.

Philosopher Martin Heidegger wrote almost lyrically about what he called a *nearness of distance*. This phrase for him was aspirational. Imagine that you possess this *nearness of distance*. That means you command and have within consciousness the power of intimacy and sensibility to which any distance and separation yields.

Today, as I write letters to my son, I try to summon my best thoughts: personal, sometimes trivial, funny, and occasionally intuitive. Does such writing mitigate real and imagined separation? On the contrary, every letter I write is an action I take toward closeness and away from separation. Nearness is more than physical proximity; it is intrinsic to a consciousness that affirms the tangibility of more intimacy with what we love and whom we love.

# My UFO Experiences

Don Street

The first of my two UFO sightings occurred in early June 1948 as I was working with my brother Joe, two years my junior when I was fourteen. My activities on the matter have been directed largely toward comparing my observations with those of fellow witnesses. For years, to me, there would be no other witnesses. Joe and I were veterans in agriculture and were charged with doing everything on the farm, since our father, A. C. Street, was not physically able to do much manual labor. We had no on-hand supervision when sent to a job.

We lived near Gadsden, Alabama, on U. S. 278 toward Atlanta, and were sent to the Taylor field to run the Model C Allis-Chalmers tractor with its two-row cultivator to weed the corn crop. I took the first turn on this clear day and worked for a couple of hours before taking a rest break and getting a drink of water. During this stoppage, Joe and I were taking advantage of the shade tree from which we had a full view to the east. It was so quiet that you could hear a bobwhite call from a half mile away. The two of us were shocked to see a high-speed, diamond-shaped craft, out of the north spear silently through the sky going south. As we stared, in a transfixed state, the copper-brown craft made a perfectly horizontal shift to the left, a similar shift to the right, then back to the original course, as if to salute us. We were able to verify that this was not a delta-wing, being rather skinny, like two spear points roughly the same length joined at the widest part horizontally at its middle. By the angle of sight, probably about 40 degrees upward, I would have placed the craft at around 1,200 feet above the ground. It was high enough to cross Dry Creek Mountain and clear Colvin Mountain on the other side of Fords Valley. It would seem to be around 40 or 50 feet long, comparing it with a small single-engine plane, and would probably have less width than the wingspan of such a small plane. Looking up, it was too great an angle to view clearly what should be the viewing screen of any occupants.

The craft appeared to be relatively flat after it passed and had no highly upward bulging body, even at mid-ship. It appeared to be perfectly smooth of skin, with no signs of windows, appendages, or landing gear.

Like many others, probably before and since, Joe and I didn't tell anybody about our discovery. We thought we wouldn't be believed or that others would make fun of us if we told about it. In retrospect, our eldest sister, Martha Culp, had come down from New York to visit us and was staying in our home. She would have believed us if we had told her about the event. Martha was a schoolteacher with a master's degree and certainly had studied a bit of science. Joe and I did repeat the story many times later since it stuck in our minds with glaring detail. I didn't write about it until a UFO aficionado, Larkin Wade, who worked as an Extension Forester at Auburn University, urged me to do it. He has a master's degree in his field, but has stacks of information on UFO studies in his possession and has watched many TV and movie programs on the subject. I was glad to write about the event and following the U. S. House of Representatives' Hearings on UFOs after mid-year 2023, there are many more discussants.

At the time of our sighting, I didn't think about the mission of the craft's occupants, if there were any, or question the motive for its route. Later, I was reminded that its path could have come over Oak Ridge National Laboratories in Tennessee, where we had top-secret research, and then it could have come over Huntsville, where Werner Von Braun had recently set up his space industry shops. After the craft passed Joe and me, its shadow would have gone over the Anniston Ordnance Depot where weapons were reworked, poison gases and nuclear wastes

would be burned, and the craft was directed to go over Ft. McClellan, a massive Military Training facility. It left something to ponder.

However, my UFO observations were not finished. About three weeks after the first sighting, I had my second one. There were a few scattered clouds on a bright midafternoon. I was working alone in the field across the road from our home at Hokes Bluff and was facing toward the southeast when a silent, we'll call it a white flying saucer type of craft, came downward facing me. Rather than a real saucer shape, it was more like a large white ball, yet its profile could have appeared like a saucer when it faced me. The large object came closer as it swooped down, then flattened out its trajectory and swerved upward going away with an unbelievable acceleration rate demonstrated by how rapidly the size of it reduced as it went out of sight in the clear sky.

It was not a weather balloon. No such device could hold together at the unimaginable speed the object attained. I learned later that many others experienced such phenomena, and I recently heard that the flying saucer name was coined in 1947.

Now I'm on the edge of my seat waiting for the unfurling of pent-up information unavailable to the public heretofore. Many are coming forth who would not have dared to in the past. I know personally of corroborated UFO cases in which two persons agreed about sightings and one of them refused to go public for fear of losing a professorial job as a result. Several of the expert witnesses in the House Hearings allowed that commercial and military aircraft pilots and other expert observers have only reported a minor fraction of UFO discoveries because of fear of reprisal. Perhaps that situation will change now.

The famous Roswell, N.M., case had taken place the year before my two sightings, but I knew nothing about that situation at the time. Other sightings were going back to 1930, I believe, but in our relative isolation, I didn't know of them.

I live in Auburn, Alabama, and occasionally visit my ranch in Comanche County, Texas. This location sparked my interest in a series of UFO displays in Erath County, just north of Comanche, in 2008. The phenomena were observed by seasoned aircraft pilots, law enforcement officers, and others who were prepared to make relevant observations. I recall that at least one of the observers near Stephenville, Tex., referred to the horizontal shifting of the objects in their path. This commonality prompts me to reemphasize that for my observation and Joe's in Alabama, nobody was swerving up or down that a normal aircraft would make if it were banking to the left or right. It was as if some magnetic force from outside could slip and slide the craft in its horizontal plane. Now, after the House Hearings, there are hundreds of reports of devices shifting horizontally, skipping along like ping pong balls, and even entering and leaving water bodies. I have also seen several references to diamond-shaped craft, but some of them seemed to be deeper craft with a greater upward bulge than what Joe and I observed, and some of them seemed to have windows.

Certainly, I would like to go back into some archives and see a picture of the type of craft Joe and I saw in 1948. There must have been other viewers at the time. Unfortunately, we lost Joe a few years ago, and I regret that he cannot review the new findings with me.

## **Tom Patton's Revenge**

**Stacey Patton Wallace**

As I've previously mentioned, my cousin Ricky Daugherty lived to terrify his younger cousins. Which was ironic, because Ricky was the biggest scaredy cat of all the seven Patton grandchildren. I suppose the old saying is correct: "Misery loves company." Ricky didn't want to be the only kid who was scared.

From 1956 to the spring of 1964, Ricky, his older brother Wayne, and his Mama and Daddy (Aunt Jenny and Uncle Nelson) lived right beside us on 6<sup>th</sup> Street in Alexander City, Alabama ("Eleck" City to the locals).

Since I'm MUCH younger than my two brothers Jim and Mike and my four cousins, I only lived beside Ricky and company from December 1962 to May 1964, so this event happened when I was just a gleam in Daddy's eye, as Daddy, our family storyteller, would say.

Since my grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles are all gone to Heaven now, I had to rely on my cousin Ricky, my brother Jim, and memories of what Daddy told me years ago for my information.

Ricky, or Rick as he is now called, told me that my parents bought the small, white house from his parents in 1956, the year my brother Mike was born. The house was quite small, having two bedrooms, a kitchen, a living room, and a tiny bathroom with only a tub and no shower.

Since I don't remember living in the house, I had never thought about my sweet Mama having to share a minuscule bathroom with Daddy and her two dirty little boys, who, I'm sure, had a questionable aim.

Also, my poor parents had me as a roommate until I was seventeen months old. Ricky said that my baby bed was beside the room's double windows. Boy, I'll bet they could have tap danced down Scott Road (where our new house was located) when I moved into my own room, and they finally had some privacy. But I digress.

Mama once told me that while Ricky slept at his house, he lived at our house. Ricky would spend steaming, stifling summer days scaring my brothers Jim and Mike with his lurid tales.

According to Daddy, back in the old days Ricky was a thin boy who wore rubber-waisted shorts which housed his skinny legs. Also, back then, Daddy said, "Ricky's ears stuck out like two open cab doors." However, Ricky later grew into his ears, and they don't stick out now.

After Ricky had finished torturing Jim and Mike nightly with his terrifying stories, he'd jump off the front porch and run home in about three steps since the houses were so close together. Meanwhile, Mama and Daddy would be left with the difficult task of calming down their two little boys for bed.

Finally, as Grandma Patton probably said, "Tom had done had a bait of Ricky." In my people's slang, "a bait" meant "way too much."

Now, Ricky was always careful to go home before sundown because he was scared of the dark. But one night when he was eight or nine, Cousin Ricky stayed a little too long; the sun had set, and darkness had crept up on him, so Daddy decided it was time to teach my cousin a lesson.

That night, when Ricky leaped off our front porch, Daddy was hiding behind a big cedar bush at the corner of our house.

Ricky told me, "As I jumped off the porch, Tom grabbed me from behind, wrapped his arm around my waist, and lifted me off the ground."

Daddy hollered, "Where you think you going, Boy?" Ricky said, "Your Daddy's question came just before the diarrhea."

Years ago, Daddy told me that Ricky couldn't even yell; he only managed a squeal of "Eeeee!" like a rat. Also, Ricky's legs were still pumping up in the air. When Daddy finally set him down on the ground, Ricky took off for home.

When I asked Ricky what he had said when Daddy released him, he said, "Nothing. I ran home, scared to death. I wasn't putting together who it was; I just wanted to get home."

For that night at least, Tom Patton, my Daddy, finally had his revenge on that rascal Ricky. And I'll bet it was almost as sweet as Grandma Patton's amazing lemon ice box pie.

*Write it down. Whatever it is, write it down. Chip it into marble. Type it into Microsoft Word. Spell it out in seaweed on the shore. We are each of us an endangered species, delicate as unicorns.*

– Adair Lara

# A First Grader's Worst Nightmare

Stacey Patton Wallace

In the 1969-70 school year in Alexander City ("Eleck" City to the locals), Alabama, I was blessed to have Mrs. Essie Tapley as my first-grade teacher. Mrs. Tapley was the perfect teacher for rambunctious six-year-olds. Not only was she an excellent teacher, she had a gentle nature, a sweet smile, and the patience of Job. She made learning delightful, and we all felt safe, loved, and valued. I truly believe that Mrs. Tapley should have been the prototype for all first-grade teachers.

However, in the 1930s, '40s, '50s, and early '60s, many six-year-olds in Alex. City were not as blessed as I was, and as summer came to an end, they faced the new school year with dread.

Why? Because their thoughtful older siblings had told them horror stories about Mrs. Bertha White, the meanest teacher in the history of the school system and a first grader's worst nightmare.

Mrs. White taught my Daddy and five of the seven Patton grandchildren. Only my cousin Wayne, the oldest grandchild, and I, the youngest, were spared from being in Mrs. White's class, and believe me, I praise Jesus for that particular blessing. Thankfully, Wayne and I don't bear the psychological scars inflicted by that woman.

According to my cousin Ricky, who now prefers to be called Rick, and my much older brother Jim, Mrs. White was a gray-haired woman who was about 5'2" tall and weighed 180-200 pounds. Jim

added, "She had a permanent scowl on her face."

My poor Daddy met up with a first grader's worst nightmare during the 1939-40 school year in the old Avondale School. Back then, educators didn't yet know about the condition known as Attention Deficit Disorder with Hyperactivity (ADHD), but Daddy was a textbook case.

Daddy once told me that there was a floor-to-ceiling pole in Mrs. White's classroom, and she had warned her students countless times NOT to climb it. However, Daddy just couldn't withstand the temptation.

One day, Mrs. White left her room full of first graders by themselves. As a retired teacher, I question the wisdom of that decision. But I taught middle school from 1990-2020; a few of my kids might have set fire to my desk or engaged in a sexual act. However, I suppose first graders back then wouldn't have engaged in such behavior. But I digress.

As soon as Mrs. White was gone, Daddy eagerly clambered up the forbidden pole. Unfortunately, however, he didn't clamber back down to safety in time.

Mrs. White came back into the room and spotted Daddy up that pole. With a sadistic gleam in her eye, she barked, "Tom, I told you NOT to climb that pole!"

Poor Daddy. After a while, he grew tired of hanging up there. His rubbery arms and legs gave out, and he began his descent.

Mrs. White was waiting for him, wielding her trusty paddle as though it were a Louisville Slugger. Her paddle connected with Daddy's small behind with a painful and resounding, "Thock!" So Daddy scrambled up the pole again, then came down to another "Thock!" So it went: Up, down, "Thock!" Up, down, "Thock!" I'm not sure how long this bizarre tennis match lasted, but I don't think Daddy climbed that pole again, at least for a while.

The next generation of Pattons to be terrorized by Mrs. White started with my cousins Ronnie, later called Ron, and Rick. Ron was so terrified of Mrs. White that he skipped first grade for three days. When the bell rang, the other students left the playground and went into school; however, Ron ran and hid in the bushes.

Poor cousin Rick, who was admittedly a rascal, particularly suffered under Mrs. White's malevolent dictatorship during the 1958-59 school year. Learning to write in cursive at the blackboard was particularly traumatic. Rick said, "Mrs. White would beat my hand and fingers with a metal-tipped ruler when I picked up my hand to write the word *nice* in cursive. Mrs. White would bellow, 'Keep your hand down!'" Also, if Rick cried, Mrs. White would snarl, "Knock it off, Ricky!"

I asked Rick why the kids didn't complain about Mrs. White's cruelty. She would have been fired on day one in my time as a teacher.

Rick said, "She was an authoritarian figure, much like Hitler, and we were terrified of her. If you stood up to Hitler, you got killed."

Rick said that there was a boy named Bob in his class. Bob wore leg braces because he had contracted polio when he was younger. Mrs. White was in charge of raising money for the March of Dimes for Avondale School, which included first through eighth grades. Each of the eight years that Bob attended that school, Mrs. White would use him as a cruel visual aid. Mrs. White would make Bob go to each classroom with her. She would tell the students, "This is what your money to the March of Dimes goes for... to help little Bob with the cost of his metal braces."

Then Mrs. White, playing her ukulele, would march around the room, singing the March of Dimes song, while Bob struggled to follow her. Rick told me that Bob was so embarrassed by this unwanted attention.

I asked Rick why the teachers didn't stop Mrs. White's complete humiliation of this boy.

Again Rick replied, "The teachers were scared of her." That statement made me wish that time travel were possible because, in the words of the late, great Grandma Patton, I'd had a bit of hearing about Bertha White. I would LOVE to go back in time as I am now and say to Mrs. White, "You're humiliating that child, Bertha. Knock it off, or I'll drop-kick your big butt to Birmingham!"

Mrs. White hated and picked on Clinton, another boy in Rick's class. Clinton had a learning deficiency and couldn't read; he only knew certain

letters of the alphabet. Also, he ate paste. However, Mrs. White called on the boy relentlessly. She would humiliate him by pronouncing each word separately and then have him repeat it. When he'd say the whole sentence, she'd tell him to stare at the sentence for the rest of the day, adding menacingly, "You'd better be able to read it tomorrow." Clinton, unfortunately, never learned to read. However, he did continue to eat paste and get a paddling for it.

Besides practicing cruelty daily, Mrs. White had a side hustle to supplement her teaching. Back then, kids were required to have Blue Horse notebooks, a large pencil, paste, and crayons in first grade. Mrs. White sold these school supplies to her students.

Rick said, "She wouldn't let you use supplies from stores. She was the one-stop shopping center. No parents crossed her. She ruled with an iron fist."

After hearing about how horribly Mrs. White treated her students, I wondered why on earth she chose to be a teacher. She obviously hated children. Perhaps it was because back in those days, women were very limited in their choice of professions. Teaching and nursing were probably the only two professions open to her. Thank the Good Lord Mrs. White wasn't a nurse in charge of sick and dying people, and thank the Good Lord for Mrs. Essie Tapley, my much-loved, amazing first-grade teacher.



## First Kiss, Last Dance

Char Warren

“Wow! Karen, did you see that good-looking guy with that little boy and girl? I wonder if the kids are his siblings. He sure is cute, but I have never seen him before.” It was the first week of summer, and we went to the gym at the park and started playing Ping Pong. Guess who walked in the door? Yep! Mr. Hunk of Cheese, and the two kids came in with him, and they started playing at the table next to ours. The kids hit the ball several times across our table by accident. He told them if they weren’t more careful, he would take them home. Hmm—could he be their daddy? I hope not.

After a while, Karen and I wandered over to see who was in the swimming pool. It wasn’t long before the three of them showed up. As they passed us, he said, “Nice day. Oh, by the way, my name is Randy, and this is my sister, Christine, and my brother, Freddie.” At least he wasn’t their father!! I said we had not seen them before, and were they visiting family or friends? He told us that he had been going to seminary to become a Christian Brother but decided that was not what he wanted to do. His family owned the only laundry in town with a dry-cleaning area attached. His father and grandfather owned it and worked long hours six days a week. He was going to help them by delivering the clean clothes to the owners who asked for them to be delivered. His grandparents had moved into the house with his family after his mother had died giving birth to Freddie, as they needed help with the kids.

By the time we finished playing ping-pong and shuffleboard, swinging the kids, and visiting, he asked me out on a date to go to the movies on Friday night. Wahoo! My first real date! Deciding what to wear took me three hours.

When the doorbell rang Friday night, Daddy answered it. Daddy was a tall, imposing figure, and I was afraid he would scare away my hopefully first boyfriend, but the two of them sat and talked while I finished getting ready. Daddy told me the next day that he was very impressed with him as he was well-dressed and very polite. They shook hands and then we left. We had a great time together, and after the movie, we drove to the Acadian Inn Drive Inn Café. This was the favorite place to go after a date and was only about three blocks from our house. Most couples just sat in their cars and the waiter would take your order and bring it out on a tray to attach to the window of the car. You would see all of your friends from school there and would visit with them through the car windows, or they would get in the back seat and we would visit. No one would go straight home after a date, as all of us went to the Acadian Inn. What fun!

We dated every weekend and saw each other after school, almost every day. We went to different schools, and Randy would drop by every afternoon for a quick visit. This went on for almost seven years! We were crazy about each other, and we talked about getting married after we finished college. Every time someone asked me out on a date, I would tell them I already had a date. Mom told me after a while that you can’t pick a ripe apple out of an empty basket, and we both needed to date others to find out if we were meant to be together. She was right, of course, as she always was!

I started dating someone other than Randy at least once on weekends. The first date I went on, I met at a dance at the Newman Club on campus. Kenny was a great dancer, majored in engineering, and was a senior with a 4.0 average, but unfortunately, he was short—a little taller than I. Still, I felt like I was a baby being burped over the shoulder by its daddy! He asked to walk me back to my dorm after the dance was over and asked me for a date the next weekend. When I got home, Mom asked me if I had dated anyone that week. When she asked me his last name and I told her, she asked where he was from, if his Daddy was a dentist, and what was his mother's name. I told her I just danced a lot with him, but I didn't ask him for fingerprints! I thought since he was smart, Catholic, a good dancer, and very polite, Mom would definitely approve. Instead, she said, "You can't date him! He's your second cousin." I just about passed out! When he found out that we were kin, he was furious! He wouldn't even talk to me that night on our date, so I just danced every dance with anyone who asked me to dance. You would have thought that it was my fault that we were kin! The short little jerk! Of course, we never dated again.

My second "new" date was about 6'3" tall, handsome, and a good dancer. I had never heard of his last name before, but when Mom asked me where he was from, and I told her, she said, "I hate to tell you this, but he is your fourth cousin!! I thought, "What the—?!" I guessed I'd have to move to China or be an old maid!

In college, Randy commuted so he could take his grandmother wherever she needed to go to buy groceries, go to church, or get her haircut. On the other hand, I had a student job at the dormitory, as an assistant housemother, so I lived in the dormitory at USL. For the 3 ½ years that I was in college, I had classes from 8:00 to 4:00 every day, Monday through Friday, and often on Saturdays from 8:00 to 12:00. Many days, I had to work after classes, from 4:00 to 8:00, at the front desk, signing students in and out. Of course, after that, I usually had three or four hours of homework to do. If I didn't have *too* much homework or I was not on duty that day, I was invited by one of my guy friends almost every afternoon to go to our favorite pub, Voorhies Inn, to dance and have a beer or a drink. I knew almost everybody on campus, and many guys were close friends or I had dated them a couple of times before.

Randy was not excited about me going out many afternoons after classes, but I felt like I had earned **some** time off, and I was just friends with the guys, so I usually went with them. One afternoon, unknown to me, Mom had come to Lafayette to pay my dorm fees and to surprise me with something new to wear that she had made for me. When she went to the dorm to see me, Mrs. McDonald, our official housemother, told her I had gone to Voorhies with a friend. She laughed and told her friends that she had to go to a beer joint to pay her daughter's dorm fees!

Every weekend I went home, as I had a job at Morningveg and Son's Jewelry Store in Opelousas, so I always had a couple of dates over the weekend with Randy. Usually, on Sundays, Daddy barbequed chicken or hamburgers, or fried fish or shrimp, or Mom made a cauldron of gumbo or homemade spaghetti and meatballs. Randy and our priest often came over after Mass for lunch. Weekends were always fun, and there was never a shortage of friends or food!

I began dating a lot of guys and had a great time. I decided to tell Randy that he should date others too, but he didn't want to. He and I dated for seven years, and then I met Toby, who became the love of my life! He and I have been blissfully married for 58 years, and hopefully, we have more years ahead to share.

Randy finally met someone else. They married and had seven or eight kids! Whew! That's a bunch! I think Christine said he has around 28 grandkids! Toby went as my date to Randy's wedding. Outside of church, we were all standing around talking, when Randy's stepmom came up, hugged me, and whispered that she had always hoped that I would be the one to marry Randy. Toby heard her say that and was ready to get out of Dodge!

That was the last time I saw Randy, but in March this year, at the funeral of my sister Glenda, a lady came up to me and asked me if I remembered her. I didn't, at first, but when she smiled, I said, "Christine Herpin?" and we hugged and laughed. She followed me around the funeral home both days and never let me out of her sight. She asked me for our phone number, and she gave me hers, and also Randy's. She told me he had been really sick with heart issues and lung problems. I decided to give him a call, as it had been 59 years since I had seen him, on his wedding day. He was very surprised to hear from me. He sounded strange, like he was in pain, and I guess he was. Christine told me that he had wanted to go to the funeral home for Glenda's wake, but he was too sick to go.

When the phone rang on October 20, it was Christine. I told her I hoped this wasn't bad news about Randy, but she hesitated, and both of us started crying. She told me he had died peacefully in his sleep. I cried on and off all day. I still can't believe he is gone! What a great guy he was! I will always have a soft spot in my heart for him and pray he is no longer in pain. May he rest in peace!

It may have been my first kiss and my last dance with him. But life goes on.



## How and When Did I Get This Old?

Char Warren

Sometimes when I look in the mirror, I can't tell if it's some old hag that broke into our home or George Washington's wig on my head with all of this white hair!

It seems like just five years ago, I was dating and in college and living life to the fullest! I used to love to dance and never got tired of going out on dates or going to Saturday night dances at the community center in Opelousas, La. Now I walk like Charlie Chaplin or the hunchback of the University of Louisiana!

You know what, griping doesn't change anything, so just accept the pain and learn from it. After eleven back surgeries, four hip surgeries, gall bladder surgery—and spinal cord stimulator surgery on June 26, 2023, all in 27 years, I need to just suck it up and keep on going. I try to enjoy every moment of my life and always laugh and try not to show my pain. The stimulator is working well, and I am in less pain than I have been in years.

Meeting new people is always a pleasure to me, as I have always been a people person. I have been so blessed by so many wonderful, caring friends who drop in all week long, as they are welcome anytime. Toby had a couple of meetings the other day and friends kept coming in. Toby thought a party was going on as he had to park down the driveway. When he came in, he said, "I did not know a party was going on." I said, "We aren't, they have all just dropped in." He had to move all the cars as there were five cars lined up in the driveway.

Life is good, Voorhies! VERY GOOD!



## **Memories of Mother: Fastened with Fabric and Colors for Each Moment Suited**

**Kay Whaley**

Mark Twain entered and exited this world to spectacular fanfare, both his birth and death coinciding with the appearance of Halley's comet. This cosmic coincidence added a touch of mystique to his life story. But most of us do not make our entrances and exits with such grandiosity. My mother, for example, was born during the Great Depression and left this world during the Great COVID Pandemic—a reminder that even the fabric of a good life is tinged with hardship and loss and sorrow around the edges.

Nearly a century ago, my grandparents struggled like most families in the 1930s to make ends meet. My mother was born in 1933 against a bleak economic landscape in rural Perry County, Alabama. But there was sustenance in the red clay and cotton fields of home that would help her adapt in years to come to life's changing terrain.

My grandfather eked out a living growing cotton and raising cattle, while my grandmother gardened, canned vegetables, and planted flowers. Decades later when I came along, my grandmother's pots of pink and white begonias were still spilling across her front porch and across the margins of flowerbeds around her house. Her love of flowers probably inspired my mother's name, Myrtle. Because my grandparents had a knack for growing things, they planted resilience and hope in my mother

awhile teaching her to cook, sew, garden, raise chickens, and tend cows.

My grandparents also made sure my mother and her sister had a formal education. For rural families, getting children to school was hard, so my grandmother learned to drive the school bus down dusty, red dirt roads, her daughters and neighbor children riding for long miles to the one-room schoolhouse. At school, my mother learned not only the three R's—reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic—but also kindness and compassion: My grandmother frequently packed an extra sandwich in my mother's lunch pail to share with other children who had nothing to eat.

Money was tight, so my grandmother, an excellent seamstress, made her daughters' school dresses from flour sacks. Wielding a hammer as well as a needle, she constructed doll-sized cupboards, painted turquoise, one of the few toys my mother and her sister received for Christmas one year when there was no money for gifts.

In 1941, when my mother was eight, the U.S. went to war. In a black and white photo, my mother sits in front of an American flag, the battle slogan "Remember Pearl Harbor" indelibly fixed in block letters above the flag. She is a wisp of a girl with the same smile and crinkle around her eyes that I remember. What did she understand—this girl named after a flower—at such a young age about Want and War?

Years later, Mother graduated from Perry County High School as salutatorian and then enrolled at Judson College as a

day student, where she majored in accounting and math. At graduation, she was the first Methodist to receive the Judson Bible Award, the small red Bible inscribed by the president's wife at the all-female Baptist College. She remained an active Methodist for the rest of her life.

After graduating *magna cum laude* (1955), she received an invitation from Eufaula City Schools Superintendent, O.B. Carter, to visit Eufaula and interview for a teaching position. Packing heels and high hopes, she and my grandmother made the three-hour trip. Within a few months, she was happily settled into an apartment with three other new teachers—Noel, Anne, and Winnie—and living away from home for the first time.

Soon, a steady stream of Eufaula's most eligible bachelors began to call on the new teachers. It wasn't long before chance brought my parents together. As my dad told the story, a class of high school students was touring the bank where he worked. His desk was behind a tall counter that he could barely see over. When the new teacher traipsed across the bank lobby in her high heels, my dad caught a glimpse of her chestnut brown hair. When he stood up to take a look, he was captivated by the new teacher! It must have been love at first sight. They were married six months later.

Before 1978, a woman could not work while pregnant, so my mother was forced into a long sabbatical from teaching before and after my two brothers and I were born. While she enjoyed the time at home with her children, the years out of the classroom created an economic strain and a professional gap. When she was able to return to teaching, schools in Eufaula were still essentially segregated by race and remained so until 1970. That summer, my mother joined the faculty of the new

middle school built to accommodate grades 6-8 once desegregation was fully implemented. I was a sixth grader. She and her fellow teachers of both races may have been members of the Silent Generation, but their lessons about how to treat others with respect came through loud and clear.

I imagine my mother still, standing in front of my eighth grade Algebra I class, wearing school colors of blue and gold, rolling a piece of chalk between her hands, explaining to the class: "As we progress in algebra, we will find...." We bonded over solving equations and decorating bulletin boards. After school, we pored over Simplicity and Butterwick patterns at Neal Logue's department store and sipped cherry cokes at Scarborough Drugs soda fountain. In the evenings, she prepared dinner and lesson plans, tended to her flowers and aging relatives, averaged grades and balanced the checkbook with a borrowed adding machine, and made sure we three kids had done our homework. Years later, when I left for college, she learned needlepoint, bought herself a computer, and earned a master's degree.

She was dubbed GrandMyrtle by her first grandchild, my daughter Laura. After she retired, "grandmothering" became a new avocation. She hung up her school wardrobe and dressed comfortably in sweatsuits in pink or red or blue. She offered snacks and tutoring around her kitchen table, taught the game of dominoes, and sewed the most enviable Halloween costumes. She eventually became GrandMyrtle to a large brood of her grandchildren's friends and parents.

My mother was the caregiver in our extended family, a role that came naturally but strained her stamina. She was also a worrier. She fretted anytime one of us was on the road, and she wanted to know our whereabouts whether we were sixteen or

sixty; when she left the house, she worried about leaving the iron plugged in, and she would worry if she had not seen the neighbor across the street for a few days. She could ruminate over various grim outcomes for hours. She would try to cover up her distress about situations she could not control. "This too shall pass" became her mantra. In her last years, when finding words was difficult, she dismissed her worries with a lighthearted "La-di-da." She had endured some setbacks and disappointments along the way. But the biggest challenges came after her diagnosis of stage 4 cancer and the onset of Alzheimer's. The cancer was contained, but Alzheimer's was not.

We sat huddled in our cars at the cemetery on the colorless February day of

Mother's funeral. COVID was surging in town again, shutting down the visitation and church service. We could not gather to swap stories, to reminisce, to grieve with friends. Isolation magnified our loss.

This year on my mother's birthday, I sifted through her family photos, now mine. I found the album I'd made when she turned eighty. We had thrown her a surprise birthday party. A gaggle of family and friends had gathered, and my gregarious mother was girlish in her delight. I settled down with the pictures, her life unfolding for me like a quilt, well-worn and comforting, its pattern pieced together with scraps of light and dark stitched together with love and perseverance and endurance and hope.



*Read! Read! Read! And then read some more. When you find something that thrills you, take it apart paragraph by paragraph, line by line, word by word, to see what made it so wonderful. Then use those tricks the next time you write.*

– W. P. Kinsella

## Oh, Brother

Kay Whaley

In the months following my mother's death, the daunting task of cleaning out her house largely fell to my husband and me. My parents had purchased their 1950s ranch-style home over sixty years before, and it was stuffed with memories and memorabilia to be sorted and divided among my two brothers and me. My parents had a habit of holding on to things, perhaps because they were children of the Depression, a time when even the basic comforts of home were in short supply. In their later years, they often joked with my brothers and me that one day, all that "stuff" would be ours, reminding us not to argue over who got what. We promised we would not. We joked back, saying none of us had the space in our homes to hold on to all that stuff. In those days, we three siblings seemed a congenial bunch. I didn't foresee how frayed our relationships would become.

My younger brother and I have not spoken much with our middle brother since our mother's death. Things began to unravel as the three of us stumbled through caring for our mother, who suffered from Alzheimer's, during the pandemic. The reasons are complicated and senseless and heartbreaking. There is little point in hashing it out here.

Still, my brother and I do have a lot in common. Mutual friends. An interest in old family photos and genealogy. Love of nature. Christmas Eve gatherings and Sunday dinners. Our children, first cousins, grew up together. Childhood memories of riding bikes through our old neighborhood, puppies, and pet rabbits. The year we took biology together. The afternoon we had car trouble, and he had to push the car out of the road. In the last few years, I've found space in my heart to hold on to the sweet and uncomplicated memories.

Is it really easier to stay tethered to anger and hurt and resentment than to forgive?

Sometimes, large truths are delivered in small ways.

Among the items I inherited from my mother is a beautiful bedspread that my grandmother made, its intricately crocheted design repeating a geometric pattern using popcorn stitches and finished off with fringe. I found it packed away in my mother's closet along with linens and family quilts, out of sight for years. My grandmother must have spent untold hours patiently looping yarn over and under with a large hooked needle to create the interlocking pattern. This type of handiwork was usually made out of necessity during the Depression. In those days, basic items that couldn't always be found on or purchased from store shelves were made by hand—a labor of love.

But when I brought the spread home and examined it closer, I discovered a section where the thread had unraveled, leaving a ragged hole.

Pull on a single strand in a crocheted piece, and in seconds it can be reduced to a tangled heap of crimped yarn. Once things start to unravel, the damage to a family heirloom—and relationships— can be extensive.

So, what can be done?

I'm still looking for someone who can mend the bedspread, but I know who can mend a heart. We are made in His image to reflect His nature. In time, I am hoping my brothers and I will find our way to reach across the gap, to patch up the rift between us.



*The gift of the memoir is getting to say on paper what most families never get to say in conversation.*

– Anne Lamott

## Keeping Hope on My Playlist

Kay Whaley

Rerun an old song in your head and inevitably a playlist of memories pops up. You never know where the music will take you.

From time to time, I catch myself humming Joni Mitchell's song "Both Sides Now," a song I learned in Glee Club during my elementary school days. Sometimes I'll share a few stanzas with a sleepy grandchild who appreciates my singing.

But in my mind's eye, I see Mrs. Balkcom, my music teacher with perfect pitch and posture, directing her choir assembled on risers in the elementary school auditorium. Dressed in our crisp navy and white attire, we sing the opening lines:

Rows and flocs of angel hair  
And ice cream castles in the air  
And feather canyons everywhere  
I've looked at clouds that way.

Back then, the song's enchanting images of clouds and love buoyed me past the hard realities of life that the song also addresses. I was nine or ten years old, so what did I know of clouds or love? My childhood was as sweet as bubblegum and puppies.

Over time, I've learned the difficulty of holding onto wonder and possibility while also accepting how mercurial clouds, love, friendship, and life can be.

The playlist in my head takes me back to another song Mrs. Balkcom taught us fourth and fifth graders—"Windmills of Your Mind," a song that won an Oscar in 1968. The lyrics mimic thoughts swirling across time and space, the imagination drifting away from its moorings to frozen images on a reel: "Pictures hanging in a hallway and the fragment of a song/Half remembered names and faces but to whom do they belong?"

Whatever happened to all those kids I went to elementary school with? What if I could splice together all of our memories and perspectives onto the ever-spinning reel in my mind?

The circles spiral back to names and faces, former classmates who stand out in the peripheral vision of my memories. Harmon Earl sits alone at lunch. He is taller than most and has outgrown the faded overalls he wears.

Cindy's feet are bare, her dress too short, and her hair uncombed as she walks along the dusty cemetery road, holding her grandfather's hand. She lives with her grandparents, who are very old. Every afternoon, her grandfather closes and locks the cemetery gates, and then he and Cindy walk back to their ramshackle home.

Richetta and Ethelrene are sweet and smart and brave. This is their first year in a school where there are still too few who look like them.

Not everyone's childhood looked like mine. Growing up meant I had to reframe my understanding of the world I thought I knew.

In "Both Sides Now," Joni Mitchell's eyes are opened to the harsher truths of life, yet she doesn't entirely give in to disillusionment. "It's life's illusions I recall," she repeats, clinging to hope in the face of heartache. It's a song and an idea I'm going to keep on my playlist, especially in 2023, while the world is changing shape and the ground is shifting beneath our feet.



*If we do away with semicolons, parentheses, and much else, we will lose all music, nuance, and subtlety in communication—and end up shouting at one another in block capitals.*

– Pico Iyer, Travel Writer

## No Irish Need Apply

Bill Wilson

I had soured on Irish-American women. Maybe because I thought the ethnicity of my ex-wife had played a role in our breakup. Maybe because I could more easily blame our failure on our Celtic backgrounds and the baggage that entailed. Maybe because I was projecting my contribution to that split onto the cultural hangups in both our families.

The “why” mattered far less than the “what.” We divorced, and I resolved never to look for the girl of my dreams in the second-generation ghetto to which I and scores of children from the auld sod belonged.

I dated several women during my marital hiatus, making sure that none sported Irish-sounding names or revealed a Celtic orientation in their lifestyle or conversation. I would fish for Ms. Right only in non-Hibernian waters.

Several years of post-divorce relationships exposed me to the kind of mitochondrial DNA I was looking for—anything but Irish. Then, misinformation morphed into misdirection, which ultimately morphed into 43 years of a fruitful, fulfilling marriage.

Thereon hangs a tale. . .

Having moved back into Manhattan during my nuptial interstices, I hooked up with a bunch of divorced guys like me—on the market, on the hunt, and on the prowl. We went to the same gatherings, inhabited the same neighborhood on the Upper East Side, and

collected a coterie of like-minded men and women in our dating pool. When no prime candidates surfaced, we decided to throw a string of Christmas parties, some in our own apartments, others in the homes of every woman we knew. Our quest was like a computer search—the more data one pushed through the cyber pipeline, the better the odds of finding the answer one was looking for.

That was a fatal mistake. At least for me. Ed Quinn, a member of my bachelor posse, had volunteered to host a Christmas party. Ed had a one-bedroom walk-up apartment on the third floor of an old building on Third Avenue and Seventy-third Street. I may have mentioned that my gang lived on the Upper East Side. I may have failed to mention that as divorced males most of us lived—post alimony and child-support payments—in rather dingy old tenement buildings that were much closer to the wrecking ball than to gentrification.

My friend John and I had brought our guitars and were regaling folks with a mostly on-key version of “Hang Down Your Head, Tom Dooley.” We had been strumming away for more than an hour, so I paused to get a coke from what passed for a kitchen in Ed’s tiny apartment. As I made my way toward the refrigerator, I started to squeeze past my friend Skip and an attractive, willowy woman in a blue blazer and floor-length plaid skirt.

“Do you know Anne Huene?” Skip asked.

“No,” I replied, continuing sotto voce, *but I sure would like to*. Ms. Huene struck me as someone very much worth meeting. Her German-sounding last name and look of sophistication belied any connection with roots in the Irish Bronx. We chatted comfortably, forming an instant connection that would eventually last for more than forty years. I never made it back to my duet with John. Tom Dooley never got to hang down his head.

I learned that Ms. Huene, a supervising nurse at Bellevue Hospital, had recently moved into an apartment on First Avenue and East Seventy-Ninth Street, less than a block from my efficiency. Her digs came with a doorman and elevator. Mine came with cockroaches and five stories of slate-worn steps. Ms. Huene—Annie, as I came to call her—was planning a New Year's Eve party in a week. She wondered if I might like to come. (Several years passed before I learned that her invitation had been inspired more by my musical talents than my charming personality or my Adonis-like good looks.)

New Year's Eve came and went. My fascination with Annie Huene remained.

Ours was not love at first sight, but after a few months we were dating and within two years we were married. During our courtship, I learned, much to my chagrin, that Huene was my lady's married name. Everyone called her Anne, although her full name was Patricia Ann Dean Huene, as Irish (forgive the reference) as Paddy's Pig. Not only was Annie Irish-American. She was from the same parish in the Bronx as two of my college buddies, less than three miles from my own home. (If you're NY Irish you come from a parish, not a neighborhood. Mine was Sacred Heart. Annie's was St. Nicholas of Tolentine, known to the locals as Tolentine.)

I was not looking for an Irish-American colleen. I was not looking for a committed relationship. And I was not looking for a wife. Fate, karma, Lady Luck, or your favorite deity had other plans. They say God has a sense of humor. He certainly did in my case, delivering to me—custom-made—a life partner I cherished until her death eight years ago.

It seems I got what I needed, not what I wanted.



## Follically Deprived

Bill Wilson

My cowlick bothered me as a kid. Mom thought it was cute. So did my sisters. I lost. The bothersome strands of hair at the back of my noggin stayed. No pomade or hair oil could tame those strands. No comb or hair bush could master them. On the front end of my pate, an equally rambunctious cluster of hair kept falling in my face. The soft brown hair gifted to me by my mother was as unruly as it was silken.

My only respite came each summer when Dad trotted me down to the local barber for a crewcut. Dad, bald as long as I could remember, reminded me at the start of each tonsorial trip: “Getting a crew cut will guarantee you have thick hair.” I stashed this exercise in wishful thinking right up there with “Carrots will protect your vision” and “Eating fish will make you smart.” I started wearing glasses at thirteen. About the smarts, I have no comment.

Dad flaunted a noggin framed by a fringe of male-pattern baldness. So did my maternal grandfather, Sgt. Joe O’Sullivan, NYPD. I covertly hoped that my fate would mirror theirs. No cowlick, no bangs seemed like boons to be longed for. I yearned for the day when I, too, would have an equally shiny dome.

Be careful what you wish for.

My hair began to thin in college. “They” told me that baldness was hereditary. A recessive gene in my mother’s DNA would cause me to lose hair. Most assuredly that fate awaited me if Grandpa Joe had lost his hair. He had.

“They” were only partially correct. Advances in genetics now show that both ancestral lines carry the baldness gene—or lack the hair gene. Whatever! Grandpa O’Sullivan and my father had both gone bald. It seemed that I was doubly fated to follow in their footsteps. The only male sibling of Dad’s that I knew—Uncle Bill, for whom I was named—had also gone bald. Late in life, courtesy of Ancestry.com, a cousin posted a picture of William Wilson, my Irish-born paternal grandfather. Grandpa Bill, oddly enough, sported a full head of hair. Why couldn’t the universe have fished in his gene pool?

By my senior year in college, the evidence for future baldness was piling up as relentlessly as my hairline was receding. Indeed. Jack Shepard, a classmate, and I had a bet about who would achieve male-pattern baldness first. Jack and I parted ways after college, so neither of us got to collect the bet.

My carpet of shiny brown tresses waned steadily throughout my late twenties and early thirties. By forty, the follicular disappearing act was complete. Never again would I purchase a comb or a hair brush. Eschewing comb-overs, never would I look like Don

Rickles, although I might have regretted the missed opportunity, had I been gifted with his acid wit. What little hair remained, I carefully parted on the right as I had done all my life.

Once, during my early forties, I ventured into a barbershop. Eddie MacDougal, my friend and mentor, had guided my career and social choices for years. I never knew why Eddie had suggested the foray into the Northport barber's den. But his advice was always to the point. He had guided me in just about every career choice I made, became my sailing coach when Annie and I bought our sloop *Fairwind*, and even introduced me to the fine, though regrettable, art of eating sushi.

A suggestion from Eddie carried the weight of a command. He recommended that I visit a barber. I visited a barber. The hair cutter clipped away. As he splashed the nape of my neck with bay rum, he made a final suggestion. "I've moved your part to the other side of your head. Leave it that way."

Later that morning, I met Eddie at Otto's Shipwreck Diner, where a bunch of us hung out on Saturdays, drinking bad coffee and vying to see who could finish the *NY Times* crossword puzzle first.

I reported in with a conversation that went something like this:

"How'd it go?"

"Great. That guy is a good haircutter and conversationalist. He even suggested switching the part in my hair to the other side."

Eddie looked up from his crossword, put down his pencil, took a long sip of coffee...and burst out laughing.



## Dad Read Poetry

Bill Wilson

He read me poems—  
Kipling, Riley, Gray, and Stevenson.  
He read me poems—

an Irish cop  
with six years of schooling  
in the hedgerows of Thurles.

Why poems?  
Why to me, his ten-year-old son—  
who couldn't understand poetry,

or the Raj, or Gunga Din,  
or Little Orphant Annie,  
or My Shadow?

Why to me?

Love, I guess.  
He couldn't figure out another  
way To say "I love you."

