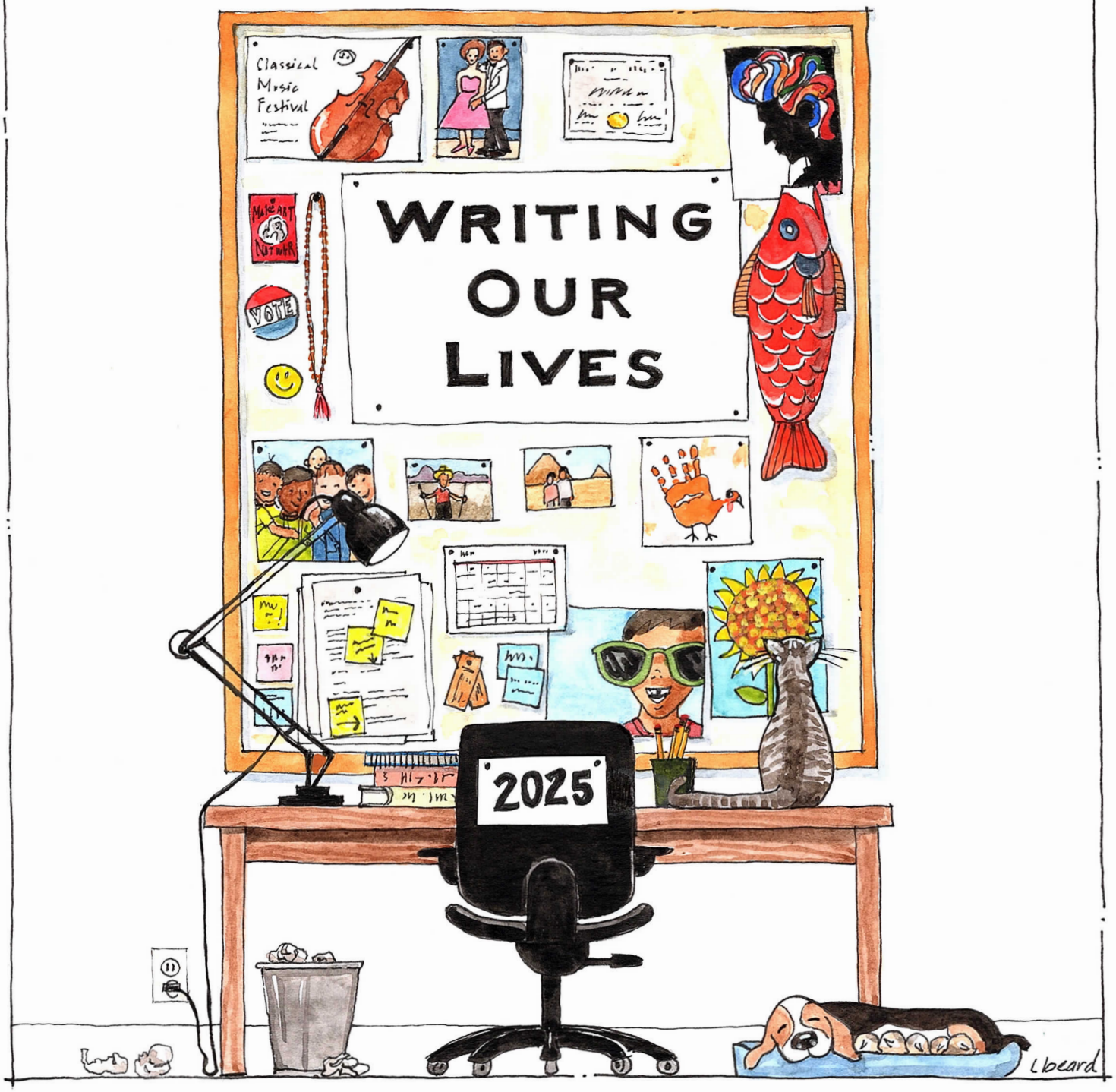

OSHER LIFELONG LEARNING INSTITUTE

AT

AUBURN UNIVERSITY

AUBURN, ALABAMA

Writing Our Lives

2025

Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Auburn University
Auburn, Alabama

Contents

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 terms.

Terry C. Ley, editor
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The Keepers of Our Histories

Peggy Haymes

Their eyes have grown cloudy,
their hair sparse and white,
and because they don't get around much anymore,
I am tempted to breeze right past them.
I have places to go,
things to do.
But Lord,
when I do stop,
when I do listen,
what wondrous stories I hear...
Simple games and swimming holes.
Two-week revivals and funeral home fans.
Old schoolhouses and old friends,
and mommas and daddies long since gone.
As they talk,
their eyes light up
with the light of all who have ever loved them,
their eyes grow tender
with the memory of all who have ever left
them.
Thank you, Lord,
for the tellers of stories,
for the keepers of our histories.

Peggy Haymes is a minister, a writer, a composer of hymns, and a hospital chaplain. She provides homes to rescue cats and dogs, “especially those who had hard starts in life.” She lives in Winston-Salem, N.C.

Heart Matters

Ken Autrey

When my wife Janne and I met, she had lived in Boston for eight years. After graduating from Mt. Holyoke College, she trained as a nurse at Massachusetts General Hospital and then began work there. Her Beacon Hill apartment was a short walk from the hospital. As a teaching institution, Mass General had several operating rooms with glass observation domes, so surgeons and nurses in training could get a bird's-eye view down on operations in progress. One afternoon, Janne put on her nurse's uniform and swiped a lab coat for me so I would look somewhat official, and we positioned ourselves above a dome to observe a heart bypass performed on a man who looked to be in his thirties.

This was my first glimpse into an operating theatre, but, looking down as the surgeons scalpeled into him, I felt not the least bit squeamish. Rather, this strange new world fascinated me. No sound was piped up to the dome, so we could hear nothing, which made it all the stranger when the anesthesiologist apparently cracked a joke and the others seemed to shudder in laughter. Despite the occasional levity, the team worked with great intensity on the heavily-draped body. The blood made it difficult to differentiate the man's organs from gloved hands working together inside his chest. As they progressed, one member of the team used forceps to pull bloody sponges (gauze strips) out of the chest cavity and lay them on a tray. Once the bypass was complete, a nurse counted the sponges and reported the number to the head surgeon, who then began probing in the chest cavity again. Janne explained that sponges are carefully counted and that they were apparently missing at least one and could not close him up until it was found.

The doctor's motions became increasingly brusque as he shoved various body parts around in his search. I could only imagine his language as he dug around and others backed away, giving him room. Finally, he extracted the missing sponge and held it up like a limp disembodied tongue. Then the team went to work stitching the poor oblivious patient back together. I realized I had begun to think of him as a corpse instead of a living being. Despite the breathing tube, the IV, and the other apparatus hooked to him, it seemed impossible that anyone could survive the traumatic violation of the body I had just witnessed. But once the surgeon tied the last stitch and applied a bandage, the patient appeared almost normal.

As an aide rolled him from beneath the dome, the surgical team, now relaxed, chatted animatedly, no doubt relieved to be done. Janne and I walked out. I left the lab coat on a rack in the hall. Only then did I realize that, despite the frigid air conditioning typical of all surgical areas, I was sweating profusely. I don't know whether I identified more with the surgeons or the patient.

I thought of that long-ago experience when I endured my own heart procedure several years ago. Fortunately, I merely went in for an ablation (for atrial fibrillation) rather than open-heart surgery. Although I was out well over an hour, and the process

involved probing my heart with catheters and burning away the problematic heart tissue, this was far less invasive than the bloodbath I had witnessed in Boston.

When my turn came for what I prefer to call "a procedure" rather than "surgery," I became the centerpiece of an operating theatre filled with computer screens, allowing the surgeon to see what was happening inside me as he worked his magic. In contrast, below the dome at Mass General Hospital forty years earlier, the team I observed operated in an era well before personal computers and miniature catheter-driven cameras. I'm fortunate that my problem didn't come along way back then. Still, some things never change. I can't help wondering what the team hovering over my inert body might have joked and laughed about as I lay there at the mercy of their skills, temporarily dead to the world.

Fortunately, the outcome for me has been excellent, as I hope it was for that young man I looked down on so many years ago. As for my wife Janne, our affair of the heart has lasted over fifty years, and side by side, beat by beat, we stand ready to face any future medical adventures.

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

– Mark Twain

Syracuse Snapshot

Ken Autrey

There's a cocksure slant to his head with his arms angled out, propped at his waist, as though he's waiting a bit impatiently for an answer to his question—or perhaps just eager for the photo session to end. He sports a full beard, long hair curling a few inches below his ears. An antique golf cap perches atop his head, its plaid pattern clashing with the flowers on his short-sleeved shirt. Bellbottom jeans hug his narrow hips. The backdrop appears to be a sheet hanging on a wall, its vertical creases framing the guy posed in front of it.

This is me—or the version of me who lived in Syracuse, New York, back in 1971, well before there was even a wisp of gray in my mustache or beard. Perhaps this was the first photo of me taken by the woman who had recently moved from Boston into my cramped apartment on Garfield Avenue, a stone's throw from the Syracuse campus and a mile or so from Roosevelt Junior High, where I struggled to teach English to recalcitrant innercity seventh graders.

The photographer would become my wife within a few months. I was barely a quarter-century old, and the jauntiness in the snapshot is long gone, as are the full beard, the long hair, the loud shirt and the cap. Fortunately, Janne is still with me, and we have two daughters, each of them over twice as old as I was in that photo. Our oldest granddaughter, now out of college and gainfully employed as a biomedical engineer, is almost as old as I was back then.

I rented my apartment from Mrs. Harrington, a blind widow who felt her way around her upstairs rooms with great finesse. She seemed ancient but probably was no older than I am now. Although I'm pushing eighty and my memory is a sieve, my recollection of that apartment is vivid. Admittedly, it was tiny and didn't offer much to remember. But it was the setting of my early life with Janne, the first home we shared. It was small but within its narrow confines, we found a whole new world.

I had known Janne's brother Pete and his wife Barb when we were Peace Corps Volunteers in Ghana teaching in secondary schools. I stayed in touch with Pete after we returned to the states and was invited for Thanksgiving at his parents' house in Rochester. Janne had come from Boston for the holiday. I first met her as she was kneading bread in the kitchen, sleeves rolled up, hair pulled back in a ponytail. She wore jeans and scuffed boots. I took an immediate liking to her, although her boyfriend Bill arrived from Boston soon after. There were thirteen of us around the groaning table that day.

On Friday, I stayed at the farmhouse Pete and Barb had rented along with some friends, as well as Pete's sister Penny and her husband Tom. Janne and her boyfriend Bill were also there for the weekend. The house party included nine of us. From the outset, I figured something was not quite right about Bill. He was given to long, rambling

monologues that were hard to follow and carried more than a hint of paranoia. Saturday night all of us except Penny, then pregnant with her first child, foolishly downed pills of uncertain origin and strength. Someone suggested that they were mescaline. We embarked on a communal high, a prolonged frenzy of dancing, drinking, and laughter. Around midnight, someone suggested that we all crowd into a small closet and pull the door shut, leaving us in complete darkness. Amid the churning about and chatter in close quarters, we realized Bill was yelling, apparently in the throes of a panic attack. Unable to unlatch the door, Pete kicked it open, releasing us all, and we continued our drug-fueled carousing through the following morning. Bill's anxiety abated somewhat, but his manic behavior continued until afternoon, when Janne took him downtown and put him on a bus to Boston. She found out later that when the bus stopped in Albany, he disembarked and was arrested for attempting to direct traffic in the middle of a busy street. Janne never saw him again.

At some point that winter, perhaps in January, I visited my friends Joe and Kathy in Boston. I learned that Janne needed a ride back to Rochester, which I was glad to provide. We drove via the Mass Turnpike and then the New York State Thruway in a snowstorm. Despite the windshield wipers, I had to stop frequently to clear snow away from the window. The defroster, always inefficient in those VW Beetles, barely functioned. We had plenty of time to talk, and the farther our uncomfortable trip took us, the more I was convinced that Janne and I could make a go of it. On my next trip to Boston, I moved Janne back to Syracuse with me.

After eight years in various apartments on Beacon Hill, Janne was ready for an abrupt change, so she ended her lease, quit her nursing job at Massachusetts General Hospital, and crammed her few possessions into my baby blue Volkswagen. She settled into my apartment quickly, acquiring a nursing position at Crouse-Irving Memorial Hospital, where she had been born. I finished out the year at Roosevelt Junior High School, the first structure east of the Mississippi built specifically as a junior high building. Janne's dad had attended school there in the late 1920s. He later sang me the official Roosevelt fight song, which had long been forgotten by the time I got there.

Every July, when Janne and I drive up Interstate 81 to the Debes family compound in the Adirondack Mountains, we zoom past our old neighborhood in Syracuse. We catch a glimpse of the apartment where we spent six months together before marrying in the back yard of Janne's parents' farmhouse, then moving south to Auburn, Alabama, where I began work on a master's degree in English. We recall how back in 1971 my VW skittered nimbly up the steep snow-covered Syracuse streets, how we strolled together across the university campus in the spring, and how we treasured our nights in that tiny apartment.

We've spent 55 years together, much of that time a blur. But each time I see Janne kneading dough with hands now wrinkled but still supple, my first view of her at work in her parents' kitchen returns to me vividly, as comforting and familiar as the smell of bread fresh from the oven.

Smoke Signals

Bill Brown

Luckily, Lindsay was a creature of habit, and he almost always came from upwind. The sweet aroma of his Hav-A -Tampa Jewel cigarillo preceded him, so that when he turned the corner, I was hard at work. Lindsay, the supervisor on a project rehabbing enlisted men's housing at Maxwell Air Force Base, seemed to be everywhere.

I was just a small cog in the construction machine, a recent high school graduate trying to earn money for college. Lindsay seemed fair enough but dubious of summer hires who got their jobs because somebody knew somebody. He wanted to make sure they knew they were there to work. In Montgomery's summertime heat and humidity, you had to stop every now and then to catch a breath, but I didn't want Lindsay to catch me doing it.

There was only one other summer hire, a kid named Jerry. After a couple of weeks, Jerry decided there were better ways to spend the summer and went home. I knew there were better ways, but they didn't pay, so I stayed.

I had not started college, but I had already begun my advanced education. Learning to make do on your own was an early lesson. I had indeed gotten the job because somebody knew somebody. In my case, my sister knew one of the company's executives. It was a Louisiana company, and I thought I would be working close to home. I was told, instead, that I would be working in Montgomery, Alabama. I had never been in Alabama, didn't know anyone in Alabama.

I didn't have a car, and I hitched a ride to Montgomery with one of the company's bigwigs. I landed at some corner on Dexter Avenue with my cheap suitcase at my feet and a few dollars in my pocket. Where to seek shelter? I found the YMCA and rented a room. And on Monday I figured out how to get to Maxwell to get acquainted with my two work companions for the summer: a nine-pound sledgehammer and a shovel.

The room at the Y was tiny, space for a single bed and a chest of drawers. Little air moved through the sole window, and I sweated through the night, seeking a cool spot on the lumpy pillow. When I got my first paycheck, I found a boarding house on South Perry Street.

It offered a clean room, breakfast, a sack lunch—sandwiches wrapped in wax paper—and supper. There were no meals on the weekends, but it was easy to find cheap places to eat. I became a regular at Chris' Hot Dogs—still in business after all these years—and on Saturdays I thumbed through the magazines at Capitol Book and News, buying an occasional magazine just so they wouldn't chase me off.

Taking advantage of time was another important lesson. I shared the room with two guys who worked for a tree-trimming company. Trees may be beautiful, but people who work in trees do not smell beautiful.

Since we started early and took only thirty minutes for lunch, I got to the boarding house in time to take a bath before the tree trimmers arrived and used all the hot water. I was usually

sitting on the porch waiting for supper when they showed up, hot and tired and smelly. There was no air-conditioning, of course, but a large and loud attic fan moved a lot of air. I was always so tired that the noise didn't bother me.

My day was spent knocking down concrete block walls and shoveling up debris. When the pile of blocks and rubble was large enough, a man with a front-end loader came and deposited it in a stake-bodied REO truck that had a dump bed. Part of my job—the best part—was to drive the overflowing truck to the dump area, which was about where the golf course at Maxwell is now. As I recall the speed limit on base was five miles an hour. I never drove more than three.

As the summer wore on, I dropped from the 175 pounds I weighed at graduation to 150 pounds. I wouldn't weigh any more than that until I'd been out of college for a year or two.

A father and son team from Prattville took me under their wing. The father ran the shop where they made cabinets, and his son was the lead carpenter.

Stay on past summer, they urged. They knew my finances were tight, and I could save a lot of money to go to college the following year, they said. Deep down, I knew if I stayed on, I might never get to college. I could spend the summer hoarding my money and not having a social life, but I couldn't do that forever. I could easily drift into being a career construction worker. That wasn't what I wanted.

Already the publisher of my hometown paper, who knew my circumstances, had tried to talk me out of pursuing my goal of majoring in journalism at LSU, which had the only real journalism school in the state. I should stay home and go to Louisiana Tech, the publisher said, and work part-time for him.

Tech had only one journalism professor. My hometown paper was not the kind I wanted to work for. The publisher poopooed the importance of a journalism degree, although he had graduated from the University of Missouri, which had one of the premier journalism schools in the country.

The publisher thought I was crazy and told me so when I turned him down.

I don't think I could have articulated it very well then, but perhaps the most important lesson I learned, or was learning, was that many people will advise you on what you should want, what you should do, but if you have a clear idea of your goals, you have to be stubborn enough to stick with them, even at the risk of failing.

When the summer was over, I had maybe enough money to get through half a semester at LSU. If I got to Baton Rouge, I figured, I could find a way to stay. And I did. I found enough jobs and scholarships and crowded in enough courses to graduate in three years. My first newspaper job was at one of the best newspapers in the country. Sometimes stubbornness pays off.

They still make Have-A-Tampa Jewels, but not in Tampa anymore. I learned a good lesson from those cigarillos, too. It's always a good idea to pay attention to which way the wind is blowing.

A Good Word for the Slow Lane

Bill Brown

I spent June living in the slow lane. It was a good place to be. We were in a turn-of-the-century (last century) cabin in Essex, a small village in upstate New York, Lake Champlain on one side and the Adirondack Mountains on the other. It's a place where the few shops' opening and closing hours seem to depend on the whims of the owner and where six or eight automobiles constitute the rush minutes.

It was a month without television, with a small local newspaper that carried, well, local news. No talking heads to report, dissect, re-report, and re-dissect the day's events 24-7. There was internet service, of course, but a glance at the online headlines to confirm the world had not ended was enough.

The day's soundtrack was the breeze murmuring in the trees and birds calling.

The Simon and Garfunkel line, "I get all the news I need from the weather report," rang true.

Adirondack chairs and cool breezes invite musing, and a time when we all lived in the slow lane came to mind. We just didn't know it.

It was when I was growing up in a small town in North Louisiana.

The stores downtown—which meant every store; there were no suburban malls—closed at 5 or 5:30, and on Wednesdays, the stores closed about mid-day. Of course, hardly anything was open on Sunday, perhaps a filling station or two. The two drug stores in town took turns opening for a couple of hours after church for people who needed medicine.

If you needed something that you couldn't find in one of the local stores, you probably could order it from Sears Roebuck or Montgomery Ward. It wouldn't arrive in two days, more on the order of a couple of weeks.

Television was late getting to my hometown, and Sunday afternoon was visiting time. Most people did not have air conditioning, and if the weather was fine they sat outdoors, drinking from moisture-covered iced tea glasses. The habit persisted for a long time after television arrived.

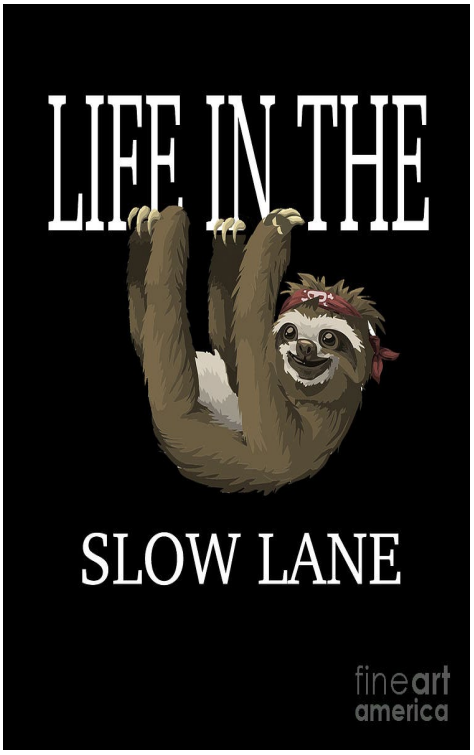
Life moved at a measured pace, and there was time for people to visit after work or to get in a little fishing or gardening.

Life viewed through the rearview mirror always has a softer focus, and it is too easy to see the good old days as altogether idyllic.

But if we recall fondly that pace of life, we must remember we are the ones—along with America's marketing geniuses who have been wildly successful at selling convenience as a key to happiness—who pressed the accelerator to quicken the pace. Convenience equaled progress. I was among those who thought it cool to get a burger at 10:00 p.m. or to go shopping on Sunday afternoon.

There is no turning back, of course, but there remains some ineffable longing for a simpler, slower time.

Joni Mitchell sang that "something's lost, but something's gained in living every day." Sometimes I wonder whether what we've gained is worth what we've lost.



How can you hate the actual writing? What is there to hate about it? How can you hate the magic that makes a paragraph or a sentence or a line of dialogue or a description something in the nature of a new creation?

-- Raymond Chandler

I Can Hear the Blood Flow

Cathy Buckhalt

My sleeves are long, so the purple bruises do not show. Surely, it will take a week for The bruises to heal. Will my veins be ready for a new round of infusions? They may well be, but I will not.

Just days ago, I would be leaving physical therapy, and at the stop sign, I would look to my right and see the Spencer Cancer Center. Taking a deep breath, I would say to myself, "At least I don't have to go there." Yet here I am a few weeks later, reclining and trying to relax while my nurse prepares my needle and looks for a big vein.

"I need to tell you I'm terribly afraid of needles," I mumble.

"So am I," she replies. I am surprised to hear a nurse say that. "Ask for the small blue needle each time you have your infusion. "

My friend says I am brave. Really, I am just numb. Whatever the nurses want to do, I go along. A vein is found. "Ready? 1, 2, 3, big stick."

"You're good" is all I can say.

Strange, the sound of my own blood swooshing from bag to arm. Honestly, I can hear my own blood. It is moving very fast. Twenty minutes later, MerryEmma smiles. "You're through," she says. "Next week, we'll use the other arm."

My weeks at Spencer passed quickly. Those days have their own stories. One day, it takes four sticks to find a vein. Another day, we watched a Code Blue. It is a sad day when we hear a patient ask for someone to sit with him while he gets chemo.

Now, nine weeks have passed. This Friday marks the end, we hope. Everyone has been friendly and kind. People know my name. But, I do not want to visit more times. I have acquired some new abilities, though. I can look at the needle going in my arm, and I can hear my blood flow.

A Stained Glass Memory

Joseph Archie Buckhalt

Dothan, Alabama, is my hometown as I lived there from the time I was five years old until I left for college. Although I should have been born there, I was born in Jacksonville, Florida, due to an historical event that changed my family's life along with millions of others' lives worldwide.

I have my father's WWII draft card showing that he registered in October 1940 when he was 25 years old. The family lived in Dothan, and Dad worked at Dothan Steam Laundry along with both his father and his aunt. In December of the next year, Japan attacked the naval installation at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and the U.S. went to war. By that time, my dad, mom, and sister were living in Ozark, Alabama, where Archie had begun work for the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad. Early in 1942, he was transferred to Jacksonville, Florida. Many troop trains went through Jacksonville as there were constant threats of German U-boats along the whole Atlantic coast. In 1942 alone, around three hundred U.S. ships were attacked by U-boats.

Archie Forrester Buckhalt at work, April 1942

Joe, Ann and Archie Buckhalt, Easter, 1948

One of my earliest memories is of First Baptist Church in downtown Jacksonville. It was then, and still is, a very large building in the central business district. Archie and Lucille had joined that church shortly after moving there, and while my mother had grown up in the Primitive Baptist Church, Archie did not have a religious affiliation growing up. I learned only recently that he had made his "profession of faith" and was baptized at First Baptist Jacksonville. Our family attended Sunday morning and evening services. My earliest childhood memory is at the church.

When we would arrive on Sunday morning, before I was taken to my Sunday School class, I was afforded a special privilege. I'm not sure how it was arranged to begin with, but the head custodian, Dexter, would take me with him on his rounds before services began. One of his tasks was to open the windows to the sanctuary. The church had enormous stained-glass windows, and Dexter would hold me in his arms so I could look closely at them and touch them. I was fascinated by the multi-colored windows, which depicted various Biblical themes. Every Sunday, I would look forward to my time with Dexter, a large black man who wore a starched white jacket with his name on it. In the photo below, the windows can be seen.

First Baptist Church, Jacksonville

As I have thought about this memory over the years, the irony of the church having black employees but no black church members has been sobering. When we moved back to Dothan in 1951, we affiliated with the First Baptist Church there. I remember putting money into an envelope every year for the Lottie Moon Missionary Program and listening to missionaries—many serving in Africa—speak from time to time at services. During the Civil Rights Movement in the '50s and '60s, there were no incidents that I knew of in Dothan to disrupt the apartheid status quo. By that time my dad was a deacon in the church, and I learned from him that ushers at the front doors were prepared to turn away any black persons who tried to attend services. I don't know if anyone tried to do so. It occurred to me that my friend Dexter would not have been welcome to attend services at the Jacksonville church where he was employed or at First Baptist in Dothan.

When a person is baptized, the symbolism is that all stains—representing sins—are washed away. But just as the stained-glass windows of my early memory persist, so do stains of racism in many segments of American life, including religion.

Adventures with Kirby

Joanne Camp

Press in the clutch with the left foot, roll back, slam on the brake with the right foot. The short windshield wipers could not clear the rain fast enough. The car in front of me compliantly obeyed the stop sign at the top of the hill. I am next in line, and two cars have pulled up behind me. I conducted my press-roll-slam maneuver twice more until I felt my back bumper kiss the front of the car behind me. Securely stopped, I pressed in the clutch, moved the handle into first gear, accelerated, sloshed through the intersection, and on to high school with my three immediate younger brothers.

The luminous light green Opel Kadett that I am driving is named Kirby. When my father gave him to me the day before, I found a slip of paper in the glove box with that name on it. This was the first day of operating my first car solo. My father had given me a twenty-minute lesson on how to drive a stick shift and then handed my seventeen-year-old self the keys. But there was a method to my father's magnanimity—I now can drive my eleven younger siblings to their various activities and relieve my mom of some of that burden.

But despite the responsibilities that went with this compact machine, the freedom and adventures were thrilling. With practice, Kirby and I cruised through the streets of Opelika and sometimes locales farther away, usually accompanied by my best friend Betsy and one or two of my brothers and their friends. A favorite Friday night activity was "juking," driving through various local haunts and looking for friends or boys we wanted to be friends with. The only local fast-food place was Jack's, right up the street from my house, and any Friday or Saturday night would see a line of barely idling cars snaking through the parking lot with the same objective.

One night, with two brothers in the back seat, Betsy in the front seat, and two friends leaning on each front window of the car chatting, a police officer approached. He was barely older than we were, dressed in Opelika Police Department blue but with long sleeves despite the Spring heat. His name tag read "D Moss." His hair was cut in a flattop. He wore brown jackboots.

"You cannot park here if you are not going into the restaurant."

I had always been taught to be polite to anyone in authority. "Yes, sir," I replied, said my goodbyes to the friends, and started the car. As the officer walked away to address another issue, a cute classmate approached, and with the car rumbling, we began speaking. The officer returned, more irritated.

"You need to move this car, now." Another "yes, sir." And I put the car in reverse. A constant column of cars flowed behind me. I waited patiently for an opening. Back came the officer, red-faced, and shouted, "Move this car NOW!" My tone met his: "Yes, Sir."

I backed out, slipped the clutch, and waved at the officer, saluting him with a "Hawaiian peace sign" as I departed onto Second Avenue.

Now, I had seen my girlfriend Betsy use this symbol to her mother's back after a reprimand, to boys at school as a joke after an off-color remark, and to her brother when he made fun of her. But I had no idea what it meant.

The officer must have known because as soon as we pulled onto Second Avenue, I saw him jump on his motorcycle and in a practiced move, boot the kickstand, and start after us without donning his helmet. Oncoming traffic checked him from leaving the parking lot. I turned right at the next street and right again at the end of the block in an evasive maneuver. But two blocks down, I saw the blue light flashing from his headlamp and pulled over.

He tromped up to my already-open window. "License," he demanded. I complied. "Miss Alexander, follow me!"

But my rebelliousness had not quite left me. "I can't," I replied. "You have my license; I don't drive without my license."

The shade of crimson his face then turned can only be described by Pantone. "Follow me," he growled.

During the deliberate, slow, four-block ride back to the fast-food restaurant, the car was silent, although I heard a stifled giggle from my friend. That was enough time for the little good angel on my shoulder to remind me of the consequences of my actions. The parking lot seemed less crowded as we pulled in.

With a gesture from Officer Moss, I exited the car. Holding my arm above the elbow, he directed me to another officer leaning against the side of the restaurant. He was taller than my captor. His thinning blond hair was combed over to hide his balding head. His face was as open as the moon. His pale blue eyes glimmered as he looked down on my less-than-five-foot frame.

"Captain." Officer Moss said as he presented his prisoner and my license and stepped back.

Captain Dunson suppressed a smile and began in a paternal tone, "Now, Miss Alexander, is this any way to start your new life? You are about to graduate and be out on your own."

"No, sir," I sniffled. "I'm sorry."

He released the smile and added. "Now, if you had been as nice to Officer Moss as you've been to me, he probably wouldn't have arrested you."

I couldn't help myself. "If Officer Moss had been as nice to me as you've been," I blubbered, "I probably wouldn't have shot him a bird."

With a snort of a laugh, he handed me my license and dismissed me with, "Go home immediately and tell your father what you have done."

***Footnote**: The State of Alabama and the U.S. Supreme Court have since decided that "shooting a bird" is protected by the First Amendment and not an arrestable offense, but I still don't recommend it.*

Joanne shoots a bird

Writers know that sometimes things are there in the drawer for decades before they finally come out and you are capable of writing about them.

– Gunter Grass

Prune Juice and Keys

Frank Chappell

Books and movies have been written about black women taking care of white children. I thank God that I was one of those children. I thank God that I had Alma in my life. I am a blessed person for having known her and for having received her love and care.

She probably aged faster because of me and Granddaddy, but that's okay. God will reward her for her efforts. The fact that she put up with us for those years shows just what a caring person she was. Looking back on it, I think I would have said there is not enough money in this world to be paid for dealing with you two each day. She never stopped doing her best.

Let me see if I can give just one example of what she went through in trying to take care of me and Granddaddy while Momma and Daddy worked. When she was dealing with Frankie and Mr. Olin, she often had her hands full.

This particular day started like most days did. We would have a cold biscuit (Alma made good biscuits) and wash it down with a cold coke in the small glass bottles. Granddaddy kept them stacked by the case near the back door. We would be seated at the kitchen table, talking and enjoying our "manly breakfast." At the end of the meal, Alma would bring in two small shot glasses and a bottle of prune juice. I am not sure of the brand, but I can remember what the bottle looked like. It was green glass, round, fairly large. It had a yellow label with dark green writing.

I don't remember if Alma poured or if Granddaddy did. We then toasted each other and drank the cold contents down. To a little boy, prune juice did not taste very good. It was thick and sort of bitter. The coke stood nearby as a chaser. Granddaddy firmly believed that prune juice kept you regular and healthier.

After we finished breakfast, Granddaddy returned to his bed. His health was declining rather fast. I went with him to his room and somehow talked him into letting me play with his keyring.

My next stop was at the bathroom, where I managed to take one of the keys that had a keen point on it and lock the door from the outside. To me, I had done what you're supposed to do when you have keys: You lock doors.

Having locked the door, I fastened the keys to my Oshkosh bib-front overalls. I ran one of the side buttons through the keyring and rebuttoned the side opening. My keys were now hanging from my side as men that I had seen in town wore theirs.

A busy man with keys had things to do, so with a shout to Alma, I headed out into the front yard. To me, it was not a yard; it was my world. I was grown up. In my world, all sorts of smells and sounds were around me.

In my world, I was a very busy man with keys on my side. I had things to do, places to be, and people to see. For instance, in my world now, I had cows to round up. They needed to be moved from one pasture to another. My friend Lemuel said that this was very important, so now was the time that I needed to be at it.

I got my herding stick. Lemuel had one that he carried in the gun rack of his truck. I was glad that Granddaddy had one that I could use today. Now where were all the cows? One was missing somewhere.

There, there she was off by herself under that bush. When I tapped her with my stick, she rolled right on out for me. As a matter of fact, she rolled past the other cows and bull. Now, if I could get them all headed in the right direction, all would be well.

As I am getting the herd moving from one side of the pasture to the other, I hear and feel my stomach rumble. Whew, that hurt, I think that I may need to head in and go to the bathroom. Another pain hit, and now I know I need to hurry. I dropped my stick and ran up the steps.

"Alma, I got to go. I got to do number two!"

I was standing at the locked bathroom door when she came out of the kitchen. "Go on in she said, I am coming."

"I can't!" I told her. "The door is locked.

"How did that happen?" she asked?"

"I locked it with Granddaddy's key!"

"Where is the key?" she asked. I showed her the ring buttoned on my overalls. She was struggling to get the keys free. She told me that I could get into such a mess. She was fussing about Mr. Olin letting a child have his keys. I was squirming and telling her how bad I had to go. My belly was sounding like a volcano about to erupt.

Alma finally got the door opened and my overalls down. I just made it onto the toilet in time. The prune juice had worked well. Alma laughed and said, "Thank you, Jesus."

When Momma got home that afternoon, Alma filled her in on the near disaster of the morning. When Momma called me to the kitchen, she said we needed to have a little talk. I was not happy as I slowly walked toward her.

When Granddaddy came into the room, he told them, "Don't y'all make that baby feel bad about playing with those keys that I gave him to play with. If you want to blame someone, blame me, not him."

Court was over. Case dismissed. No more was said. I did learn a lesson. When under the influence of prune juice, bathroom doors should never be locked. Also, wearing keys should sometimes be just for looks.

I do not so much write a book as sit up with it, as with a dying friend. During visiting hours, I enter its room with dread and sympathy for its many disorders. I hold its hand and hope it will get better.

– Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

Thinking of a Taste

Frank Chappell

Christmas was on its way! That time of year that comes so very fast and leaves way too soon. Why, why does it happen this way every year?

Is it the way our childhood taught us to be? Does the heartfelt desire of a child wanting Christmas to hurry to stay alive in us as adults? Does its power bring to life thoughts of many years ago and not often remembered?

I feel that it must be so, for the memory was over fifty years old and yet came once more to mind. Its clearness is as sharp as if it were happening for the first time. Shirley and I had stopped at the farmer's market. I am not sure if we were on a mission to obtain a certain item of food or not. Most of the time, when I go in there with her, I am just looking. I do enjoy the smells. They are fresh and excite my nose. They don't cost anything, so that is a blessing.

I took note that due to it being so late in the year, there was more space in the building. The cramped rows were not a problem as they were during the full-blown harvest season.

To utilize the space, the owners had stocked the front tables with all sorts of candies. There were all sorts of items there that were rarely seen except at Christmastime.

Sugar-loaded items abounded. I looked and saw enough sugar there to put the state of Alabama into a coma. Container after container sat, inviting those who gazed upon them to take them home and stuff fistfuls into their mouths.

There were so many varieties of sweet goodness to choose from! As a kid, I would have wondered which one I should pick. As an adult, I was standing there wondering how much money was tied up in this inventory. All that goodness must have been cheap to buy. From the price tags, it was obvious that profit was to be made.

Then I saw them! My eyes locked on the container as my hand went toward it. I was looking at chocolate cream drops. I had not thought about that candy in many, many years.

For a moment, I was not standing at the farmer's market. My mind had taken me back to our kitchen in Waverly. I was sitting at the table with Daddy. He was eating cream drops, a treat that he allowed himself at Christmas.

Standing there, the memory flooded through me. I even remembered how I felt about that candy. I was not a fan of it. I thought that it was too sweet and mushy. Daddy liked it, and that was what was on my mind now.

As I stood there looking around, I thought about the fruits that would have been in our home so many Christmases ago. Both Momma and Daddy enjoyed oranges, tangerines, and such. I guess those were treasures that they had eaten in their own childhood Christmas joy.

Neither of my parents ever shared with me Christmas stories of their youth. Knowing what a large family that Daddy came from, I would think that the gift of candy and fruit was huge on his wish list.

After we left the farmer's market, I shared my thoughts with Shirley. A few days later, she returned to the market and brought home a bag of chocolate cream drops for me.

I may not be a big fan of the candy, but I sure enjoyed the memory of how my Daddy was.

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

For Sale

Frank Chappell

To My Auburn Family concerning the property we own on Donahue Drive:

Every once in a while, I have a thought. Rarely are they good ones, but I have them anyway. I have been kicking around the idea of sharing this thought with others. At first, I thought I would just keep it to myself. I figured no one would want to hear it. Then I said to myself, why not share it? Get it off my shoulders. Put it out there for everyone to know just how I feel about the matter that has been on my mind for a fairly long time now. Now that I am putting it here on paper, I feel better already. Yes, not keeping it bottled up is the right way to go!

Really, it boils down to this: I want us to sell Jordan-Hare. It is a prime piece of real estate that is not being utilized properly at this time. Why not sell it with the understanding that it will have to be relocated? It is a shame to see such a fine structure go to waste. With the planned improvements coming to the north endzone, its property value has never been higher. No doubt about it; now is certainly the time to sell.

Some sprucing up will have to be done before an open house will be possible. We need to see if we can get rid of the foul odor that the current occupants have allowed to creep into every nook and cranny of the place. It stinks so bad that I personally am ashamed to have visitors drop in on Saturday afternoons.

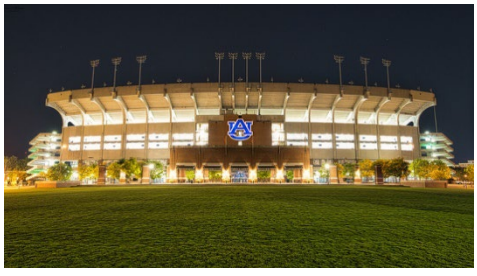
I know this has to be a family decision. I am aware that we have to be "All In." It is time to let the old girl go. We have had our share of wonderful memories there.

We need to take a second to recall all the miracles we have enjoyed within her walls. Now it is time to say goodbye. We really need to make it happen while it is a sellers' market!

Sincerely,

Your Cousin

Tears on the Plains



Miriam, At Home

Wendy Cleveland

The house on Filbert seems smaller now, willows full and weepy,
and in every room I remember her presence, fragrance, and voice.

In spring she filled the sandbox with zinnia seeds we sold
to raise money for trips to the zoo and Valley Forge.

In summer she staked tomato vines to broken hockey sticks,
rearranged the furniture, canned peaches, beets, and beans.

On Mondays she hung sheets on the line, snapping and slapping
even when frost dusted the grass and leaves swirled at her feet.

In the middle of the night she felt foreheads for fevers
and fed throats with honey she warmed on the stove.

Her books lined the built-ins and yarn sat by her chair
where she knitted colorful scarves, hats, mittens, and socks.

I hear her laugh when she wallpapered the kitchen upside down,
roosters walking on their combs, distlefinks dancing on air.

From the basement came the click-clack of the Singer treadle
and the whirring shuttle as she fed fabric through the presser foot.

I inhale her roux of roasted turkey, cinnamon-dusted sand tarts,
and closet sachets of clove-pierced oranges hung on satin ribbons.

Her humming is still with me—pie crimped, laundry folded, table set—
the soft assurance that in my house all is well.

Flag Fairy

Wendy Cleveland

September 11, 2001, was a day like most in upstate New York, the view from my classroom reflecting the best of Indian summer—the sky cloudless, the fields teeming with Queen Anne's lace, goldenrod, and purple asters. My tenth-grade honors group entered the classroom, and as soon as the bell rang, Amanda raised her hand and asked if we could just talk about the Trade Center instead of Theodore Roethke's poem "Big Wind."

"What about the Trade Center?" I asked.

"A plane flew into it. They think it was a terrorist attack."

"What?" I responded, not quite sure I had heard correctly. This early in the school year I still did not have a good read on these students, though they all were polite and I had no reason to believe this was an insensitive ruse to thwart our attempt to understand poetic metaphor.

So, we were off and running, most of the classmates having been in their history class prior to English, where there was a television showing the horrific event unfolding. I listened to their comments and questions, observing on their faces the looks of astonishment and worry. If it could happen in New York City, could it not also happen here in Ithaca, five hours away? Was this the prelude to a bigger nuclear attack? How would people on the floors above the plane's entry get down all those stairs? How would the firefighters rescue so many people from such a fiery inferno? The questions were endless. The answers were not, but clearly, they needed to talk, and I needed to listen.

When they left for lunch, I headed for the science room where the television anchors were trying to keep up with other attacks, one of which included a plane that went down near Pittsburgh to which my brother was heading back from a conference in Paris. I raced downstairs and asked the guidance counselor if I could use her phone to make a long distance call to my sister-in-law. I didn't know where that flight originated from, but I had to know if Bob was safe. The phone lines were all busy, clogged with callers like myself trying to find out if our loved ones were on that plane. I would have to wait anxiously before learning my brother had landed just before all planes across the country were grounded.

Following lunch, my seniors, fourteen boys and four females, filed in after attending the morning session at a nearby vocational school. Many of the young men were volunteer firefighters in training and, understandably, very vocal about their impressions of the Trade Center attack. By now, it was known that people had jumped out windows in an attempt to escape the flames. By now, there were reports of people filing down many floors while firefighters, with their heavy hoses and gear, were heading up to save those who were trapped or injured. By now, the President had been taken to a secure bunker safe from a nuclear attack. Once again, these young people needed to talk, and I needed to listen.

Like most people across the country, my husband and I later watched the events of that day unfold on live television. Our daughter, a sophomore at Auburn University, eighteen hours away from home, called and wept, unable to understand the evil she was witnessing. We had no answers but tried to assure her that she was safe and urged her to stay with our close friends who lived across town.

In the days following the attacks, American flags flew all over town from homes and businesses. Between 74% and 82% of Americans chose to respond to the attacks by flying American flags on their homes. One farmer outside of our neighborhood projected a photograph of a huge flag on the side of his barn that lit up the darkness. Our country was coming together to mourn those who had lost their lives, to honor the dead, and to stand behind all the first responders who experienced unimaginable trauma. National pride was on the rise, and I rode that wave alongside my neighbors. I was brought up in a time when love of country was unabashedly common among Americans. Our classroom walls displayed the photograph of the sitting President and at the start of each day we pledged allegiance to the American flag hanging in the front of the room. With hands over hearts we sang the national anthem at sporting events as it was meant to be sung, and we celebrated the Fourth of July with parades, people waving miniature flags all along the street.

As time marched on, however, those flags showed signs of wear, were taken down, and, for some reason, never replaced. Fourth of July celebrations were superseded by picnics and ball games. Singers contrived new notes and rhythms while performing the national anthem. Patriotism was fading, but when we moved to Auburn, we noticed flags displayed all along city streets on national holidays. Unsung heroes worked through the night to line the streets with Old Glory. I wasn't ready to let go of my love of country and my pride in those who keep us safe, so I took on the job of Flag Fairy not long after we relocated.

Whenever I was driving around town and noticed a frayed flag, I wrote a note to the business owner that read *Please honor our service men and women by flying an untattered flag* and mailed it with a flag stamp. I passed the designated place of business on a regular basis, hoping to see a new flag. University Tire and Auto had a huge flag with several tears but very quickly replaced it with another large flag. Kentucky Fried Chicken, on the other hand, took their time removing their shaggy flag while I waited a few months before seeing its replacement. Trust Bank flew a frayed flag for weeks and did replace it, but with a smaller version that looks silly hanging on that tall pole.

America is hurting these days, torn in half by differing political ideologies, rampant internet rumors, and a sad loss of the unity that has, in the past, buoyed us up in times of strife. When I see the eagle soar above Jordan-Hare football stadium followed by the band's unfurling of that enormous flag, I am reminded that even with our differences, we can still come together for a short time. And then, when those Air Force jets fly overhead with their ear-piercing scream and vapor white contrails, I am filled with the hope that Americans still feel the same sense of patriotism that gives me chills and the pride to wear the name Flag Fairy.

Uncle Philip Makes Me Happy

Betty Love Turney Corbin

Uncle Philip is always happy when I call him, and I'm always happy when he calls me. He always lets me know he loves me. He encourages me when I'm facing challenges, especially those of being a caregiver, a role I've played several times in my life, or when I'm facing health challenges.

Not only does he love me, he loves all his nieces and nephews, and there are quite a few of us because he is the tenth child in a family of eleven. His nine older siblings—eight sisters and one brother—were born to his father's first wife, Ida Love. After her death, his dad married Vonie, and she was the mother of Phillip and his younger sister Anne. But you would never know that those nine older siblings were half-siblings. Philip loved them all. His father, Jim Martin, and his mother Vonie set a good example of loving all the family.

Many of us nieces and nephews call him Philip, not Uncle Philip, because he's not that much older than we are. He's only twelve years older than I am, and some of my cousins are much closer to his age than that.

When Philip was hospitalized recently and we were worried about him, my cousin Mary Helen texted me: "He is the most wonderful uncle ever. I love him so much!!! He loves all of us so much!" I feel this way, too.

When Mary Helen's sister Nancy couldn't make it to Philip's 89th birthday party, she called him for a phone visit. She later told her sister, "I wish we were as perfect as Philip thinks we are."

Philip, as the tenth child, was seventeen years younger than the ninth one, Elizabeth, known as Lig. You might think they wouldn't have been close due to the age difference, but that was not the case. When my mother, Mary Love, the fifth child, died in 1999, Lig was the only survivor of the first nine. She lived in Dothan, and Philip lived in Enterprise, about twenty miles away. They got together for lunch almost every week. Their affection for each other was obvious. They would smile at each other and sometimes hold hands. Although my mother was 25 years older than Philip, they had frequent long phone conversations, and they certainly loved each other.

One day when Aunt Lig and I were talking on the phone, she said, "Philip is like a woman in all the best ways." She was referring to his ability to show his love for his family and his habit of keeping us up to date with family news. Sometimes he would tell us the same news several times, but that was okay. He was so proud of his family.

Philip and his wife Charlene have been married for over sixty years, and they have welcomed many people into their home. For many years they would host Christmas dinner at their home in Enterprise. My parents, my husband, my sister, and I would be there as

well as Aunt Lig and her son Clayton. Sometimes Lig's son Jim and wife Patty and Lig's daughter Mary would come, also. Usually, Philip's niece Kay Wooley and her husband Wilson, who lived across the street, would join us. Occasionally other family members or friends would join us, too. Philip loved people, and he wanted everyone to have a place to go at Christmas. All of us would bring food to these dinners, but Charlene cooked so much that we would have had plenty if we had eaten only the food she had prepared. She was a wonderful cook and a wonderful hostess. Christmas at their house was a time of love and happiness.

When I think of Philip, I also think of his devotion to County Line Baptist Church, the church he has attended all his life. He, Charlene, and their son Edwin are there each Sunday. Philip and Charlene have sung in the choir and have served on many boards and committees. I think they know everyone who attends that church. I don't know the details of their church involvement, but I think he and Charlene do whatever needs to be done.

Philip was a farmer, and I think there were years when he knew almost every farmer in Alabama. He grew up on the farm, and when he graduated from the University of Tennessee, he joined his dad in running the dairy farm and growing peanuts. After his dad's death, Philip and his son Edwin took over the farm. Philip also served for a long time on the board of the Alabama Farmer's Federation.

Since I moved back to Alabama in 2003, it has been my pleasure to have Philip, Charlene, and Edwin join other family members at my house for a Thanksgiving feast. As the patriarch, we always call on him to say the blessing, which tends to be lengthy. We have a lot to be thankful for. And of course, he always has a special place at the head of the table.

One time I asked my mother what advice her dad gave to his children. She said he wanted his children to love each other. Philip has certainly carried on this tradition of love. Of course, that's why talking to him makes me happy.

Note: Philip passed away in April 2024, just two months before his 90th birthday.

Philip and his wife Charlene are in the front row. Thanksgiving 2023.

Back Yard Peace and Comfort

Betty Corbin

I find comfort and peace as I look at my backyard. As I sit on my couch in my great room or on my screen porch, I see tall hardwood trees—oaks, hickories, sweet gums, beeches. I think some have been alive longer than I have, over seventy years. Of course, the view changes as the seasons change.

In summer, the leaves cover the trees, and the woods are so dense that I can't see the house behind me. Six red begonia hanging baskets on black wrought-iron crooks surround my patio. They sway gently in the breeze. The drift roses bloom in pink clusters on the right of the patio. Sometimes I clip a few of them to decorate my coffee table. Just in front of the dense woods the crepe myrtles droop with deep pink blooms, and yellow blossoms cover low lantana bushes. In the morning I check to see if there are any saucer-sized red blooms on the hibiscus bushes in pots on the patio. These blooms always cheer me up. Their beauty lasts only a day in the summer heat. Sometimes I photograph them with my iPhone and post the pictures on Facebook or as a background on my iPhone or iPad.

I see the birds at the feeder just beyond the patio's edge. I lift my binoculars to see them close up, especially the cardinals, who are my favorites. The male cardinals are a brilliant red with a bright gold beak encircled in black. God created such beauty when He created this creature. I call the largest male cardinal Ray, the largest female cardinal May. Perhaps the smaller cardinals are their offspring. When I walk into my great room in the morning and see Ray at the feeder, I think God is saying, "Good morning," letting me know He's with me today. The female cardinals are golden tan with red accents, not as stunning as the males but beautiful in their own way. I'm amazed when I see tiny hummingbirds hovering around their feeder

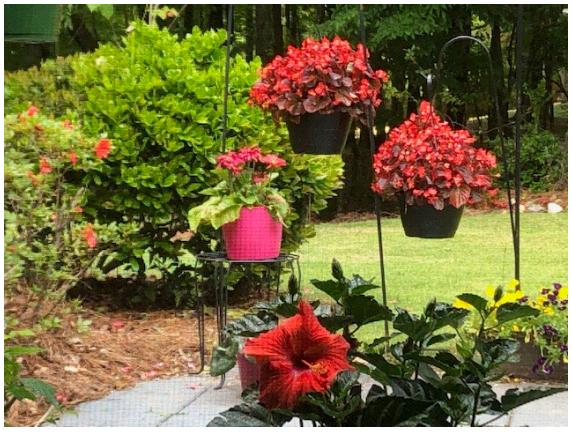
In autumn, the leaves start to fall and scatter on the grass behind the patio. Some leaves are bright red or yellow, some brown. The summer flowers continue until there's a freeze, sometimes not until December. I bring the hibiscus pots and the hanging baskets into the garage on those freezing nights. The humidity of the summer is replaced with crisp air of fall. With the cooler weather the hibiscus blooms last two days or more instead of being gone in a day. Sometimes I have a hibiscus bloom on Christmas Day.

In the winter, the bare branches reach to the sky. I see the skeleton of the trees, their very essence. The sunset scatters pink across the sky behind their branches. Yellow pansy hanging baskets replace the red begonias. They shed joy on grey winter days. The cardinals are still here in winter, Ray and May and their friends and kin. Plus, there are many small birds, house finches with their red heads and red breasts, brown chipping sparrows with the lovely scalloped pattern on their wings, tiny Carolina chickadees with their black heads and white breasts. A few plump mourning doves eat the seeds that have fallen to the patio.

Spring comes early here in Auburn, Alabama. Sometime in March tiny leaves emerge on the bare branches. Each day they grow larger, and in two weeks they are fully grown. They are a pale fresh green, not the darker green of the summer. As I take walks through my neighborhood, I see azaleas bloom in various shades of pink and purple, white and red. But the only azaleas I can see in my backyard are small bushes to the left of my patio. I call them my Auburn azaleas since they are orange, an Auburn University color. For an unknown reason, they bloom very late, not until the end of April or early May.

I have a new appreciation of this view as I spent more time at home during the pandemic of 2020 and 2021. I live alone, having lost my husband in 2015.

When I lie in bed at night and feel lonely or restless, I picture my backyard and find comfort and peace.



Raising an Infant in a Construction Zone

Carole Corsby

To say that our handmade house was not finished when we occupied it in the summer of 1989 is a ridiculous understatement. The floors were exposed plywood, as were the walls, which also were the underside of the roof. It sported neither heat nor insulation; those were in the works, but it was summer, and they could wait while we did plumbing and wiring and nailed on siding and built porches and screened the windows. The only bathroom ready for use was upstairs. We were roughing it in a huge, double A-frame structure perched among deciduous hardwoods on the side of a hill. Even with some 4500 sq. ft. of roof, the many windows and skylights made it feel like we were living in a tree house.

On a bright, hot day later that summer, my cousin Shirley brought her young daughter and our grandmother (Mama Hallmark) to visit. They wanted to see what we were building on a dirt road so far out in the sticks. The trip to our house from Colbert County is about 230 miles; to drive it one way takes me at least five hours. Their visit was literally a day trip. We tried to get them to spend the night, but Shirley insisted on driving them back home that evening. We had a wonderful visit of a few hours, including a big dinner. They admired what we had accomplished on this construction project, but it was obvious that we had a whole lot left to do to make our house comfortable, much less to complete it.

That following November 27 brought us our son, Nick, on a beautiful, mild day. Born on the 24th, he was three days old when we met his delivering angel at a Burger King and brought him home. He weighed a few ounces over six pounds. We had learned that he was to be ours only the week before he was born. Doug and I were over the moon with happiness, but our house still had no insulation, and we had very little heat. Fortunately, the weather was still mild, and thanks to Mama Hallmark and my mother, both quilters and knitters, we had plenty of afghans, quilts, and blankets to keep us from freezing if it should turn cold.

Turn cold it did, suddenly and drastically! December temperatures dropped into the teens and below. AU students had gone out of town on break without winterizing their apartments and houses. Pipes froze and burst, flooding everything as soon as the temperatures rose above freezing. Landlords hustled to find building supplies to repair the damage. At one point, we heard that there was no PVC pipe to be found in Auburn. Fortunately, we had decided to stay at home during December instead of traveling with our infant. Doug wrapped all of our water pipes, and we left the water running. We purchased a kerosene heater, turned up the electric one in the waterbed, and piled on more quilts.

Breastfeeding was not an option for us. Every night, I would clamber out from under several layers of quilts and prepare a warm bottle of formula. Although the cold was bitter, even in the house, Nick's midnight snack was a special bonding time for my son and

me. I kept both of us bundled up, leaving only our faces and my hands exposed. Even so, when the temps inside the house dropped into the low 40s, I worried about keeping Nick warm. During feeding time, I would drape a quilt over my head to cover us both. He seemed to love the cold and never complained while we huddled inside our makeshift tent in the dim lamplight seeping through the quilted walls.

A phone conversation with my grandmother during the worst of the cold went something like this:

"Mama Hallmark, do you think we can raise our tiny baby in this house with no insulation and next to no heat?"

Seeking her advice made perfect sense to me: beginning during The Great Depression, she had birthed and raised a dozen babies to adulthood without losing a single one. Papa Hallmark had worked as a sharecropper, and, for many years, they had moved around a lot, living in houses, some bad and others worse, that came with his jobs.

Although her reply was 34 years ago, I still remember what she said:

"Honey, you'll do just fine. You've got a good, sturdy house. Why, I've raised babies in houses with holes in the walls big enough to sling a cat through."

After a good laugh, I pressed on, "How did you keep the infants from freezing to death?"

She answered, matter-of-factly, "I just took them to bed under the covers with me and held their little feet in my hands to keep them warm."

Taking her wise advice to heart, I learned to do the same.

The worst of the cold spell broke in January, and we had a relatively mild winter. Doug and I scrambled to put up rolls and rolls of insulation to cover the 940 square feet of walls in the living room. Since my husband had a height phobia, I did most of the installation above eight feet or so. The living room soars to the peak at twenty-five feet above the floor. Being short, I had to work almost exclusively on a ladder. Once I reached heights that freaked Doug out, he built a large platform at twelve feet. I still had to put a ladder on the platform to reach the highest point, but I was not afraid of heights. Doug seemed to be calmer once he had the platform in place, probably because he could no longer see me dangling in space.

We had to keep Nick out of the room while we were installing the fiberglass insulation. Fortunately, he was an easy baby, sleeping almost all day; his most active times were in the late evenings. When he went to sleep after his morning bottle, I would place him in his crib in the bedroom and drape a light mesh shawl over it to protect him from the drifting fibers.

We made it through that first year with flying colors. The intervening years have had ups and downs, but we still haven't completed the house. It's comfortable, certainly livable, and people gasp when they come in and see it for the first time.

"You built this by yourselves?" they usually ask, followed by, "Without a blueprint?"

One day a few years ago, I commented idly to Nick, "I don't think we'll ever get this house finished."

My astute, experienced son looked me dead in the eye and said firmly, "Mom, this house is finished!

Writers live twice. They go along with their regular life.…But there's another part of them that they have been training. The one that lives everything a second time. That sits down and sees their life again and goes over it. Looks at the texture and details.

– Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones*

For Only Seven Dollars a Day

Carole Corsby

The young man from 1-2-1 who delivered the 20-yard dumpster to our house on April 11, 2024, dropped it off exactly where I requested. I've always been a tree-hugger, so we have only a few places to park something that large. Before we built our house in the 1980s, we cleared only enough trees to plop the future dwelling down in the middle of the forest. Our skinny driveway snakes 300 feet or so from the clearing to the county road.

My son and I had been planning for a couple of years to clean out the stuff that has accumulated in all three levels of our house. Build a big house, and you have plenty of space to fill with the things that you hesitate to throw away; someday, they might come in handy.

The bentwood hat rack that, for years, had been relegated to a spot in the downstairs bathroom was delaminating, but it would still hold hats. Nick caught me gone to Mama's for a few days and spear-chunked it straight into the dumpster. Where we will hang our fathers' hats going forward is a mystery.

While I've never been willing to throw books away, the presence of the dumpster prompted me to sort through shelves and random stacks, choosing some lesser favorites and duplicates to take to the OLLI book exchange. Hopefully, I can lug a bag each week.

Each time Nick descends from his second-floor residence, carrying big black bags bulging with who-knows-what, I hoist them into the receptacle. I don't raise an eyebrow. When I hear the four-wheeler crank outside the basement door and listen as Nick drives it around the house with the trailer rattling behind it, I assume that it could be filled with forgotten treasures, but I don't even peer to see what they are. If I haven't missed them by now, I never will. Someday is here, and they haven't come in handy.

The partially sunken tub that my husband insisted on installing 35 years ago is gone. Nick managed to get it out of its hole and onto the front deck in one piece, but he had to saw it into four sections in order to heave it over the deck railing. The tub took up about twelve square feet of bathroom floor space and held enough water to drain the well; it was used rarely in its heyday and not at all since Doug died in 2014. Portions of the ceramic tile flooring came up along with the tub. I'm the one who laid the tile over 25 years back, so I wasn't surprised. Nick asked, and I gave the nod to scooping the tile into a wheelbarrow and on into the dumpster. Tile removal revealed that years-old water damage around the commode will require replacing that portion of the subfloor. We already had planned to replace the commodes in both bathrooms, since it's impossible to get parts. The oldies are destined for the dumpster. The bathroom floor will be a mess until we get something else installed. Nick plans to lay vinyl flooring. He has asked me to vacate the premises for a long weekend while he organizes and executes that task. When I was his age, I put down flooring, but my body has

lost that required degree of stamina and agility. I would be no help at all, so I'll go visit Mama again.

The bentwood rocker, a gift from Mama back in the 1970s, also is delaminating. For at least the past decade or so, it has been lounging on the screened porch off my bedroom, subjected to all kinds of weather and given only sporadic use. I'm waffling about whether to keep it. This spring, on that porch, we raised baby banties until they grew their flight feathers. Once they could fly out of their bin, as chickens are prone to do, they commenced pooping all over the place. A stubborn splotch of chicken poop is on the front of the rocker seat where the fabric and wood meet. Even if I could clean it, I would hesitate to sit in that wobbly chair: I'm over the load limit. Probably, it should join the hat rack.

Nick has promised to remove the electronic equipment that is stacked on the floor behind the garden swing in the living room. I don't bug him about this because numerous crates of vinyl records, bins of children's toys, Doug's dusty musical instruments, two rocking horses, a tub of Christmas things, and a child's rocking chair are back there as well. The swing, my retirement gift from the AU Biology Department, is intended to provide nostalgic, comfortable seating for guests; unfortunately, no matter how often we free it of clutter, valuable "stuff" sneaks back onto the seat. Should a skinny person clear enough room to sit, he could not rock the swing without bumping into the things listed above.

We agreed that the unwieldy hide-a-bed sofa, a cast-off from friends, was dumpster fodder. Even before it was broken, it made a dreadfully uncomfortable bed. Nick dismantled and chunked it yesterday. The matching chair should have the same fate, but Nick thinks he can clean it. I'm doubtful. Lucy, our hound, adopted that chair and slept in it for several years, until it became too nasty, even for her. Removing the nasty is a work in progress.

So...we are cleaning out the house. The dumpster rental company is patient. At first, I told them we would need it for at least a month. On June 6, I told them that we hope to be finished by the end of June. They don't seem to care how many days we keep it as long as my credit card payments go through. Surely, I can call them to pick it up by Labor Day!

Yesterday, Nick discovered an excellent reason to keep the dumpster for a while longer. It is resting on a slight incline with the drain on the higher end. Since we've had such a rainy spring, I was concerned about water collecting in it and providing a breeding pool for mosquitoes. Nick bought a pump for removing the water, but I've asked him to hold off on pumping it out for the time being.

As I was getting ready for bed a few days ago, I saw a pool of light waving around on the front deck. A noise or something had caused Nick to take a flashlight to investigate; all kinds of critters visit our house. Curious, I waited to see what he had discovered.

"We've got frogs in the dumpster," he reported with smiling eyes.

I'm thrilled! Some tadpoles eat mosquito larvae. We'll have to keep renting the dumpster until the tadpoles hatch. For only seven dollars a day, we get all of these bonus benefits. As I sit here

writing, I am being serenaded by a symphony of frog calls, and I'm filled with joy. Who cares if the house is a wreck? Our world needs more frogs.
FOLLOW UP: July 11, 2024

My son is the most amazing person I know: he can do anything. Plumbing, electrical, carpentry, electronic, or mechanical problems he can handle with ease. He and his chainsaw keep us in firewood. Problems with my car or his truck never faze him. He can unlock my computer, even when I've done something particularly dumb, and he can make our printer print! He finds the most amazing deals at thrift and pawn shops. He enjoys cooking, and at least twice each week, he makes delicious meals for us. However, he has a couple of traits that confuse me: since he was an infant, he has treated the world as his trashcan—his tolerance for clutter is boundless. Occasionally, he reiterates his motto to me: "Procrastinators, Unite...Tomorrow."

The life I have the joy and privilege of living would not be possible without the fact that Nick and I share our house.

Yesterday, I called 1-2-1, the dumpster company, to let them know we were ready for haul-away. After carefully backing the huge truck up our skinny, bumpy driveway, the young man put the supporting bed under the dumpster and lifted it. Discolored, smelly water gushed out as the drain end lowered. I just hope that all of the frogs have hatched.

Even more clutter than before resides on the swing in the living room. We've not seen the entire top of the kitchen table free of stuff since Doug died in 2014.

We've still got the partially nasty chair. Nick says it's clean, but I'm not sure. The bentwood rocker continues to delaminate on the screened porch. The upstairs commode is sitting someplace on the second floor. Since I've not been upstairs for at least seven years, I'll have to use my imagination. Nick says he is a bit leery of lifting it down the stairs for fear of dropping it and taking out part of the house. Eventually, he may have to break it into pieces with a sledgehammer and haul it off to one of the erosion ditches that dot our hillsides. We still have two exercycles that never get any use. One has no seat.

Both bathrooms now have new toilets with bidet seats. The downstairs bathroom is an obvious construction zone, and the floor remains uncovered. Instead of installing any flooring, we've decided to paint it, a much cheaper and easier solution, whenever Nick gets around to doing it.

My sister-in-law once remarked to Doug and me, "You've got more college degrees between the two of you than the rest of us put together. Why do you live like Jeff Foxworthy?"

That's a very astute question that I can't answer. Are we too busy or simply too lazy?

It's very likely that the price will be more than seven dollars a day then, but in a couple of years, I may need to resume our relationship with 1-2-1 and rent another dumpster!

Coming Home!

Margaret Craig-Schmidt

One of my favorite photos of childhood is of my father, Neil Craig, walking me up the sidewalk to my grandmother's house in Oxford, Mississippi. The photo was taken on a chilly day in February, 1946. Daddy, dressed in his military uniform, had just been discharged from the Army after the end of World War II. He was seeing me, his 11-month-old daughter, for the first time. My mother, or perhaps Aunt Peggy, had dressed me up in a stylish coat in anticipation of my father's arrival. Daddy is holding my hands in a manner that is typical for a child just learning to walk. With a smile on my face, I appear to be leading Daddy up the sidewalk to a new life. He, too, is smiling but at the same time his look is somewhat pensive, perhaps remembering the day in June, 1944, when he had walked up the same sidewalk in an army uniform with his new bride, Mildred White, still wearing her wedding gown. Following a honeymoon in Mexico, the newly-weds lived on an army base in El Paso, Texas, until he was shipped out to man a radar station in Hawaii. In March of 1945, nine months later, he received a telegram that his daughter, named Margaret Corinne Craig, had been born. Almost a year later he was getting to "meet" her in person. Perhaps Daddy was also dreaming of getting a job as an engineer and building a house that would become a home for his wife and their family. Thoughts of the future were transitory, and now all he could think of was that he was HOME!

Mama and I had lived with my grandmother and grandfather as well as my mother's sister during the time that all the young men had gone off to serve in WWII. The house on North 7th Street in Oxford, Mississippi, had become my first home and now Daddy had come to join us there until he could find a job and build a house of his own.

Living at my grandparents' house during the war meant that I had three "mothers," my mother, my aunt, and grandmother. In addition, my grandfather was my "substitute" father. I'm sure that I enjoyed being the center of their attention. My birth was special to the youngest of my mother's brothers because I was born on Uncle Jimmy's 21st birthday while he was stationed in occupied Japan. In one of his letters home, Uncle Jimmy wrote, "Guess all of you stay busy feeding and tending to the baby all day. I would love to see the baby. She will probably be grown before I get back to see her." During this time, my mother often wrote to him as if the letters came from me, and he always responded to letters calling me "the baby." A photo of Uncle Jimmy flying a P-51 fighter with Mt. Fuji in the background is another of my favorite photographs in the family "archive." The letters that he wrote home always indicated how much he missed his parents and "the baby." Eventually, Uncle Jimmy did see me – the baby, but he never got to see his father again. My grandfather died unexpectedly on April 24, 1946, in Jackson, Tennessee, while he was doing his job as a railway mail clerk

on the Illinois Central Railway. This was less than three months after Daddy came home from the war. My cousin said that her father (Uncle Jimmy) never "forgave" the Army for not letting him come home from Japan for his father's funeral.

In the 1940s, communication was difficult between the home front and those who served overseas. Writing letters was the most common form of communication. Telegrams were used to convey urgent news such as births. Telephone calls were rare. In one of Mama's letters to Uncle Jimmy, she commented that it would be good to hear Daddy's voice again. She said that six months can seem like six years sometimes. She even invited Daddy's mother to make the hour's drive from New Albany to Oxford so that she could hear her son's voice.

The house that became home to all of us in the Ralph White family was typical of a Greek Revival style cottage for a middle-class family in the 1940s. My grandparents would be classified as middle class or maybe upper middle class. Granny White was a teacher and Grandfather White was railway postal clerk picking up and sorting mail on a special mail car on the route between Chicago and New Orleans. The house was white with a long porch across the entire front. There was a swing at each end of the porch where my grandparents and mother "rocked" me as a baby. A shingled railing encompassed the porch. Seven steps led up to the porch. Many photos of family life were taken on the steps, including one of my grandfather having a conversation with Uncle Jimmy just before he left for the Pacific Arena of World War II. There is another photo taken on the steps of five of us cousins lined up in birth order.

The house sat on a small hill with a sidewalk connecting the front porch steps to the steps at street level. A concrete, rectangular fishpond with water lilies and goldfish graced the front yard. The fishpond was a favorite place for the grandchildren when they visited. The house seemed to have a welcoming smile and welcomed everyone for Christmas gatherings of the extended family as it grew.

The living room was comfortable with a fireplace where we hung our stockings in anticipation of Santa. On Christmas morning, each stocking contained a large Roman Candle which we "shot off" from the porch on Christmas evening. The stockings also contained sparklers which we lit and drew circles in the air, and poppers or torpedoes which made a loud "pop" when thrown on the front sidewalk. One Christmas, a Roman Candle somehow got lit in the living room! An observant uncle grabbed it and shot it up the chimney of the fireplace as it went off. In addition to fireworks, Santa brought us each a toy or doll we had wished for. We filled the morning excitedly playing with our gifts.

At the end of the living room was the dining area with a table large enough to seat most of the adults at Christmas dinner. The grandchildren were served in the breakfast nook adjacent to the kitchen or at card tables set up wherever there was space. A sumptuous Christmas dinner had been prepared in the large kitchen filled overflowing with mothers. The food included traditional dishes such as roast turkey and dressing with gravy, sweet potato casserole, cranberries,

Waldorf salad, and pear salad topped with lots of cheese. There was a plethora of desserts. Family specialties included bourbon-spiked Aunt Lottie Lane cake, fruit cake soaked for months in some sort of liquor, and cakes loaded with fresh coconut. There also were pies – mincemeat, pecan, lemon meringue, lemon chess, apple, pumpkin and others. My younger brother is known to have said of the holiday at Granny White's, "Christmas in Oxford was fun, but there were too many mothers and too much cheese!"

Many of these holiday foods are still made by the descendants of Granny White. For a family reunion in November 2002, one of my cousins, Marty White, put together Xerox copies of the "Family Recipes of the White Family." Making these recipes today awakens in me many memories of Christmas at Granny White's. Marty included notes at the end of some of the recipes putting them in historical or family context.

The house accommodated the growing families each year and at its peak reached 30 people. Most of the extended family were from out-of-town, and somehow there was room for almost everyone to sleep at Granny White's. Beds were found or set up somewhere – in the three bedrooms, on the back porch, on the couch in the living room, and in a basement room. My cousin Thana and I felt special as we snugged together in "Grandma's feather bed" in the basement.

Despite the chaos—or maybe because of it—we loved going to our grandparents' house for Christmas each year. The years passed. My grandmother died, and somewhere along the way, the yearly Christmas celebration at her home in Oxford disappeared.

As an adult, I went back to Oxford for a funeral. Our family decided to drive past my grandmother's house. To our surprise, there was a vacant lot where the house had been. We learned that it had been torn down for an urban renewal project, and the street name had been changed. The only thing that remained was the concrete shell of the fishpond filled with dirt. Nothing would replace the magic of Christmas at Granny White's. But forever, we had our childhood memories to treasure and stories to pass on to our children.

The Colors of Frightsday…or
How I Survived
Dottie the Hottie and the Atomic Bomb

Stephen Gresham

It was a red, white, and blue Friday or "Frightsday" as I liked to call them. Beneath my fourth-grade desk I embraced semi-darkness and the companionship of stained wood clothed in the filthy silk of ancient cobwebs with old wads of chewing gum as buttons. As Miss Sidler had directed us, I pressed my hands onto the bare nape of my neck and, on my knees, leaned forward, quietly reflecting upon the mute, inglorious end of my days in Kansas.

I thought to myself: so this is where I die—should the Russians drop an atomic bomb on Salina's SAC Air Force Base some fifty miles west of our innocent village. I would be violently expunged along with eleven classmates, including Patti Ann Powell to my left, Thomas John Jefferson directly behind me, and, to my right, Dorothy Hollins, aka "Dottie the Hottie," a moniker given her by the sixth-grade boys; it was one she took a rainbow of pride in.

A score of minutes before the air raid siren sounded, Miss Sidler, pressing a large photo of President Eisenhower—our fellow Kansan—against her stomach, delivered an overview of what to expect **when** not **if** the Russians attacked. Details included a flash of blinding light like a thousand suns, a debilitating shock wave, a hellish firestorm that would melt our faces, and radiation fallout serving up dozens of hideous cancers. We were to be "obliterated." When she uttered that word, Thomas John poked me: "Stephen, what's that word mean?"

"Thomas John, it's not something you'd like."

"Are we gonna have to spell it?"

"Maybe."

Then Miss Sidler provided us with a visual aid: on the blackboard she chalked an outline of Kansas with a dot indicating Salina and one marking Allen, our tiny town. A measure of string and piece of chalk in hand, she drew an ominous circle, and my young heart sank when I saw that our town was just inside the geometry of doom. Then our teacher finished her mind blowing spiel with one sliver of hope: "Children, President Eisenhower will protect us."

She then caressed the President's face with the back of her fingers, a gesture I found more than a bit odd. Color me **unsettled**. Did our old spinster guardian have a thing for our President? I glanced at Dottie and she grinned and winked at me salaciously. She could arouse me before I even knew what being aroused entailed.

"Boys and girls, do you have any questions? Anyone other than Stephen?"

When no one else volunteered, Sidler nodded at me, sighed and steeled herself for the discomfort of my queries such as the firestorm issue: Why were we placing ourselves under **wooden** desks with a pending conflagration? And what about the possible salvation of driving ten miles to the east to the safe bosom of Admire, our neighboring town, so as to be out of harm's way?

Shaking her head, Sidler smiled tightly, folded her hands and stepped close to my desk. When irritated or nervous, she would often reach inside the neck of her dress and adjust some kind of strap.

"Stephen, Stephen," she intoned. Her smile flickered; it was the color of disgust, a combination of periwinkle, burnt sienna, and raw umber, but her words **seemed** potentially positive. "As always, you raise interesting matters." But her stern expression was a reprimand; she swallowed back other words she couldn't say. My translation of them was this: "Stephen, if you make any other comments like those, I will stab you in the face."

Her punishment came through naming me "class monitor" for the entire drill. I was to urge my classmates to remain quiet and to reflect upon, as she put it, "our final moments on planet Earth." At best, Miss Sidler's heart drooped like a wilted orchid; at worst, she possessed a scrupulous meanness and could easily scare the bejesus out of us.

On that particular Frightsday, she switched off the lights, pulled down the shades and stepped out into the hall. For nearly a minute the drill went well, though, of course, someone had a flashlight. Then I began to hear crunching and smacking behind me and to my left.

"Patti Ann," I murmured, "are you eating something?"

Her response of "No" was delivered over the escape of chocolate crumbs tumbling from her lips like frightened ants. Those same lips were slavered over with crème from a Hostess Cream-Filled Cupcake. The smear of the white stuff resembled spackling. She had a cupcake in one hand and a Twinkie in the other.

"You shouldn't be eating," I said. "We're about to be…**obliterated**."

She was heavyset and wore a popular girlish perfume called "Blue Water," a pungent concoction made worse in a warm, sweaty classroom. She smiled and quite suddenly the Twinkie disappeared; it was as if her mouth had morphed into a garbage disposal. Behind me, Thomas John, the most academically challenged of our class, was also eating: his meal included stubs of old crayons, a dollop of paste, and a few dead insects. His mouth was a wet, midnight blue wound. He often left school with a stomachache.

"Thomas John, this is serious. Stop what you're doing and think about death," I warned. He chuckled, belched loudly, and passed gas. I groaned and held my nose. Thankfully, in the aftermath a stillness of sorts began to hold sway. It was then that Dorothy—aka Dottie the Hottie—dropped another kind of bomb on me. When I twisted my head to the right, she smiled and

whispered as softly as a serpent's hiss: "Stephen, guess what! I got on new underpants."

"Wha-a-at?" I shaped that word into three shocked syllables.

She giggled. "They're pink. You wanna see 'em? I can show 'em to you now or at recess. Either one." She was always a girl of options.

"Dottie, are you crazy? What you're saying is…," and there I paused to find the right Word—"it's…vulgar." I liked that word; it carried more resonance than a word like "naughty." "Nice girls wouldn't do that," I added.

She snorted. "But nice girls never have no fun."

Little did I know then that years later I would lose my virginity to Dottie in a fumbling, bumbling exercise in the gymnastics of lust, ending not with a whimper but with a premature bang. I can still remember Dottie's post-sexual, wickedly gleeful snicker: "Stephen, it's okay….You'll get better at this."

Back in the classroom on that fateful Frightsday I was surrounded by the colors of madness, or so it seemed. I never ever wanted to be drill monitor again. Bottom line: the Russians decided not to obliterate us on that occasion. Miss Sidler clung to her photo of Ike, and after the all-clear siren had sounded, our class headed out to recess. Dottie the Hottie flounced along in front of me with an impish, bobble-head gesture and a seductive swivel of hips before slowing to flip up the back of her skirt.

Oh, my.

Yes, indeed, those underpants were pink, punctuated with tiny blue flowers.

I stared. My mouth went dry. I experienced something of a sonic boom and a flash of mesmerizing light. Maybe even a mushroom cloud as well.

And, yes, the color of my face was

red. As red as the Russian flag.

Terror in the Heartland:
The Summer of Hay Hook Ted

Stephen Gresham

Isn't this the way slasher movies often begin: with an insane monster juggling chainsaws while munching on roadkill? That was my thought during the heat of things, but I'm getting ahead of myself. It was July, 1963, and Calvin Johnson, a Mennonite and the best farmer in Harvey County, Kansas, had asked me to take charge of his hayloft for several large cuttings of alfalfa. It would be my responsibility to see that dozens of heavy bales of premium hay were stacked neatly and accessibly in his new, clean barn.

"Stephen, you've worked for me before, so I know I can count on you." His meaty hand was on my shoulder, a hand as hard and strong as his voice was soft and reverent; he was a holy man, tolerant of the fact that I was **not** a holy boy. "Just one more thing. You'll be working all month with old Ted here." Calvin tugged at the ursine looming of a man in his sixties clad in overalls, no shirt; he wore Coke bottle glasses and sported a John Deere cap, the traditional green of it so soaked with sweat that it was the color of oatmeal. I extended my hand, but Calvin intervened: "No," he said, "Ted, he doesn't shake hands."

And that's when I noticed that Ted had two very sharp hay hooks dangling at his sides. "You see, Stephen, Ted's been spending time in a…an institution for men with…psychological difficulties. But he's a good worker, and he's on medication. He won't talk much. Just see that he drinks plenty of water."

Suddenly thirsty, I nodded and smiled at the speechless man who fixed his stare at my forehead just like a chicken hawk sizing up a field mouse for its next meal. Ted's eyes were not separately dead and crazy—they were **dead crazy**.

Keep running that slasher movie soundtrack.

Then Calvin headed for the ladder leading down from the loft. "It'll be fine, Stephen. Doctors say Ted won't likely do no harm, and I've prayed on this. God will protect you."

Under my breath, I whispered, "God, I hope so." My head was always to be on a swivel; I mean, I envied owls that could almost see behind them. Am I saying that Hay Hook Ted frightened me? Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I am. But you haven't heard the rest of the story, a long, hot July of a tale. Sweaty days filled with muscle aches passed. Calvin's loft began to fill; Hay Hook Ted maintained his silence, and I made sure he drank lots and lots of water from our huge thermos. His bladder emptying seemed to go on for hours. I kept a close watch on his hay hooks, stayed out of reach of the potential violence of their swing.

Then one day a curious breakthrough: old Ted spoke in a growling voice not unlike that of Bear Bryant. You see, while waiting for the next wagon of bales to pull up under the loft, I would read: Hemingway's *In Our Time*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, the latter because it contained the "f" word edited out in early editions, replaced by the word "fug." That editorial tampering disgusted me. Out of the blue, old Ted pointed at my books and said, "Read some of them to me out loud." So I did. What happened then was kind of sweet: old Ted fell asleep, draping over a couple of bales like a bear skin rug. I woke him when the wagon arrived or to give him more water. Lots and lots of water.

Days later, he spoke for the second time: Calvin's daughter, who was my age, would come up into the loft around 4:00 in the afternoon with tall bottles of Pepsi in a bucket of ice, plus bologna and cheese sandwiches on homemade bread, the bologna sliced as thick as a bull's tongue. Her name was Sarah or maybe Ruth or Mary (something Biblical). You wouldn't think someone wearing a black dress that covered her body from her chin to her ankles would look sexy, but she did. Please bear in mind again that I was fifteen, testosterone coursing through me with locomotive intensity. On a particularly hot afternoon, that untouchable goddess arrived with offerings of her beauty (she also brought food and drink); she had wild green eyes that could have melted the Ark of the Covenant and, oh my, there were tiny beads of sweat above her lip and at each corner of her Edenic mouth. Oh, Lord! I cannot describe how much I wanted to kiss away those beads of sweat, and, thank goodness, she could not read my mind to see the x-rated movie playing there, one in which I committed numerous sins and broke more than one commandment. She responded to my ardor with a gaggle of coy smiles, and when she left and my breathing troubles relented, Ted spoke: "Son, that girla has her eye on you."

After I poured another gallon of water down the old guy, he and I shared all we knew about women. It was a short conversation. Seems that Ted's wife, Mildred, left him shortly after their only son, "Dwayne," was killed in the Korean War, and old Ted had lapsed into being "cracked-minded." In telling me of the death of Dwayne, Ted cried openly, and I was somehow prompted to tell him that I wanted to be a writer or else shortstop for the St. Louis Cardinals. Maybe even become a teacher.

Then one afternoon our bond was forged even more deeply.

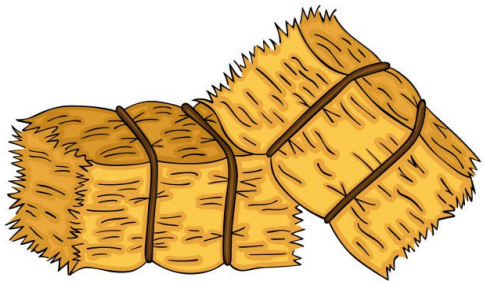
Here's what happened: I got careless with my impressive pyramidal stack of bales, and it gave way in a thunderous tumble. In a prairie fire of anger, I loudly exclaimed, "Oh, fug!" but I didn't say "fug"—I repeated the "f" word a half dozen times in frustration, and then, to my surprise, old Ted began to laugh. He put down his hay hooks and slung his arm around my neck, and he, too, started firing f-bombs at everything in sight. We became a dynamic duo, laughing and swearing; it was like ping pong balls bouncing out of control and striking the rafters, the bales of hay, the pigeons—you name it, we threw the "f" word at it, chuckling, enjoying

every second. But at the end of our feast of laughter, Ted said something strange. Something that made cold chills of shock and sadness run through me. Imagine here another round of slasher music. Looking at me with tears as big as marbles rolling down his cheeks, Ted whispered, “Dwayne, I’m so glad you came back. I’ve missed you, son.”

OMG! I, too, almost wept; but I remembered that there’s no crying in baseball or bailing hay. It was a strangely magical moment: together, Hay Hook Ted and I crossed the river of good mind to the far shore of friendship. A week later our work came to an end. Except in my daydreams, I never got to kiss the Mennonite bombshell or play major league baseball, and I’m still trying to be a halfway good writer. Sadly enough, I never saw old Ted—Hay Hook Ted—again.

But I’m telling you this: that old guy stole my heart (**not** literally!).

And one more thing: I’ve never forgiven Mailer’s publishing staff for expurgating his fine novel. I still have one question for them: “What the fug were you thinking?”



When you set your stories down, that very act charges up every part of you and makes you feel alive, important, and 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

Homemakers

Lynn Jackson

I once read the entry in a home is the most important space. Some interior designers suggest it should reveal something about the homeowner and serve as an introduction to the rest of the home. Invited to my home, you might be surprised when stepping inside. It might not be what you expected. You would not be the first person to exercise the long pause, to point and lean in close.

Front and center there is a curated display of bird nests, rustic and refined. It is not the normal decorative display of a nest or two perched on a stack of books or an interesting specimen under a glass dome. This display is full-fledged. The numerous nests fill the entry and spill into the other main rooms. The question I am most asked is, "How did you amass such a collection?"

It all began about forty years ago with the retrieval of two abandoned nests in my in-laws' South Georgia yard. The first one was precariously perched on the branch of a mature camellia bush. What caught my attention was the sparkle. Walking closer, I focused on an ordinary-looking nest except for the bits and pieces woven among the pine straw, grasses, and the random feather. The strands of turquoise-colored Easter basket grass glistened in the sunlight. Discarded cigarette filters and small fragments of clear cellophane were scattered inside the nest. Because it was much too interesting to leave, I carefully lifted it from the branch and cradled it in the palm of my hand. Walking towards the house I spotted another nest resting in the forked limbs of a dogwood tree. It was constructed with twigs and leaves, but the standout feature was a length of red tape used to mark trees for removal. It was woven through the nest in a loose-flowing fashion. Because it too was too interesting to leave, I removed it from the limb and carried it in my other hand.

Those two nests, nestled in a cardboard box, travelled with me to my home. I displayed the unique specimens on the living room mantel. People saw the nests, and I told them the story of where they were found and pointed out the intriguing whimsy of each. Before long, family, friends, neighbors, and even the piano tuner contributed their found nests, each with a story of their own. The thrill of discovery and appreciation of nature's artistry skills was at the heart of every story. This is when I realized my home had become a repository for these special nature gifts. It was a place where the coveted nests would be safe and appreciated.

Our military family moved frequently, and packing days came. There was a shipment packed for long-term storage and a shipment to be packed for a three-year assignment in the Marshall Islands. My task on packing day was to monitor the labeling of the boxes. In the living room, I noticed small boxes labeled FRAGILE on all four sides and DO NOT STACK instructions on the top. I asked, "What is in those boxes?" The professional packer replied, " Your bird nests." I never considered they would be packed, labeled, and inventoried but was grateful they were. Soon our shipment of household goods would be on a plane, then on a barge to arrive in the Marshall Islands two months later.

The collection of bird nests was prominently displayed in our Pacific Island home. The nests drew attention, recollections, and responses. Other families' stories were woven into my stories. When moving day came again, the nests received the white-glove treatment. These fragile treasures were packed, labeled, and inventoried. They drifted on a barge across a vast ocean before being flown to our next home.

Following military retirement, a position at Auburn University brought our family to Alabama. The nests came too. The collection has multiplied to at least sixty nests since moving to Auburn 27 years ago. They are noticed by visitors and attended to by contributors. There is revelry in retelling the stories of discovery and marveling at the uniqueness of each.

The bird nests displayed in my entry reveal the artistry of homemaking. Like the nest builders, I have been making homes, twelve to be exact. I have flitted from place to place and cobbled together a home from bits and pieces accumulated from expected but, more importantly, unexpected sources. Each home has been different yet familiar. Enter and I will invite you to tell your stories of home and homemaking.

Description begins in the writer's imagination but should finish in the reader's.

– Stephen King

The Casket

Gerald Johnson

On the front porch was a huge casket. Nighttime—dark. I was told in no uncertain terms, "Jerry, do not go out on the porch."

I was maybe eight, at most ten. I stood inside the front door, looking out on the porch, looking through an oval, pasty, opaque-looking glass window with misty white flower designs that covered the top half of the door. I could see the casket, at least the shape, but not the details. Long before it became a popular political admonition, I knew the truth: if it existed, it was in the details.

Why a casket on our front porch? Who was in the casket? Mom would tell me nothing. Maybe she knew nothing. She said, "Son, we don't know everything. It just is. Do not go out there."

I really needed some company, an ally, a co-conspirator. Someone. I was alone, even with six siblings. The first family of four had scattered. Betty married to a Southern Baptist preacher; Pete, to be a president of a division of Union Carbide, now in the Navy at Norfolk, Virginia; Wallace, in the Air Force in England, soon to bring home an English wife; and George, a Norfolk and Western railroader, also married, to a Jackie Kennedy-like husky-voiced telephone operator sound-alike.

There was a gap of six years between the first family and the second family. Randall, a year and a half older than I, born on the 4th of July, and I constituted the second family. He had the mumps and was bed-bound. He, a to-be neuroradiologist, his wife, three children and dog were all killed in an automobile accident.

The third family, again a six-year separation, was Bonnie, now some four or five, was already in bed.

Other than my dad liking symmetry, the first and last were girls, I have wondered why the two six-year gaps. What did mom and dad do or not do those gap years?

However, at this moment, I was alone. If something was to be done, and nothing that I could think of needed doing, although it sure felt like it, I would have to do it, alone! The gravity of that gravitas casket was stronger than Mom's breakfast dessert of heavily buttered biscuits and chocolate syrup. Some called it chocolate gravy. I never did. Different class than gravy.

Mom was in the dining room that also served as her seamstress parlor, pedaling away on her Singer sewing machine. I don't recall many days that she was not busy producing post-Great Depression clothes for us seven, and she was really good at it. She

was born in a log cabin in rural Virginia, something she never valued despite Abe Lincoln and many others. I often visited it long after it was mostly decayed.

I knew she was occupied; I could clearly hear the rhythm of the leather strap spinning the wheel that drove the needle that pulled the thread that sewed the clothes. If I was going to do it, the time was now!

I did!

I opened the front door and slipped out on to the porch. There were several steps, eight or ten feet long, maybe, going down to the sidewalk just beyond the hedges and then the street. The porch, with a wooden, dark green painted floor, was surrounded by a banister, three feet high, maybe, with a flat surface on which the kids could sit, while the adults had the swing and chairs.

On one end of the porch was a wooden, light green swing with a cushion that Mom made and springs in the chains to make it bounce. Hours in that swing. Chairs were on the other end, light green metal chairs that sort of rocked or bounced.

While dark—the night, not the casket, although it was dark—the casket was now clear, placed up against the banister facing the street on the swing side of the porch. It was larger than I first thought. Black. Metal. Closed, except for the head part of the casket that faced toward the steps and away from the swing. It was enclosed by a glass dome with a small window on the porch side. Really strange, I thought. But at eight or ten, I hadn't seen many caskets. I couldn't think of any. Maybe the window did something useful. Could not imagine what.

I approached the casket from the foot, inching (I'm trying here not to brag too much) my way to the head so I could see Who. My head was a little above the rim of the casket and even with the little window and the head of the Who.

I saw the Who clearly but had no recognition of the Who. An elderly female, black hair in a bun, a gold comb, and glasses, clothed in a black dress with a dainty, lacy white collar. Stern. Very stern. The closest I could come to any recognition was seeing a vague resemblance to two spinster aunts, Aunt Ida and Aunt Ada, I think, who lived together in a little white house tucked away in the woods not far from the Woiblet farm, my mom's home place in rural Virginia, where the log cabin was.

Somewhat relaxed, even thinking about going back in the house, I was intrigued by the little window beside the head of the Who. The window did not slide open. Rather, it had a little round gray metal knob with fancy scroll-like design on it. Obviously, you pulled on it to open the window.

It looked so innocent. So harmless. Even charming. Should I? Why not?

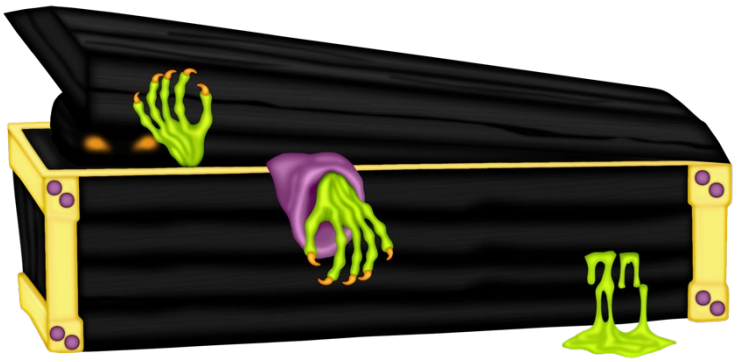
I did!

As soon as the little window was open the Who swooshed out of it like a Halloween witch on a broom. She immediately grabbed me in her arms, or black robe-like cloth, and carried me out to the street and began, in flight, sailing up and down the mile-long street. Even though I heard no sounds, something alerted people in each of the houses because they all turned on their porch lights, came out on the porches, and stood waving at me as we sailed by. They were happy!

This continued up and down the street until the last porch light was turned on and the occupant came out on the porch. Mom!

She too waved. She too was happy!

I screamed! Woke up.



Contrary to what many of you might imagine, a career in letters is not without its drawbacks—chief among them the unpleasant fact that one is frequently called upon to sit down and write.

– Fran Lebowitz

The Day I Met a Real Cowboy

Gerald W. Johnson

July 26, 1949. I was nine. A hot, hot day—ninety-five degrees.

The red clay road running in front of the house on the way to the barn from the west field was dry and dusty. The only good thing about that red clay road was that after a rain it was a better slide than any modern-day water slide park, especially in the gully alongside the road.

The bad thing about that red clay road after a storm was it was almost impossible to wash the red stain off my feet. Mom would not let us—me and my next-oldest brother, Randall, who was ten and a half—in the house until we went to the creek and did our best to wash away our red blood sins. The terra rossa never came out of our clothes.

Today was not a rainy day. How I wished it were. Rather, we had just spent the day in the west tobacco field, suckering tobacco that was taller than we were. No wind could ever breach inside those rows of tall, dark verdant, sticky tobacco plants. I had long since determined that the one single good thing about tobacco plants were the Manduca sexta, tobacco worms. While they too spit black, sticky stuff on your fingers, nothing could beat them to bait your catfish trot line.

That's all off my story. The day I met a real cowboy.

My grandfather and I, Papa Woiblet—my middle name is Woiblet, a Swiss-French name that I had to learn to love, now a dead family name—were sitting on the front porch. We had finished a bit early, and I had ridden Maude, one of our two workhorses, back past the house from the west field to the barn, where Papa and I had put Maude up and returned to the house, the porch, with some fresh, cold well water.

We had two workhorses named Maude and Billy; sometimes we bartered for a couple of mules to help. Mules are not horses. They do not have horse sense. I have a photograph taken when I was about nine or ten on the back of Maude riding in front of the house on the way to the barn.

Maude was a pleasant, faithful, slow-walking, safe good worker. Billy was crazy. He would throw tantrums, try to leave the field at the first inkling of it being time to go to the barn.

Papa and I had not been on the porch long before we heard a scream coming from the direction of the road from the west field. Billy came into sight, running at full speed, full speed for a workhorse, and Randall was holding on as best he could, screaming all the way. We never used saddles, just a bridle. The bridle was not working.

My immediate reaction was, well, terror. I thought Randall was a goner for sure. Wasn't sure what that meant, exactly, but was exactly sure.

Papa Woiblet casually got up, strolled along the path between the box hedges, out the front gate, and placed himself in the middle of the road looking at the oncoming Billy and Randall.

Have you ever smelled box hedges? We lived in the city in West Virginia during the school year and moved to the farm in Virginia for the summer, a Great Depression necessity. Always, my first impression, sensation, in arriving at the farm after a long train and car ride, no air-conditioning in either, was opening the front gate and smelling the box hedges. I can still smell those box hedges. I miss them.

Back to Papa Woiblet and the runaway horse.

Papa always wore a straw hat. He took off his hat, put it in one hand, and raised both hands over his head facing the oncoming calamity called Billy.

Will never forget it. Thought I was about to lose a grandfather and a brother, all at once.

Not so. To my forever surprise, Billy stopped right in front of Papa Woiblet. He took Randall off and led Billy down to the barn. Never said a word then or after. Remarkable. Amazing. A word I seldom use.

That's when I met my first real cowboy. That was a big thing for a boy who grew up with Roy Rogers and Gene Autry movies. But that was not the biggest thing. The biggest thing was that I began to like my middle name.

Names mean something. If all goes well, we grow into our name. There is a biblical commentary in there somewhere, I think. Don't know that I have made it yet. I am only 85. I am still trying.

1964 – A Hard Lesson

Charlotte LaRoux

It was mostly the shame of vanity that caused me to throw those expensive shoes away, but there was more. In the few weeks I owned them, the loafers rubbed oozing blisters on my heels and pinched my arches. I hated them. The Bass Weejuns had been a bad fit from the start.

For several months in my junior year in high school, I saved babysitting money and tips from waitressing. I was anxious to buy a pair of Bass Weejun shoes, finely crafted leather penny loafers that the *IN* girls wore. I wanted to be an *IN* girl too, though I knew it was hopeless. The popular girls came from rich families where their daddies shelled out easy money for lavish shopping sprees. Those girls wore clothes that matched: sweater, blouse, and skirt. They never wore the same outfit twice.

The Bass Weejun mania had started with one *IN* girl of Italian descent. Her thick black hair, her lovely olive skin and her fine clothes were flawless. She smiled coyly. She knew her place in the school hierarchy. She was at the apex. One day she wore new penny loafers to school. She had a heavy gait; she clomped flat-footed through the halls which focused our attention on her feet. She sported Bass Weejuns. Soon all the popular girls had those shoes. I wanted a pair. If I had a pair, I reasoned, I would be popular too.

I finally had saved enough cash for the shoes, tax, bus fare, and a modest lunch. I rode the bus into Annapolis, found the small shop where the Bass Weejuns were sold, and purchased a pair in my size. Afterward, I crossed the street to Read's Drug Store and settled on a red cushioned stool at the soda fountain. I ordered a grilled cheese sandwich and a cherry Coke, careful to stay within my limited lunch budget. Alone, I reveled in the pleasure of my new symbols of status and prestige.

As I nursed my Coke, a woman sat down on the next stool. She placed her order and rested her left arm on the dark marbleized countertop. I glanced over. Her forearm bore a blue tattoo of random numbers. I had often seen blue anchor tattoos on the arms of Navy men, mementos of their tours of duty during WWII. But tattoos on women were not fashionable in l964. Her tattoo was unique—its blocky serial numbers were artless and crude. As discreetly as possible, I peeked to my right to see her face. What kind of woman would wear such a mark?

Her hair was covered by a scarf, and I saw her neck first. It was ringed around and around with deep red scars where wire had been. Ragged knotty pits were there too. This woman had been strangled by barbed wire. I must have gasped. She sensed my attention and turned to face me. She had been slashed by a knife. A deep red scar divided her face in half leaving her left eye mutilated and blinded. The two sides of her face had not knitted together properly as it healed. Apparently, nerves in her face had been severed. The left side of her face sagged. Her disfigurement was terrible.

Now I know for certain I gasped. Her one blue eye met my two brown eyes. I looked away as the world turned gray at the periphery of my vision. I nearly toppled off the stool, but I caught myself in time and held onto the edge of the counter. I felt my core muscles clamp tightly in a breathless attempt to vanish. I forced myself to breathe, then gathered my purse and shoes. I left a dime tip and walked outside to the bus stop.

I found an isolated seat on the bus, and I wept on the way home. Nazi atrocities were no longer historical abstractions in textbooks. "Man's inhumanity to man" was no longer a cliché. In that afternoon I grew up. I learned how little status symbols matter.

Encircled and Entrapped

Charlotte LaRoux

I spiral upward. The birds spiral too. M.C. Escher tessellations come to life, black sawtooth wings of starlings beat the air, the geometries of their beaks slice through the darkening sky. Which is more transfixing: the hum of their rushing wings or the circling pattern before me? Birds swirl left to right in front of my windshield, right to left in my rearview mirror. It is a murmuration of birds flocking to their evening roost. I am trapped in a vortex of cyclonic motion, and as the flock speeds upward, I do too. In a flash I realize I am driving off the cloverleaf. I correct my direction. All this commotion happens in one moment, and I save myself.

But what if I had driven down the embankment and died? What would the starlings and I have said as they flew away to their horizon? "Ahh, we would have murmured. Such beauty! It was worth it."

M. C. Escher

Number 1 of 46

Charlotte LaRoux

I guess I will always be a Number One-er. Since joining the Adirondack Mountain Hiking Club, I had heard of the legendary 46ers, a small cohort of adventurers who had climbed the 46 highest peaks in the Adirondack Mountain State Park. I had hiked in the Catskills, the Helderbergs, and the White Mountains. I had also hiked marked trails through the Adirondacks, though I had never ascended a peak. I sought to change that by scaling the highest peak in the state of New York: Mt. Marcy.

My best friend, Susan, agreed to come with me, as did her husband, Bruce, and my husband, Len. Tomato, their playful golden retriever, was especially enthusiastic. We planned our trip by booking one night's stay at the Johns Brook Lodge, 3.5 miles into the park. The lot where we parked ran along a murmuring stream that skipped east, eventually emptying into the Hudson River. We followed the brook west to the lodge.

Johns Brook Lodge was a log structure with bunk beds in a co-ed dormitory. One screen at a window had long claw marks where a black bear had torn through it. The dining room had plain wooden tables where strangers dined family-style and conversed genially. We were called to dinner by a handbell. All the food was packed in on the backs of college students who worked at the lodge that summer, cooking, cleaning, and managing guests. Trash was likewise packed out on their backs for disposal in Keene, New York. The lodge and park were remarkably clean. Hikers respect the wilderness.

We set out for the highest peak in New York State the following morning. Mt. Marcy was one mile high, and the hike was 11 miles from the lodge, round trip. En route, I asked my companions why they wanted to climb the mountain. Len said he didn't want to. He came along to be with me, to keep me safe. Susan, a polished athlete who ran five miles every morning before work, wanted to come for the exercise. Bruce, her husband, planned our trip and wanted to come for the bragging rights. Tomato had no response. He was a mile ahead, happily sniffing out chipmunks. I was surprised that no one mentioned the aesthetics of the park. Seeing its beauty was my motivation.

The Adirondack State Park is an old-growth forest. Hiking through, I relished the humid exhalations of the trees, the humusy perfume of woody decay. The sunlight, filtered through sky-high trees, playfully flickered down on us. Tiny shy wildflowers greeted us along the way. The word Adirondack comes from a Mohawk Indian word that means "…[those] who eat trees." Indeed, there were plants that I recognized as sources of nutrition: sugar maple, black cherry, blueberry, blackberry, butternut, dandelion, balsam fir, and oak.

But I was most taken with the geology of the mountain park. Evidence of glaciation was everywhere, often hidden under moss and ferns. Erratics, enormous boulders dismissed and dropped by mile-high glaciers 20,000 years ago, stood as

stolid sentinels of the frozen past. Kettles, round depressions in the rocks, marked the places where ice jammed, held firm, and eroded sinks where water collected eons later. We found a delighted Tomato wallowing in a kettle filled with the black water of organic decay. He may have cooled off, but he lost his glorious orange sheen in his makeshift spa.

We came to a vertical incline, a fingernail claw going up, up. At the top, we collapsed and caught our breath. Len began a comedic whine about how much fun he was having. Susan stopped for a sugar/salt/protein snack from the gorp we had packed in. Bruce said nothing. But he wisely rehydrated. I gasped for air.

Toward late morning, we saw our destination, the round peak of Mt. Marcy. It seemed close, but as we continued to climb, our legs felt rubbery, and I wondered if I would make it to the top. I will never forget the last quarter mile. It was steep and barren, a bald head of granite. I almost had to crawl to keep from toppling backwards. Even this peak, a mile high, had been worn and polished by glacial ice. At the summit, Len sat down and asked for my first-aid kit. He tugged off his hiking boots, peeled off his socks and bandaged his blisters. When we had rehydrated, we took a long time to look out over the park. A verdant valley lay between voluptuous peaks that swelled in a line going north to Canada. Below us, an eagle coasted on a thermal, its white head clearly visible. Others who had made the ascent stood with us in reverent silence.

As we recovered from our exertions, an elderly man sauntered to the summit. He was wearing loafers and a leisure suit. Len inquired about his helicopter. No helicopter, he told us. He had followed a gentle trail from a place called “The Loj.” It was no more than a mile or two, he testified. Len looked at Bruce.

“You knew about the short trail, didn’t you?” Len asked. Bruce hooted. “There are several ascents,” he chortled. “We took the hardest route. Bragging rights.”

How I Found My Passion

Bill Lee

It's dusk on May 5, 1972, as our 1971 Toyota Corona Mark II sedan rolls into the motel parking lot in Rapid City, S.D., and it's snowing. My wife, Lynn, gives me a look that says, "I'm really anxious about how the next chapter of our lives will unfold."

My anxiety was high too, but I didn't let Lynn see the panic I felt deep in my soul. I went inside the motel and called Bob, my college roommate, and said, "Bob, I'm in a heap of trouble…. What do you mean, how bad is it? It's bad, it's so bad. I'm in South Dakota. It's May 5th and it's snowing. I can't imagine what the heck the weather will be like in December.

"As you know, because of my Auburn R.O.T.C. program, I owe the Air Force four years of my life. Bob, there's no base housing. None of the apartments have a vacancy. I'm calling you from a pay phone at Lil' Audrey's Motel in Rapid City. The motel is straight out of the *Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid* movie set of the 1890s.

"There's no telling how long we're going to have to live in this motel. And Bob, I haven't even made it to my first wedding anniversary. I'm afraid Lynn is going to take our car, leave me, drive to Atlanta, and get a job as a Delta flight attendant. So far, Lynn is still sitting in the passenger seat. Look, I've got to check in. I'll call you later with an update."

My four-month training program at Vandenberg Air Force Base in Lompoc, Calif., was fine. For a long time, my life has been one great adventure after another. But my current reality is that I am 23 years old, an Auburn graduate, a law school dropout, a newlywed, a reluctant Air Force Second Lieutenant, and clueless about a career.

My optimism fought off depression. I was grateful the base offered a master's degree in business. The Harvard case study approach led me to read stories of successes and failures. I studied the job satisfaction theories of Maslow and Herzberg. I learned about motivation and productivity. I studied organizational structure and the function of staff and line managers.

By the end of the program, I found my passion. It was to help employees succeed and find joy in their work. In October 1974, due to Air Force staff cutbacks, I was delighted to be released from my R.O.T.C. commitment.

Lynn and I sold our beautiful condominium and our 1955 Ford Fairlane sedan. The movers packed our furniture and household goods. Once our Toyota was packed to the gills with our clothes, essentials, and a cockapoo named Princess, we made the four-day drive from Rapid City to Atlanta.

With a great deal of excitement and apprehension, I began interviews for a job that would allow me to find out if what I studied in the classroom would work in the real world.

And I thank God that Lynn didn't leave me for a Delta flight attendant job.

Bubba

Bill Lee

Bubba sat on the second from the top step leading to his grandmother's front porch. His dad took his photo. Bubba was wearing brown and white saddle oxford shoes, brown socks, and corduroy pants. His navy-blue zipper jacket covered his new brown and yellow striped T-shirt. His brown hair was parted on the right, and he sported a felt beanie jughead cap with twenty prizes from Cracker Jack candy boxes sewn on the cap. At first glance, he looked like an angel, but when one looked into his eyes his rascal nature was obvious.

It was October 1951. Bubba was three years old, and he had the world by the tail. He was able to engage strangers with his blue eyes and wide smile. By the time his dad took the second photo, he had both hands around the neck of a tabby cat. The cat belonged to next door neighbor, Lula Preister. Bubba asked the cat, "Are you the one who jumped over the side rails, dug a hole, and put a stinky poop in my sandbox?" The cat didn't speak English, but I think her whine meant she understood the question and knew there would be consequences for a future trespass.

This day Bubba was enjoying the warm sunshine while he contemplated his next activity. He had a playhouse in his backyard. It was built in 1945 by his grandfather for his first cousin Lynda, who was born in 1940.

The playhouse had a front porch where his toy piano sat. Inside was a fully equipped toy kitchen. Plastic plates, bowls, cups, and saucers filled the cabinets. Plastic knives, forks, and spoons were stored in cabinet drawers. A chalkboard for conducting school for his stuffed animals hung on the left wall. There were fully functioning double-hung windows on the right and rear walls. He added water to a bucket of sand from his sandbox and poured the mixture into toy baking pans to make mud cakes, pies, muffins, and cupcakes. He had a toy griddle for making pancakes and a toy waffle iron for his waffles. A wooden table and four chairs were in the center of the room.

In the yard was his sack swing and his large sandbox. The sandbox now had a wooden cover with a sloping tin panel roof to keep out the rain and neighborhood animals.

Although life seemed peaceful, his world was about to take a turn for the worse. His six-month-old twin brothers were sleeping in the bedroom, just thirty feet away, and he had no clue as to the damage to his toys the twins, aka whirling dervishes, were capable of when they started crawling and walking.

His family housekeeper named him Bubba, but he was born William Henry Lee, Jr., and lived with his parents and maternal grandmother in Fort Deposit, Ala., until he was ten years old. And, yes, Bubba is now Bill Lee, the author of this story.

55-year-old Man Dies

Bill Lee

It's 2004, I'm in Jackson Hole, Wyoming in the Grand Tetons at the top of a mountain with my eighteen-year-old son, Brian, and twelve other father-son pairs who are part of an outdoor adventure program. I'm having a great time, but anxious about this whole rappelling thing. I imagine myself as the lead story of tomorrow's news, "55-year-old Man Dies in Rappelling Accident in Grand Teton National Park."

One end of the rope is tied around a tree and the other end runs through some metal contraption on my rappelling harness. Duncan, one of our guides, methodically helps me step into the harness, clip the carabiners into place, and install the ropes. I'm terrified and attempt to fight off a panic attack. For a moment, the smell of the fir trees helps me relax. Then, I wonder, "Do these guides really know this is safe?"

One of the dads asks, "Duncan, how far is the drop?"

"It's only about ninety feet." I thought, "Ninety feet! Oh hell, I'm going to die."

Well, I reason with myself, "You've lived a good life. You've been married to a beautiful, smart, and kind wife for over thirty years. You've been blessed with two sons and a daughter-in-law. But I'd really like to see Brian graduate from college and maybe get to play with some grandkids.'

My mouth is dry because I've swallowed all my saliva. I listen to Duncan say, "Hold the rope with your left hand and the braking rope under your harness with your right hand. Then, just walk backward and push off when you get to the edge of the cliff."

My hiking shoes make a scraping noise as I nervously shuffle my feet backward toward the edge. When I get there, I just can't bring myself to push off. I close my eyes as my feet slip off the edge. Gravity drags my legs and belly as I slide over the moss-covered rocks. I'm now dangling in mid-air with the rope sliding through the grip of my left hand.

Before I know it, I'm gaining speed and am worried as I head toward the sharp rocks below. I use my right hand to pull hard on the brake to slow my descent. I am thrilled to make a smooth landing among the rocks at the bottom of the cliff.

Then, like Mohammed Ali after a boxing match win, I raise both hands in the air and say, "I am the greatest!"

Hole 15 is a Killer

Bill Lee

It's a hot July day, with green leaves on the trees and the grass on the fairway smelling sweet. The short par four 15th hole of the Moore's Mill Golf Club in Auburn, Ala., is deceptively difficult. For me, a good tee shot lands in the fairway and rolls to a spot about 135 yards from the hole.

Usually, the pin is placed in the northwest quadrant of the green. And because the green slopes from right to left, it's a problem. Even a good shot to the center of the green usually rolls across the green, past the hole, and off the edge of the green. The putt back to the hole is rarely a straight one. The break from left to right makes it difficult to get the ball close to the hole.

On Mondays, the golf course is closed so the groundskeeper can get it groomed for a new week of golf. The course rules prohibit people from using the golf cart path for walks and bike rides, but some people break the rules.

In 2019, before I knew about the Monday rules, our grandkids, Camden, age 10, and Kaiya, age 8, from Atlanta were in Auburn for a visit. The three new Razor Kick Scooters my wife, Lynn, and I bought were in our garage. So, Camden, Kaiya, and I got on the scooters, took off down the sidewalk in front of our home, and headed to the clubhouse to look for adventure.

Now, you might think a 70-year-old on a scooter is a bad idea, but that thought never crossed my mind. We sailed down the golf cart path of holes 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14. When we arrived at the tee box of hole 15, we paused to catch our breath, then headed down the hole 15 golf cart path.

We were doing fine until I led the way around the back of the green. Sure enough, just like the slope of the green, the downhill cart path also sloped. My scooter slipped out from under me, and I took a nasty fall. The upper leather of my favorite brown sandals ripped away from the rubber soles. I scraped my left knee and elbow as I fell, and my glasses went flying into the grass.

You might think my scooter days are over since I'm now 75 years old and a prostate cancer survivor with a hip replacement, but I'd sure like to sail down the golf cart paths on a scooter and feel the wind in my white hair. If I do, you won't see me near the 15th hole at Moore's Mill.

Memory is the diary that we all carry with us.

– Oscar Wilde

Dance in the Rain

Bill Lee

Shortly after the party hats, whistles, and confetti from the celebration of the successful treatment of my prostate cancer in late summer 2023, it happened.

My right hip pain, which had been intermittent for over a year, became unbearable. Each step I took on the golf course was painful. On September 15, my doctor said, "I want you to go for physical therapy." He said, "I want you to get an x-ray at the Orthopedic Clinic. My surgeon, Dr. Dooley, said, "Your hip is worn out, and you need a total hip replacement."

Dr. Dooley said, "We need to schedule your surgery." I asked, "What about labs on November 21, Iron Bowl on November 25, pre-op on November 27, and surgery on December 5?"

As scheduled, I arrived at East Alabama Ambulatory Surgery Center in Auburn for my surgery. Afterward, Dr. Dooley said, "I used drill bits number 6, 8, and 11. I tried to get a hole large enough and deep enough to nail the hip replacement spike into your right femur, but your femur was hard as a rock. I was afraid to use number 13 for fear it would shatter your femur. I went as far as I could with 11, then inserted the number 8 bit into the hole to go the rest of the way. Then I mixed cement and inserted it around the spike to hold it into place. You should be good for at least twenty years."

I got to go home after I passed two tests: 1) use a walker and walk the length of the hall, about thirty feet, to the restroom; and 2) pee into the toilet. I passed both tests. My wife, Linda, got my medications at the pharmacy and by 6:00 p.m. I was at home and in bed.

I went from taking only Lipitor 20 mg once a day to using the full-fledged pharmacy in my bathroom. My pain meds were 14 days of Ibuprofen (Advil) 600 mg, 3 x/day; and Acetaminophen (Tylenol) 1000 mg, 3 x/day; Neurontin (Gabapentin) 300 mg, at bedtime; and Aspirin 325 mg at bedtime. My antibiotic was Cephalexin (Keflex), 4 x/day for 3 days. I was given a prescription for Zofran for nausea and Oxycodone for intense pain, but didn't need them.

The day after surgery, I had physical therapy (PT). Daniel Winn, my therapist, put me through the exercises. I completed them and moved from walker to cane. Day Two was more difficult since the anesthesia had worn off. However, my shower and shave (the first ones in four days) felt great. Day Three I aced my PT appointment. Day Four I watched Auburn beat Indiana in basketball, 104-76. Day Six was a post-op appointment to remove my bandage. PT continued to go well. At my Day Thirteen appointment, Dr. Dooley said, "Your X-rays look great. Come back to see me in a month." Then Caroline, Med Tech, with snips of the clippers and tugs of the pliers, removed the ten stitches from my six-inch incision, covered the incision with ten Steri-Strips, and sent me to PT. My last PT was January 4.

Vivian Greene said, "Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass; it's about learning to dance in the rain." I think she's right.

I Want a Puppy

Linda Lee

Almost every night when I lay in bed with Bill, I watch YouTube videos on my iPad. "Look at how cute they are," I say as I hold up a video for Bill to see three miniature dachshund puppies.

"Yeah, but they have gas. Our family had a dachshund when I was growing up, and they smell," he replies.

"No, they don't. They are hypoallergenic and they have no hair."

"Well, what about a schnoodle puppy?" I say, as I show him a video of a puppy from a breeder in Ohio.

"No, we would still have to find someone to care for it when we are out of town…too much of a hassle."

"But they are so cute," I say. "Plus, I think a dog might be very comforting and reduce our stress as we age."

"No, I don't think so," he says.

Once again, my attempt to change his mind about getting a dog fails to persuade him.

It may have something to do with Princess, a cute one-year-old cockapoo that I brought home unexpectedly one day shortly after we married. She lived with one of my foster families and garnered my sympathy and immediate affection when I saw the children in the home throwing rocks at her while she was tied to a tree.

The foster mother offered her to me with an attitude of good riddance, and added, "She doesn't get along with children."

I silently thought to myself, "I wonder why."

Bill reluctantly accepted Princess into our home , and she accompanied us for the next sixteen years as we moved between seven homes in five different states. She was a constant at Bill's feet in his home office, on his chest as they both napped and in his lap as he relaxed on the sofa in the evenings.

Bill learned that I am not a morning person, so he dutifully let Princess outside every morning and kept an eye on her from his home office window. His reluctance to have another dog has a lot to do with this experience.

It has been many years since Princess passed away and now that we have grandkids, my desire to have a dog has returned, but Bill has been consistent in his refusal to agree with me.

"I don't like dog hair, dog pee, or dog poop, and I don't like boarding a dog," he said.

Having a dog is not in our future, but I can still enjoy watching YouTube videos. Last night I tried to share a video with Bill, but he didn't want to see it.

"No, we are not getting a puppy of any kind."

When he reluctantly looked at the video, he laughed at what he saw. There were two baby monkeys playing together on the screen.

"Look at how cute they are," I said.

Growing old is one of the ways the soul nudges itself into attention to the spiritual aspect of life. The body's changes teach us about fate, time, nature, mortality, and character. Aging forces us to decide what is important in life.

– Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul*

The Naked Legend

Terry C. Ley

The Naked Man lived in the woods behind my house. At least that's what we believed. We kept an eye out for him whenever we explored the woods, while we sat in a circle somewhere in the interior, dropping purloined wooden matches, lighted, down holes in the manhole cover or using them to light hollow weeds that became our "smokes" as we chatted about life, especially scary things like The Naked Man catching up with us as we sat there, defenseless. Jerry might have seen smoke rising from The Naked Man's campfire on Tuesday, about suppertime. Ronnie and his dad once found an old sock not too far from our manhole that Ronnie was pretty sure was part of the guy's wardrobe before he got naked.

We had no idea what he might do if he found us here, but just the prospect of seeing him not wearing that sock—or anything else, really!—was scary enough. To us, The Naked Man became one frightening legend.

I won't say that my parents bought into that legend, but when my fear became sufficiently evident, Dad fixed my bedroom windows (one of which was located about twenty feet from the edge of the woods) so that they would not open more about eighteen inches, thus assuring me that The Naked Man would not gain access to my bedroom through one of them. Dad's carpentry did indeed assure me of safety, but it also assured me of some very warm Iowa summer nights.

One very dark summer night, after supper, someone banged on our back door and continued until Dad answered it. A young woman, breathless and frantic, shouted that a partially naked man had just jumped out in front of her friend and her as they walked along the sidewalk that ran along the edge of the woods and the dimly lit and lightly traveled Grand Boulevard, about a block from our house. Dad left with her, to return to the woman's friend, who was hiding at the edge of the woods. He took no weapon because he had none! After Mom called the police, she and I stood inside the back door, waiting for Dad's return—and his story.

Our boyish stories around that manhole cover were really more exciting than what Dad could tell us: A young man had emerged from the woods, exposed himself to the young women, then bolted back into the woods. The police talked with the women and went searching in the dark woods. We watched for news of an arrest in the *Daily Record*, but we didn't see one, which meant (of course) that The Naked Man existed and that he was (undoubtedly) still (pardon the expression) hanging out in the woods, practically under my bedroom window!

Whether we boys returned to the manhole in the woods after that or found another secluded manhole cover for our secret meeting place, I cannot remember. I suspect that the legend of The Naked Man persisted for a couple more years, until a developer built houses where the woods and The Naked Man had once been.

Playing First-Chair Antagonist in the Banned

Terry C. Ley

Ella Mae Heide, my junior English teacher, stood with a copy of *For Whom the Bell Tolls,* its spine nestled in her hand. She looked more serious than usual. "I think I can tell you where this book will fall open by itself," she said with a scowl. "Who would like to make a prediction?" Silence. We knew where this was going because we had passed the book around, and many read only the extended love scenes. All of us could make a pretty good guess. A long silence. I don't remember whether she let the book fall open to one of those scenes or not, but if it did that, prim Ella Mae Heide would not have read the passage to us aloud, you can be sure. I remember well what did follow, though, a sermonette about how we should choose our reading.

That was my first lesson in book censorship, a gentle reproval from a beloved teacher. Because as an English teacher I believe that diversity of content and the choice of books are important to everyone's education, current hard-handed political efforts to challenge and ban books from libraries and curricula disturb me.

The American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom reports that between January 1 and August 31, 2024, there were 414 attempts to censor library materials and services, including 1128 unique titles. The Office estimates that 82 to 97% of challenges are unreported!

The book most often challenged in 2023 was *Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe, one of several books in the ten most challenged books that feature LGBTQIA+ themes, events, or characters. But among the one hundred books most often challenged between 2010 and 2019 are familiar titles, some of them classics: *To Kill a Mockingbird, Of Mice and Men, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Catcher in the Rye, Brave New World,* and *The Holy Bible*. Although much of the current attention is on books for children in school and public libraries, some groups wish to remove all books like these from a library's collection. A woman challenging dozens of books in our local public library's collection wishes for those books to be not only removed from the shelves but also burned.

My personal experiences with challenged books have been unremarkable. Perhaps, remarkable. While I was teaching high school English, we studied *To Kill a Mockingbird, Of Mice and Men, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* and *Catcher in the Rye*, among others that have been challenged—without incident. I notified parents what we would be reading and offered an alternative text in case they objected to the proposed book. As I recall, over thirteen years, only four or five read the alternative choice. I hope that what we did with those books enriched and clarified my students' reading and contributed to their maturity. We discussed problems they encountered in their reading, they talked with peers about them in small groups, and they shared what they wrote about them. One day while I was teaching at my first school, the English curriculum consultant came in tears to the library to remove *Brave New* World from the shelves, on the superintendent's command. Ironically, we soon sold out of paperback copies of the book in the bookstore that I managed down the hall from the library!

Our curriculum required that we provide three consecutive weeks each semester for Directed Individualized Reading, when students' primary obligation was to bring books of their choice to class and read silently for fifty minutes. Their choice of books reflected their diverse interests and their reading levels; some of their choices were certainly on current lists of challenged books—or would have been if people with conservative stances had read the books. I suggested that my students confer with their parents about their choices. The "individualized" aspect of those times allowed for a wide range of tastes and reading abilities—and, very importantly, gave students a sense of being part of a reading community of peers.

The "directed" part of the unit title was also important, for it implied interaction between student and teacher. When students finished a book in my classroom, they completed a record of their reading on both sides of 4x6 index cards—a brief plot summary and responses to elements of the story—characterization, relationships, language, conflicts, and resolutions. At the bottom of the back of the card, they listed questions or opinions about the book. I used those cards as the basis for short conferences with them that usually ended with my recommending another book they might enjoy, a book from my classroom library, if possible, so that I could hand them a book to examine. During the many conferences with tenth-grade girls about Ann Head's *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones*, for instance, we talked about its dominant pregnancy theme—motives, problems, solutions, and their conclusions. Challenged books can lead to insight, even the beginning of wisdom, when instruction and discussion emerge beyond reading the last page. When I was about fifteen, while I was at school, my mother laid on my desk a copy of *Ann Landers Talks to Teenagers About Sex,* which I undoubtedly read with interest, but neither of us said a word about the book. Parts of that book must have been mysterious to me, but I talked to no one about them, even my peers.

Of course, not everyone's experience with challenge and censorship has been as fortunate as mine. In *That Librarian: The Fight Against Book Banning in America* (Bloomsbury, 2024), Amanda Jones, a longtime middle school librarian in the small Louisiana town where she grew up, recounts the consequences of a talk in defense of the freedom to read she gave during a meeting of her area's public library board. News of that professional point of view spread quickly and led to unsubstantiated charges that she was a "groomer" and that her library's collection contained porn. Their side of the battle was waged via social media. She received numerous death threats. This continued for more than a year without anyone offering examples from that collection. Unfortunately, her critics included some former friends, parents of former students, and journalists, even her state legislator. Although friends were helpful, she was disappointed that many colleagues would not defend her. The results? For Amanda, depression, compromised physical and mental health, a one-semester leave, and a lawsuit against the two men who lit the fire of conflict and kept it stirred for several years, a lawsuit for harassment that a local judge dismissed.

Several signs of the times—political, religious, and cultural—make me fear that sad variations of Amanda's story will be told by too many teachers and librarians in the near future, thus making it more difficult for them to serve well an increasingly diverse population. I am happy that I was saved from the poison of ill-informed critics throughout my career and pray that staunch friends of books will find ways to defend everyone's right to read.

Halloween Pageant

Diane Miller

Mrs. Morgan perched on the junior-size chair, her skirt taut across her hips and her fleshy knees exposed. I sat listening to her, fascinated by the sight of the rolls of fat that marched like temple guards along her inner thighs to the nether regions of her anatomy. Yet, most of my attention was reluctantly devoted to what she was saying.

"And so, we will allow some of the taller girls to play the part of our goblins. We don't have enough boys to balance the number of fairy princesses. We want our Halloween production to be beautiful, don't we?"

My heart sank. I knew that she was talking about me. I, along with my friend Laurice and a couple of other girls, had been struggling to get the fairy dance right. "Turn, turn, turn, and bow, plie, walk, walk, and turn," Mrs. Morgan would chant, over and over. I would walk, walk, and turn the wrong way every time. The too-tall verdict might have been an excuse, but it was just as final as the truth.

I raised my hand. "Mrs. Morgan," I ventured, "I think my mother has already picked up the bag with my costume stuff."

"Not a problem," she smiled through tight lips, annoyed at my objection. "I've already adjusted the materials for the costumes."

Class dismissed, I met my mother at the table where she had paid the five dollars and picked up the costume bag. Anxiously I peeked inside. There it was. A set of long underwear to be died black, orange cloth for curled-toe shoes and floppy pointed hat. No frothy net for fairy wings and tutu, no glitter and no crown. I was crushed. Every third-grade girl dreams of being a fairy princess.

"You'll be the cutest goblin on the stage," Mother said. I didn't care. I wanted to dance, not march. Because I had no choice, in the days leading up to the play, I swallowed my disappointment and learned the goblin march, which had to be simplified further for the boys who couldn't master even that action.

My time was made more difficult by my cousin Freda who taunted, "I get to scamper, and you hafta march! Nah, nah, ne nah nah!" She was a second grader, a year behind me in school, and she got to be a cute little mouse who sat on a big wheel of cheese. She was petite, while I was tall for my age. To her, that contrast was a point of pride.

On the night of the performance, we arrived early, and my humiliation was complete. I discovered that my mom, who had done such a great job of sewing the accessories for my costume, had forgotten to sew up the strategic opening in the back of

the long johns. When I moved, my white cotton panties just peeped through. I burst into tears, ruining my carefully painted cheeks.

"Oh, darlin', don't worry," Laurice's mother said. "I brought some big ol' safety pins, and we'll just use one of them." She deftly solved the problem, and I was mollified. My cheeks were repaired, and the show went on as scheduled.

And then a funny thing happened. The goblins started joking and teasing, whooping in fun with the release of tension after the performance. My tragic oversight became the subject of conversation, making Laurice and me the center of attention.

"Y'all were awesome!" Sammy said to us. Sammy! The most popular boy in the class. "You couldn't even tell there was a hole in your costume. Hey, y'all must be honorary Cub Scouts. You're supposed to come to our wiener roast to celebrate. My house."

The fairy princesses huddled quietly on the other side of the room, consumed by jealousy. Maybe they had their own celebration to attend, but it wasn't as enticing as ours. It seemed to me that the snowy net skirts drooped as each subdued fairy crept from the room.

Trial by Water

Diane Miller

I bit my lip and managed to murmur a “thank you” even as my head buzzed. Our friend Bob seemed so proud of having been able to procure a tent that would allow us as newcomers to participate in the annual campout event. “I already pitched it for you! Look how smooth the ground is, and not much slope at all!”

He was doing his best to care for us. The tent was a loaner from Biloxi AFB, which Bob as a retiree could get at the last minute since no one had requested it, It seemed easy to me to understand why there were no requests. The “two-man” tent was dome-shaped, six feet in diameter. Less than the size of a king-sized bed, with no corners where you can put your feet. Of course, the walls sloped in immediately.

I told myself that it would be only two nights. We could manage that. We inflated our cheap air mattresses and squeezed them inside, tossing in our pillows, blankets, clothing, and other necessities to sort out later. It would be impossible to stand up inside, but we would be inside only to sleep, and we could change in the bathhouse some fifty yards away.

We joined the group for the communal meal of sloppy joes and chips, topped off by s’mores and ghost stories, campfire skits, and songs. It was fun, and we tucked in looking forward to the breakfast that would start the next day’s activities.

I was awakened by the strange sensation that the bathhouse must be too distant and that I had wet my sheet. Then I realized that the pillow was wet also and that the air mattress was floating up around me. Jim sat up beside me and hit his head on the top of the tent, which released a solid stream of water down the back of his neck. This man, who never cursed, somehow came up with a string of imprecations that would put a sailor’s parrot to shame. Just then a brilliant flashing light, followed immediately by an ear-splitting clap of thunder, revealed the source of the dampness. The water inside the tent was a foot deep, and the structure itself was straining against the pegs that held it in place. The bedding was floating aimlessly, as far as the confines of the tent would allow.

Seems the smoothness of the tent site was because it sat squarely on the area designed as runoff in case of a storm. Added to that, the violence of this particular sudden storm was record-breaking in its intensity. We didn’t stand a chance. We decided to make a break for the car. Jim continued to mutter as he attempted to gather the things deemed most important. His billfold floated over and lodged against the now-useless waters-soaked flashlight. His glasses were fortunately protected by their case and could be dried if he could find something to use in drying them. He couldn’t find his shoes and then remembered that he had left them outside to save room. By that time, they had washed down the hill.

I found what I could, too, and we slogged to the car, fearful of the lightning around us. We piled in, thankful that the leather seats would probably recover from the soaking. We were only thirty miles from home. The lure of baths, dry clothes, and warm beds made it an easy decision to finish out the night in comfort. Fortunately, the car started without trouble, and by the time we were halfway home, the rain had almost stopped.

Jim needed gas, and he offered to stop at an all-night truck stop and get us some much-needed coffee. It was 3:00 a.m., he was soaking wet and shoeless, and by that time he had recovered his trademark questionable sense of humor. “Sorry,” he said. “I can’t get the coffee. You always want me to look nice when I go out in public, and I’m not dressed well.”

I think I threatened to throw one of my shoes at him. I know I snarled, “Bring me the damn coffee!” I’m not one to curse, either, but there are times….Eventually, I regained my composure too. The coffee helped, and so did the bath and the real bed.

The next morning, the sun was shining brightly, and the puddles were quickly drying. We had to return to the campsite to clear away the debris from our infamous night. We arrived just as the grits were bubbling, the bacon frying, the scrambled eggs just right. After a delicious breakfast and a quick cleanup (we never did find one shoe), we joined the rest of the group in the day’s activities. We weren’t the only ones who had bailed out the night before, probably just the wettest ones.

For the record, we did go camping with the group for several more years. However, we bought a proper tent and insisted on pitching it ourselves. Thanks anyway, Bob.

Generally, Files

Diane Miller

I stood in the doorway of the files office and smiled at the welcoming faces of my new coworkers. Each of them was old enough to be my mother, and it soon became apparent that they would take seriously the responsibility for teaching me the ways of adult womanhood. They became a chorus of mentors, commenting on their understanding of the process of maturing. This cadre of file clerks at the Georgia State Highway Department would have all summer following my sophomore year in college to enlighten me.

It was a plum job for a student hired to ease the extra load of the bid-letting season. It was not so attractive for those older ladies who regularly performed the mind-numbing task of filing pages of documents in maddeningly recalcitrant cabinets, in those days before digital media. The upside of performing a job that kept hands full and minds practically empty was that there was no reason not to talk, and talk they did. Maybe it is not surprising that the topics they chose bordered on the bizarre. Our desks were close, which meant that discussions involved all those present.

I was a new audience, so I was quickly introduced to the circumstances of each of my co-workers. Nancy was a maiden lady, reliant upon her own efforts for all her fifty-odd years of life. She told how she suffered from restless leg syndrome and found it hard to sleep, but that problem paled beside her unfortunate bouts of constipation, which she described in rather too much detail. She looked forward to early retirement from civil service. Martha was the quintessential Mom who brought homemade cookies to the group. Her medical anomalies seemed to be limited to the presence of a third breast that she claimed to have under her arm.

Elizabeth had the most interesting tale, however. She had been married to a German industrialist who spent the years during World War II with her family in Germany. As the war drew to an end, her husband was deemed disloyal to the Reich and was imprisoned and executed. Elizabeth, nearing the end of her third pregnancy, was left abandoned and homeless. She attempted to flee the country on foot but started having labor pains. She gave birth to her third child, a healthy girl, by squatting between the rows of cabbages in an open field, observed and assisted only by her other daughters, aged four and eight. The child born that day would be a senior in high school in the coming fall, at the time of my employment.

That left only Joanne, the office coordinator, whose desk sat far apart from the others. I suspect that she didn't regret missing out on the office chatter. Toward the end of the summer, another new hire was brought on. Caroline was even younger than I, only nineteen at the time but newly married. She was wide-eyed and truly innocent in the ways of the world, and her presence meant that I was no longer the center of attention. The chorus had a fresh opportunity to share their experiences and insights, and so I got to hear all their stories again.

They did have some useful information to share. Like how to

pronounce the names of some of the counties: Taliaferro = Tolliver, for example.

Even though our primary job was not mentally demanding, it could occasionally be physically taxing. When specifications for bidding were released, the massive multipage documents were collated by placing stacks of individual pages around long tables set up in the hall. Every available person would then file past and compile a completed document by picking up each page in order. The process relied upon speed and accuracy so that the line moved quickly and no pages were omitted or duplicated. I was miserably bad at it. My fingers just refused to cooperate. I was finally excused from the task, to the relief of my fellow workers from offices up and down the hall.

In those days, building security was not an issue. The doors were open to anyone who wished to enter. Our favorite visitor was Pete, who would come through regularly, selling roasted peanuts or fresh produce. He was a personable, kindly man who had genuine delusions of grandeur. He'd been hospitalized and released when he was deemed functional and no threat to himself or others. He would confide his latest secret espionage assignments and tell of his recent meetings at the White House. Most striking were his pronouncements of the decisions he had made in his capacity as God Almighty.

There was another fellow just as memorable as Pete. He might have been lucid under other circumstances, but on the day that he visited us, he was far gone under the influence of alcohol. He read the sign on the door: "General Files." He counted the people in the room: "One…two…three…four…five…six. Six secretaries. Whooee! The gen'ral has six secretaries. He must be a very important man!"

I admit that it was a good summer job despite considerable boredom punctuated only by bizarre tales and events. It was much better than the previous year when I had clerked at Sears as a part of their "College Board." That job required a uniform that consisted of a pleated skirt and belted vest in an uncertain shade of green, coupled with a Peter-Pan collared blouse and knee socks that didn't quite match the green of the skirt. It did look like something from Never-Neverland. I envied the guys who could mow lawns or bag groceries, wearing old tees and shorts.

It's no wonder that the next summer I opted to be a camp counselor.

We understand that what we remember dislodges and agitates during the very act of remembering. We recognize that the important stuff may lie in the glimmers and shadows, in the imprecisions, in the misremembered. We know that any dialogue that lives outside a transcript is iffy at best. We know that shaping a life means choosing a life means leaving a lot of it out. Memoir requires of us artistry. Sometimes life is anything but.

– Beth Kephart, *Handling the Truth*

Red and White Porridge

Lili Muljadi

When I was born, my parents lived in a two-story rental house. They moved to a different rental house when I was a few months old. My father's company provided these rental houses as part of his benefits.

In 1965, my mother got pregnant. It was a very difficult pregnancy. She had lost two babies before this pregnancy. My father had to find another job because his family was expanding. That meant that the housing allowance was also gone. My parents could not extend the lease of the rental house because the owner had given the house to his son as a wedding present.

My mother went to her mother to ask for help. But my grandma refused to help my mother. She gave my mother a diamond earring. Not a pair, just one. With the grace of God, my parents were able to buy a house. The new house was much smaller than the rental, but that was all they could afford. The new house was only a block from the other one.

People in Indonesia do not move around very much. I never knew anyone moving from one house to another. I was very excited.

While we were still living in the old house, every day my mom collected the dust when she swept the floor. She believed that you would feel at home in the new house when you scattered the dust in your new house.

Finally, the moving day arrived. We had a little ceremony in entering a new house. We lined up in front of the entrance door. Our maid entered the house first, waving a coconut broom to scare off the bad spirits. Next, my father went in carrying a pitcher of water and a bowl of rice, a prayer that my father could provide for the family. Finally, my mom, carrying my brother and holding my hand, went inside the house.

My parents hired a mover, three men, and a wooden wagon. After all the furniture and other household goods were moved, we celebrated by eating red and white porridge prepared by my grandma.

In Javanese culture, red and white porridge symbolizes avoiding bad luck. It is usually served on birthdays, at weddings, and after harvest as a celebration. Red and white porridge is made of sweet rice, coconut milk, and palm sugar. It can be categorized as a breakfast food or dessert.

Red and White Porridge

250 gr rice
100 gr sweet rice
1000 ml water
1 tsp salt
300 ml coconut milk
2 screwpine leaves or ½ tsp vanilla

Put these ingredients in an instant pot, use the porridge setting, natural release.
Set aside ¼ of the porridge in a separate bowl and add 4 tbsp sugar
Add 150 gr grated palm sugar to the rest of the porridge.
It is ready to serve.

Over the years I have found that putting a play, or even one act, into a drawer and not looking at it for at least a few weeks makes wondrous things happen. Its faults suddenly become very clear. As I read it, what's good remains, but what's bad jumps off the page.

– Neil Simon

What Kind of Animal is That?

Lili Muljadi

My mom's day starts after my father leaves for work and I leave to go to school. A lady comes to our house bringing groceries. Fish, shrimp, tofu, tempeh, vegetables and herbs. She carries it in baskets. All fresh. The fish and shrimp are still alive. Before sunrise, these ladies shop at a truck stop to buy all the goodies that they bring to the surrounding neighborhood, walking. She can carry only very limited goods. Every day, she changes the variety of her merchandise. You can also ask her to get you a certain kind of item. The meat man comes on a bike. He sells only beef. You can choose which part of the beef you need and how many kilograms you want. We get our rice from a female vendor who carries the rice in a basket on her back. Fruit vendors are also women. Many things come to our house. Bread, pork, and deli vendors are men riding bikes. We have a maid who is responsible for preparing our meals. She goes to the market to get things that these vendors do not have. We always eat fresh. No frozen food. No leftovers. Our freezer is for making ice cubes and cooling ice cream. The refrigerator is for cooling drinks and fruit.

Later, a very small grocery opens in the neighborhood. It is a house converted into a store. This grocery caters to Indonesians who have lived abroad and to expats. It is much more expensive. I was a picky eater. My favorite food was rice or bread with cheese. My mom will go to this grocery to buy cheese for me. It is always interesting to shop at this grocery because they have food and things that we are unfamiliar with.

On one of the grocery trips, I see an expat lady who buys a roll of aluminum foil. The only aluminum foil I am familiar with is from my father's cigarette box. I collected them for crafts. She also gets something from the meat freezer. It is huge and wrapped in layers of plastic. Both my mom and I wonder what kind of animal it is. It was a turkey.

If I fall asleep with a pen in my hand, don't remove it—I might be writing in my dreams.

–Terri Guillemets

The Last Time

Kim Murdock

My life was more hectic in the summer of 2004 than usual. Instead of flying around everywhere for work, I was living in Toronto, trying to get our new office off the ground with fifteen newly hired salespeople. Some, I suspected, had spent their careers selling gym memberships rather than complex financial software. I didn't hire them, but I was there to coach these Canadians into success. Eh? I was also flying to San Francisco every other week for meetings at headquarters. My Atlanta home was on automatic pilot.

Summer in Toronto was cold. Airplanes are always cold to me. And you might remember Mark Twain's quote about summer in San Fran—the coldest winter! I was missing the hot, sultry, high-humidity summer of the South. I was just scurrying around for my professional life, making a good living, not living a good life. My cold summer would end on Friday, September 3. And my normal, hectic life would resume.

August 1 is my dad's mom's (my grandma's) birthday and also my mom's dad's (my granddaddy's) birthday. Those birthdays confused me as a kid because my other two grandparents didn't share a birthday. Granny's birthday was the first day of spring, and Pop's was late in July, close to August 1 but no cigar. In 2004, only Grandma was still living and would soon celebrate her 95th birthday.

There was going to be a big party. Of course, there was a party. We always celebrated her birthday. My parents, sisters, brothers-in-law, nephew, aunts, uncles, cousins, and my aunts and cousins on my mom's side and a host of relatives would be there to celebrate. Grandma was the oldest of five siblings, and she had outlived them all by decades. Grandma's mother, "Mattie," had lived to age 95, and Grandma often told me she she would live to at least 95, if not 100. I believed her. She had been widowed since age 65 and was an independent woman until she fell in her garden (some people have green thumbs but she had two green hands!) and broke her hip. That mishap sent her from her small basement apartment to a nursing home.

I had shared a lot with Grandma, either alone or with my five sisters or with my cousins. She and I watched the moon landing on July 20, 1969. Just us. We had played gin rummy over and over, barely keeping our eyes open. I was ten and she was days away from turning 60 (so old!). Then, right before 10 p.m., astronaut Neil Armstrong uttered those famous words, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." Suddenly wide awake, we were beaming with pride, patriotic pride, and proud of my dad, who had worked on the Saturn V rocket design in Huntsville. After moving to Atlanta (following all of her children)

Grandma became an avid Braves fan. She loved listening to their games on the radio and loved Ted Turner for putting them on TV. She could cook anything! She was the MASTER of fried pies—right out of the hot cast iron skillet: peach, apple, and sometimes, sweet potato. I still imagine her crispy, golden fried chicken. I never questioned how the chicken got from her backyard to my plate. Grandma would whip up a blackberry cobbler with the blackberries my sisters and I would run down the street to pick right before suppertime. Her warning to watch out for the snakes fell on deaf ears of her "girls." We warned family newcomers not to take on my sweet Grandma in any card game, for she played to win, no matter how young or old her opponents were. She and I corresponded by mail for years in my early life—letters sent between Decatur and Gadsden—each of us promptly responding. Hers always ended with "Tell your mom and dad hello and love your sisters." It was a commandment I've always tried to obey: not love ***to*** your sisters but "love your sisters."

The birthday party was on her birthday, Sunday, August 1. I traveled from Toronto to Atlanta the Friday morning before that. No amount of pleading or whining from my colleagues or higher-ups changed my travel plans. My schedule was crazy, but this event was important—95 years in the making! I rode the fifty miles from the airport to my home, all the time on the phone negotiating end-of-the-month deals. I spent Friday night doing laundry and other adminstrivia things like expense reports. Saturday, I drove 25 miles to my parents' home for my mother's pot roast dinner, and then on Sunday, party day, I drove 35 miles to Grandma's nursing home. If there is something to dread other than the heat and humidity of a Southern summer, it is the weekend Atlanta traffic! In Toronto, I drove a one-mile round trip from my corporate condo to the office each day. I had been spoiled. Frozen, but spoiled! And by party time, I was tired but happy but not looking forward to a Monday at the airport.

The atmosphere was festive. The staff were happy to celebrate a long life at their nursing home. My aunts had outdone themselves—the balloons, the pink streamers, the flowery bakery cake, the zesty appetizers, a real party for a grand Mom, Grandma, and great-grandma! Although in recent times Grandma didn't seem "with it," she was aware on her birthday. She took my hands into her cold ones and beamed into my face as I reached down to kiss and hug her. She had done it! She was 95! Lillie Mae knew her rarely seen Alabama relatives, her children, and all her grandchildren. We were all there, including her great-grandchildren. Lillie Mae—a perfect name to describe her—pure, full of life, devoted.

People were leaving. Those from Alabama had to get home. My older sister was flying back to New York that night, and like most Sunday afternoons, we all had to wrap up and get ready for Monday. I found myself alone with Grandma in the activity room. Had people left without saying goodbye? Or were they just taking the leftover food to the cars? I decided to wheel Grandma back to her room on the other side of the low and long L-shaped building. At 50, she was a strong, able woman, easily wringing the wash or wringing the necks of those chickens. At 95, she was frail and fragile, but her eyes were still lively and alert with a tinge of

green. Her abundant white hair formed a halo around her lovely face, and the hot Atlanta sun shone through the west-facing window. When we arrived at her room, I was relieved to hear my parents' and aunts' voices close by at the nurses' station. I was unsure whether I knew how to help her from the chair to the bed, but she was trying to stand. Somehow, she and I together managed to get her into the white linen bed. The bed was surrounded by photos of all of us and cards from her girls.

Grandma was suddenly confused. I sat down on the bed. The room turned cold. She grabbed my hands with her tiny, frozen ones and pleaded with me, "Don't leave me here in the road. I'm in the middle of the road." There wasn't a way for me to say, "Go, cross the road, it's time. You're ready." I shuddered with fear and desolation and confusion while squeezing her hands and soothingly saying, "I'm here, Grandma, I'm right here." Letting go wasn't an option. But I knew. I knew it was the last time.

Four weeks later, in the scorching sun of August's final days, Grandma had crossed the road, rejoined with Pop, her young child, and her parents at Forrest Cemetery in Gadsden. My frantic, crazy, cold summer was halted by burning love, fiery devotion, and blazing remembrance of a life well lived.

Memoir is the intersection of narration and reflection, of storytelling and essay writing. It can present its story and consider the meaning of the story. The first commandment of fiction—Show, Don't Tell—is not part of the memoirist's faith. Memoirists must show and tell.

– Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory*

The Heart of the Home

Nancy Penaskovic

Without a doubt, the kitchen held the heart of our home. It was where we gathered to tell life's stories. The room began with the sink along with various appliances. A group of up-and-down cabinets stood out over a long countertop that set the table and chairs as a special section.

I remember the stove as a simmering space for coffee, soups, and of course, frying pans. The oven below cooked many a meal, along with pies and chocolate cake. One could stand in front of the stove for warmth and wonder. Forty years later, I could see this kitchen in my mind despite my being thirteen hundred miles away in Auburn, Alabama.

This kitchen still exists as a melting pot of fond memories and love. I treasure the memory of my mom, a nursing supervisor at the Albany County Home, along with her sister, Winnie, a nurse's aide at Ellis Hospital in Schenectady, N.Y. They would gather together many an evening to tell stories of the wonderful and unique patients they met, without mentioning names. Based on their example, I decided to become a nurse. Their love of nursing gave me the wherewithal to deal with and survive the sixteen years in hospice thirty years later in Alabama.

The interest and love they invested in getting to know their patients and families fueled my survival skills to deal with the dying regularly. My hospice motto became "Proceed gently, without judgment." I discovered that no one decides what is a good death. One must provide comfort and a listening heart. One must allow the family members and patients to tell their life stories and present concerns. I found out through experience that patients have their unique ways of dying. Moreover, patients often reveal their life's successes and failures, plus what they fear the most.

I often remember a woman about 45 who was dying of lung cancer, struggling to breathe despite oxygen and medications. As I stood at her bedside, anxious to find a way to provide comfort, I noticed a picture next to the bed, an architectural rendering of a home. I asked her husband, also at the bedside, about the picture. He started to tell of their life's story, including their marriage and desire to build this new home. As he related their love story, I noticed a gradual change in his wife's breathing that was slower and she seemed more comfortable.

I never forgot this lesson in dealing with the dying. Medicines are not the only solutions. Hearing her husband talking about their life together eased her suffering. We need to explore the many remedies one can use to provide comfort to those who are dying.

"Proceed gently, without judgement."

More Pins Than a Loose Sorority Girl

Jim Rose

Calisthenics are so boring. I slopped my nineteen-year-old body through side straddle hops and wished I was in basketball class. But no. At Auburn University in the winter quarter of 1961, I was stuck in wrestling All able-bodied males had to take physical education classes. The basketball class was full before I could get in. What could have been an easy A was now going to be God knows what.

Our instructor, Coach Martinique, eyed me from the front of the class. He stuck out a finger at me and yelled, "You, in the glasses, get up here now!" I ambled up to the front and stood before him

"Your name?"

"Jimmy Rose, Coach."

"Mr. Rose, are warm-ups too tough for you?"

"No, sir. But they would be a lot easier in basketball class. I don't want to be here anyway."

I don't know why I said it. As soon as it left my lips, I knew it was a mistake.

"Well, Mr. Rose, since you don't want to be here, I am going to help you with that problem. Do you see Coach Umbach with the intercollegiate wrestling team over on the other side of the field house?" He pointed.

"Yessir."

"You go over there and report to him. Tell him I sent you."

Away I went, having no inkling of what was in store.

With some trepidation, I approached Coach Umbach. Auburn won the national championship almost every year in wrestling, so I figured he must be one tough dude.

"Coach Umbach, Coach Martinique said I should report to you."

"Oh, he did, did he? Well, welcome aboard, young lad. You can be useful. What do they call you?"

"Most people call me Rose, Sir. That is my last name."

"Okay, Mr. Rose, you are our new practice dummy. All of our new moves will be tried out on you before anybody else. Do you understand?"

"I am afraid so."

And so began the most hellish three weeks of my young life. Keep in mind that these wrestlers were the finest in the country. Compassion was not in their vocabulary.

They threw me for body flips. They twisted my legs over my head. They sat on my chest. They pulled my arms through my crotch and tied them in a bow tie behind my butt. Well, maybe not, but they would have if they had thought of it. In essence, they beat the hell out of me in every way known to man. No matter what they did to me, the result was always the same. I wound up with both shoulders flat on the mat with somebody lying on top of me. If this position is held for three seconds or more, it is known, politely, in the wrestling world as a pin. I had more pins than a loose sorority girl.

After three weeks, which seemed an eternity, Umbach said I could go back to wrestling class. Some other fool had incurred Martinique's wrath. The wrestling team had a new piece of unspoiled meat to devour. Poor guy, I didn't have the heart to tell him what was in his future.

I can tell you one thing. When Martinique accepted me back, I made damn sure I did all those calisthenics correctly. Three more weeks passed, with us practicing wrestling three times a week. I quickly realized that I knew some moves the guys in P.E. class did not. Getting your ass beat regularly teaches you things.

Soon, it was time for the P.E. class final tournament. They divided us into weight classes, with each class having sixteen participants. After four rounds, each weight class would have a champion.

My first opponent was a carbon copy of me. Same weight. Same height and build. Same never-quit attitude. We wrestled the three regulation rounds and were tied in points. We went another round and remained tied. Still another round, and still tied. We both stood lifelessly on the mat, unable to raise our arms, much less wrestle. Martinique finally took mercy and sent us to the dressing room. I sat down on the bench and couldn't get up. The class from the next period came in, dressed, and went out. I still sat there. Looking down toward the end of the room, I saw my opponent still sitting there as well. After half an hour, we both managed to get our clothes on and leave. We never spoke.

A couple of days later, Martinique said we would wrestle again until somebody won. I somehow emerged the battered winner after two more rounds.

My opponent in the quarterfinals left school, so I was the winner by default.

My semifinal opponent got sick and was in the infirmary. Another default.

I was in the finals having won one match.

During the last class period, I stood looking across the mat at my championship opponent. The scales had obviously malfunctioned when he stepped on them. He was two inches shorter but built like a tank. The two of us standing together looked like a Charles Atlas before and after.

The match started uneventfully with each of us sizing up the other. Then, in the second round, he got me in a takedown and would have pinned me, except my long arms kept him at bay just long enough for me to slide away. But the takedown put him ahead in points. As the third round started, I knew I had to earn points. While I debated what to do, he charged, got his shoulders under, and flipped me on my back. He was on me in a

flash, but I pulled a trick I had learned under Umbach. Suddenly, I had him in a pinhold. It was count one, count two...and then he levitated his shoulders up off the mat and threw me away like a sack of potatoes. We both scrambled to our feet. I studied him from across the mat and decided that anybody who could rise straight up from a pinhold was somebody to avoid.

The match devolved into something like a circular track meet with him chasing me as I made my feints and dodges. Somewhere in the background, I heard Martinique yelling, "Engage! Engage!" Engage, hell. If I wanted to engage, I would find a girl to marry. Mercifully, the match ended with the bell. No playoff round was forthcoming. We were declared co-champions. That meant an automatic A for the course. I know it must have hurt Martinique badly to give me that A. I had stumbled and fumbled and lucked my way to the finish line. Had it not been for my banishment to the AU wrestling team for three weeks, I probably would have failed the course. But in those days, there always seemed to be a guardian angel looking out for me. Unfortunately, when I left Auburn, he remained. I have been looking for him since I returned some five years ago but haven't found him yet.

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*

Officially Handicapped

Jim Rose

You read it here first. I am officially handicapped. The medical profession tells me I have hearing loss and decreased visual acuity. At 82 years of age, there isn't much about me that has increased except my waistline.

I have learned a few things from being handicapped. Those who are handicapped do not like to be reminded of it. We prefer to go on about our daily lives as normally as practicable. No need to tell me my handwriting sucks. I already know it. If I pick up the wrong jelly at Publix, just smile and put it in the basket.

We handicapped people despise kiosks at medical offices. Try operating one of the damn things while being 6'3", visually impaired, with low back pain and shaky fingers. I hope the inventor of kiosks burns forever in the seventh level of Hell. Another individual who should burn for eternity is the guy who invented the little labels on pill bottles. Good God, I think they could print the whole Bible on there using that font. Newsflash to the pharmaceutical industry; it is old people who take pills, and old people can't read microscopic fonts.

Here's a good one. People go to ophthalmologists because they are having trouble with their eyes. Ever seen an ophthalmologist's office with upgraded lighting? I haven't. My eye doctor doesn't provide signs to his office. I surmise his mantra is "Let the blind bastards figure it out."

I went to an orthopedic office not long ago. All the chairs were so low, it appeared the legs had been sawn off. It makes sense to me: "Let's get all the arthritics in here who can't get up and down and put them in chairs six inches off the floor. We will leave them sitting there for two hours, but they can't leave because they can't get out of the chair."

I love going to see my general practitioner because he always has his 21-year-old nurse trainee do the initial interview. They know I am hearing impaired, so she always mumbles her questions in a Minnie Mouse voice while facing away from me and staring at her laptop. I have noticed that all TV shows are now made with some kind of stupid music blaring in the background. I was watching a classic western not long ago and noted how easy it was to hear the dialogue. There was no noise in the scene, just two people talking. Upon reflection, I realized that in all the conversations of my lifetime, there has never been an orchestra playing in the background. Obviously, I am deprived and in need of reparations. Well, if not reparations, then perhaps preparations for hemorrhoids.

None of my complaining is going to do any good, but it does help some to put it in writing. Perhaps, I can become the Andy Rooney of the 21st century.

My wife just hollered at me from the kitchen, "I won the lottery!"—or did she say, "I want you to fold the laundry"? Aw hell, I don't know, and I damn sure ain't going to ask.

Art, Instinct, and Play

William Tolliver Squires

A president's son blows paint through a plastic straw onto a canvas and calls it art. Society cherishes its artistic amateurs. This may be why we have so many of them. Legions of self-taught artists and crafty folks amuse and surprise us with their extravagances. Hobby Lobby thrives. Adult coloring books are as popular today as Drink and Draw art classes. Short of a return to Renaissance apprenticeships, Sunday painters, hobbyists, and eccentrics promise to entertain and astonish us in the foreseeable future.

Are there not times when we consider ourselves accomplished in a profession? However, as a well-trained artist, I only need to stand before one great work I admire to feel like an amateur. This humility is good for me when I embrace the moment, realizing the extent and improbabilities of my journey.

The most practiced professional in any sphere of activity may learn much from observing children at play and the behaviors of society's primitives. A freely practiced amateurism opens the door to the intangibles of discovery, delectation, and soulful delight.

Twentieth-century author Henry Miller was a famous and controversial novelist. As a professional, his writing became an agony, made tolerable only by a fortuitous discovery of watercolor painting. One day, he began painting on sheets of typing paper with a child's set of watercolors. Miller wrote about his explorations of painting in *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, a memoir written late in his career.

Miller was an autodidact who painted precisely as he pleased, always exuberant. He talked to himself loudly, whistled, hummed, sang, and shouted! Sometimes, he danced a jig, laying his brush aside. Astonished visitors to Miller's studio witnessed this spirited play.

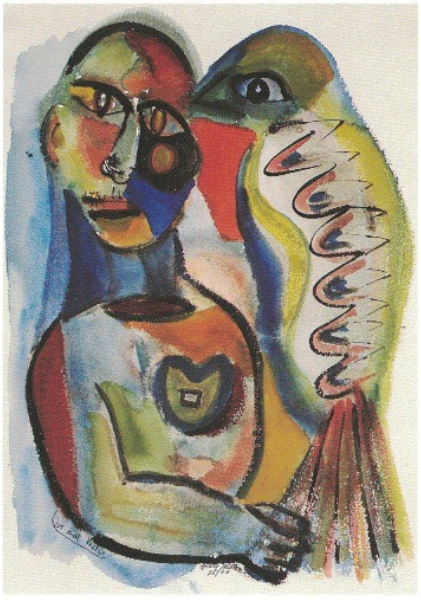
Miller confessed to a hopeless inability to draw from life and an incapacity to take instruction. He could not look at and draw natural subjects and considered himself unteachable. He confessed a complete disregard for anatomy, perspective, structural composition, dynamic symmetry, etc. As he put it, he remained undeterred by "misfires and failures that would scare the daylight out of a buzzard." He never allowed manual shortcomings to dampen his art-making spirit.

He devised an *instinctual* painting method in which he closed his eyes and formed a mental picture of what he wished to paint. Then, he willed the image onto the page with a brush. As he admitted, this technique sometimes worked better than others.

Miller possessed a mania for art and looked hungrily at every kind of art, good and bad, with an avid eye for innovation. He was never satisfied with doing what he called *plain nature*, so he instructed himself to see with new eyes. Miller was a student of everything visual that crossed his path. He stored imagery in the mind's eye and trusted his hand to

commit what memory and imagination presented in his paintings. Although he thought what he painted could have been better, he painted over two thousand pictures across five decades.

Today, I find it appealing when optimism, playfulness, and surprise accompany my daily rituals. So, what if some eccentric behavior creeps into my dabbling? I welcome intimations, hints, and instincts more and worry less about obstacles to be overcome. I embrace the intangibles of faith, hope, and curiosity so that a *joie de vivre* lives at the heart of my aesthetic outlook.



The Blind Factory

Gina Touchton

With each passing day of high school, the siren song of freedom grew louder until it reached a crescendo in the winter of 1974. A cool hippie chick clad in flannel-soft, patch-worked jeans, my head swathed in a colorful bandana, my breasts unfettered by a bra, I finally found my own Bobby McGee that January. And just like that a plan was hatched. Like one of my idols, Janis Joplin, me and Bobby would hit the freedom highway together, escaping society's constrictive norms. The goal was to leave our suburban Long Island town sometime in August. This left me with eight months to earn some cash so my heady dream could become a reality.

I had never shied away from work. Despite being Irish Catholics, my parents instilled a Puritanic work ethic in me and my seven siblings. From an early age, I had household chores. These chores were gender-specific. There were male chores: taking out the garbage, mowing the lawn, washing the car. And there were female chores: washing and drying the dishes, making beds, and cleaning the whole house every week. My sisters and I were aware that this hierarchy was unfair and later on in life we chided our Mom for upholding these traditional patriarchal roles.

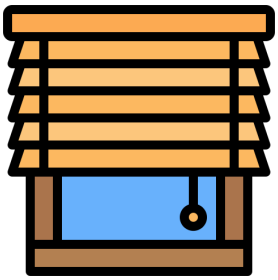
We were never given an allowance for our chores, so we all found ways to make money. When I was six, my two older brothers and I delivered the voluminous Sunday newspapers to our neighbors. Before church, we would hop on our bikes and speed through the streets to help our fellow suburbanites stay well-informed. Because I was the youngest and a girl, my brothers assigned me the houses that owned menacing dogs. It was a bit terrifying, but in the end, I didn't mind, for the quarters my brothers threw my way started piling up. From then on, I always had a part-time job. But now I needed a full-time one.

To this day, I can't remember how I found out about the job opening at the blind factory. The pay was more than I had ever earned, which sealed the deal. I called it the blind factory because we workers manufactured blinds. When asked where I worked and when I answered a blind factory, more times than not people would give me a quizzical look. I guess they didn't get what I thought of as a joke.

So, there I was working at the blind factory which kind of blew my mind. I had never been inside a factory before. This one was a cavernous, hot, and dusty place as noisy as the depths of hell. The loudest noises emanated from the large power looms. The incessant clacking of the wooden slats being fed into their maws was hard to ignore at first, but after a while, I adjusted to the clamor. I manned or "womanned" one of these mammoth machines, and I became good at it.

Let me describe the blinds we made on these amazing looms. They had real wooden slats that were stained all different colors. Their threads also came in various hues. Well, let me clarify, they were earth-tone colors that were de rigueur at the time. They had a back-to-nature quality to them, comparable to the macrame I did in my spare time. And there I stood, day in and day out, by my machine, feeding it its meal of twelve-foot-long slats for eight seemingly endless hours. It was rhythmic work. I learned to dance with my mechanical partner, swaying back and forth to the internal songs that played in my head. The factory had a cathedral ceiling with a row of skylight windows that illuminated the dust motes that floated and wafted about in the bright sunshine. Within a week, I became one with my machine, and by the second week, I became the worker who produced the most spools of blinds on any given day.

Like the dust motes that wandered about, so did my mind. I daydreamed about my future where I would be thumbing diesels down just before it rained, while Bobby sang the blues. I envisioned communal living, abundant gardens, artistic ventures. I remained focused, though. Indeed, my eyes were on the prize for I wasn't walking down a blind alley. Instead, I was punching my ticket to my promised land, the freedom highway.



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

Can You Dig It?

Gina Touchton

The Great South Bay froze over that winter. You could walk clear over to Gilgo Beach from the house situated at the head of a canal where I lived with Dick the clamdigger. The freeze lasted a week or so, and on sunny days the light was so clean and blue and bright, it was blinding. The once-booming clam-digging industry was in its final death throes due to overharvesting and pollution. Where there once were hundreds of clam boats dotting the bay, so many that you could easily jump from one boat to another, these days there were only a few stalwart baymen left who continued to eke out a living from the waters off the south shore of Long Island.

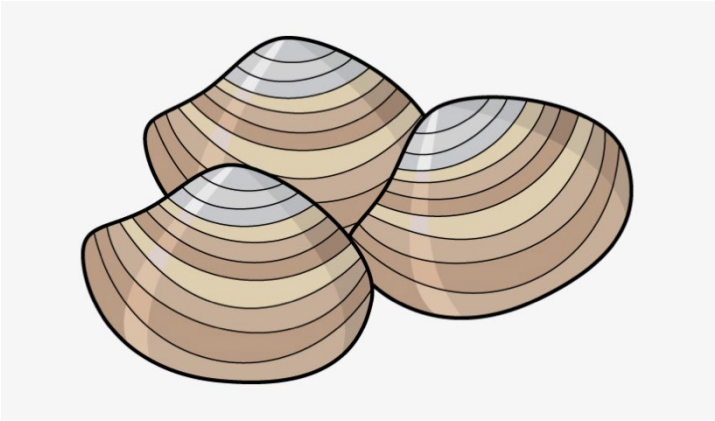
So how do you harvest clams when the bay freezes, one may ask. Layers and layers of warm clothing and a chainsaw are mandatory. Early each morning, Dick and I would load up a makeshift sled with our clamming essentials: a chainsaw, gas, bushel baskets, burlap sacks, and rubber gloves. I led the sled onto the icy expanse while Dick carried the most essential tool of all, clam tongs. The tongs were a bit heavy and cumbersome to haul. The tong handles were two eight-foot-long smooth, rounded wooden poles that crisscrossed in the middle where they were bolted together. Two oblong metal baskets were fastened to the ends of the poles. The baskets had sharp teeth, making it easier for the digger to coax the clams out of their beds.

The art of clamming is not easy to master, a lesson I learned earlier that fall when I first tried my hand at it. Even though I'm not a tall woman, I was athletic and strong. Heck, I could beat most women and some men while arm wrestling at the local bar. Dick never showed any skepticism when I told him I wanted to give clamming a try. So, the day came when we hopped in his boat and puttered out into the foggy predawn light. Dick stopped the boat over one of his favorite spots where he had seeded clam spats the year before. I immediately hoisted up my pair of tongs and plunged them into the murky water.

To begin the clamming process, you start by squeezing and opening the tong handles in jerky motions until the baskets find purchase in the muddy bottom. When the tongs are fully closed, you can twist them out of the water. I was excited, for the time had come to examine the briny treasures I had dug up. Would there be a bounty of the prized Little Necks, some Cherry Stones, or large Chowders? I soon discovered that hauling up the baskets proved to be difficult. I placed one hand above the other, like climbing a pole in reverse, I finally was able to swing the baskets onto the boat and release my take onto the deck. Thick, wet, oozing mud splattered everywhere. And there, amidst the pile of mud, were a variety of non-edible things: empty oyster and clam shells, rusty screws, and bolts, part of a broken propeller, and to my surprise, a slimy leather shoe. Despite having no luck with my first go-around, I kept at it the rest of the morning. Plunge, squeeze, lift, release. Sadly, each time

proved to be less fruitful than the last. Meanwhile, Dick's pile of clams continued to grow until we called it a day around noon. Needless to say, my career as a bona fide Bay woman was short-lived.

Fast forward to the week the bay froze. Ever since my failed attempt at clamming, I had been waitressing at a popular restaurant in Amityville. I worked nights, so I was able to accompany Dick on his frigid forays. I thought of myself as a sous chef to his head chef. I would prep all the ingredients needed for him to be successful, while he finished cooking the meal. Dick was a culinary wizard, especially when it came to seafood. What remains frozen in my memory all these years later is how we feasted on clams every day that week. It's a Proustian moment, for I can still conjure up how the linguine and clam sauce smelled and how the ice-cold clams on the half-shell tasted. I was finally able to dig all the clams I wanted.



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

Losing Daddy Twice - Part I

Stacey Patton Wallace

"Stacey, there's something wrong with your Daddy," my husband Mike said as we returned home to LaGrange.

"Wrong? What do you mean?" I asked.

"When Brittney and I were talking to Tom today, he was having trouble getting his words out," Mike explained.

Earlier that day in December 2008, Mama and I had been Christmas shopping at Peachtree Mall in Columbus. Daddy, Mike, and our niece Brittney, a 2nd Lieutenant at her first post at Fort Benning, had stayed at a table in the food court to chat.

I hadn't noticed Daddy's difficulty with speaking, but after that, I began to listen carefully. Soon, I noticed it, too, and as Daddy's difficulty with speaking progressed, we knew what was happening: Alzheimer's was slowly but relentlessly taking away the person Daddy was.

Daddy once told me, "I know in my head the words I want to say, but I can't get them to come out of my mouth." Dementia was beginning to silence our quick-witted family storyteller, and it was devastating to watch.

Mama had taken Daddy to their primary care physician for a cognitive evaluation, but I wasn't satisfied with that doctor's examination. Therefore, I made Daddy an appointment with Dr. Greer, a neurologist in LaGrange.

Mama and I were in the examination room when Dr. Greer examined Daddy. When Daddy was sitting on the exam table, his bare feet dangling, the doctor had his palms raised, facing Daddy. Dr. Greer told him, "Push my hands as hard as you can."

Daddy pushed so hard that the doctor stumbled backward, almost losing his balance. "No problem with physical strength," muttered the doctor, probably surprised that a 78-year-old man was still as strong as a bull.

After that exam, Daddy later bragged that he'd "Knocked that doctor on his ass!" Amused by his exaggeration, I said, "Daddy, you made him stumble; you didn't knock him on his ass." Alzheimer's was bringing back the colorful language he used before he became much closer to God and served for many years as a deacon in our church.

Before the exam was over, I asked Dr. Greer, "Is there anything we can do to slow the progression of Daddy's dementia? Could we play games with him to help his memory?"

"No," was the gentle but unwavering reply from the doctor. Also, Dr. Greer explained that the medicines he was prescribing for Daddy wouldn't slow the disease's progression.

"They will only level him off," he said. Daddy was dying because no one has ever survived Alzheimer's.

Daddy's ability to say the words he wanted grew progressively worse, and it was hard to guess what he was trying to say. My sweet Mike could understand Daddy's speech better than anyone.

Before Daddy was sick, he loved to read two newspapers from cover to cover: *The Birmingham News* and *The Alexander City Outlook*. Also, as a Sunday school teacher, he carefully read the Bible and his Sunday school book. However, these activities eventually came to an end.

One Christmas, probably in about 2015 or 2016, Daddy pointed to the cardholder on the wall of his den and asked Mike, "What does that say?"

"It says 'Merry Christmas,'" Mike quietly answered.

"That's what I thought," Daddy said. Even Daddy's handwriting changed. He was left-handed, and back when he signed my report cards over forty years ago, his penmanship was beautiful. However, when he became sick and signed Mama's birthday card, his handwriting was labored and unrecognizable.

Although Alzheimer's is one of the cruelest diseases on earth, some funny and sweet moments sustained us. One such incident occurred when my parents were spending the weekend with us in Auburn.

On Saturday morning, I got up to make a Hardees breakfast run, and Mike was to make our coffee. When I returned home, I saw that Mike was still in our bedroom. Also, Daddy had gotten up, dressed, and was dozing on our couch.

I tiptoed into our kitchen to take my many morning meds, trying not to wake up Daddy, but I wasn't successful. Daddy walked around the corner and asked, "What are you doing?"

I tried not to burst out laughing, but it was really hard. Daddy had apparently tipped his head back on the couch and snagged a large hoop that had come loose from a Christmas decoration. He was unaware that he was wearing the hoop around his neck like a gigantic necklace. "What have you got there?" I chuckled, removing the hoop from around his neck.

After breakfast, Mama and I went Christmas shopping at the mall, while Mike and Daddy watched college football and napped. When I told Mama about Daddy's "necklace,"

she hooted with laughter. Mama declared, "Laughing is better than crying." I heartily agreed.

Once, when Mike and I were visiting my parents at their home in Alex. City, Daddy asked me to come back to their bedroom. He picked up a framed, long-ago teacher picture of me from the 1992-93 school year. "Is this you?" Daddy asked. "Yes, Sir," I said.

Glancing at my picture, Daddy said, "Every morning when I wake up, I put on my glasses, and that's the first thing I see. Pretty," he said looking at me with a smile.

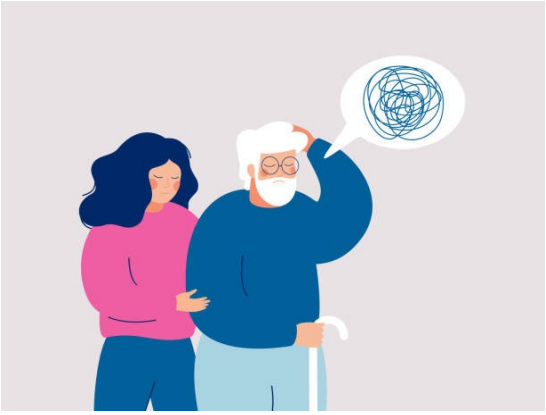
Mama once told me that Daddy had asked her, "If we had to move in with one of our kids, which one would you like to live with?"

"Neither one," Mama replied.

Daddy said, "Well, me either, but if we HAD to, I'd want to live with Mike and Stacey." Now, I would NEVER tell my older brothers Jim and Mike what Daddy said because I wouldn't want to hurt their feelings. However, I always smile at what he said because he was acknowledging that Mike and I were the most fun, and we are.

Daddy was adamant about wanting to drive, even though we knew that if he did, he could hurt Mama, himself, and innocent drivers in Alex. City. Therefore, Mike and I brought a letter from Daddy's neurologist which stated, "Tom Patton should not operate a motor vehicle because he has dementia." My brother Jim was with us. We gave the letter to Daddy; he looked at it and said, "Then the hell with all three of you!"

On our way home, Mike and I chuckled about my Christian Daddy telling us all to "go to hell." However, soon Daddy's dogged determination to drive would not be funny at all.



A Blue Horse Tablet Kind of Day

Kay Whaley

It's early August, and the dog days of summer threaten to stretch interminably into fall. Despite summer's too-long lease, it's back-to-school time. When I ask my daughter if she bought her children's school supplies during tax-free weekend, she reminds me that she pays a supplies fee, so the school purchases the items and distributes them among the students. Brilliant idea. Throughout my 31 years in the classroom, I'm amazed no one ever proposed this practice, one that ensures that no student shows up during the first week or so of school without the required materials. While I applaud this leveling of the learning field, I am sad that my grandchildren are missing out on a rite of passage I always looked forward to as a child: buying school supplies with my mother.

Back in first grade, my mother and I picked out a plaid book satchel to carry my stash of Blue Horse tablets, Elmer's glue, and a box of 64 Crayola crayons with its crayon sharpener on the back. The names of colors in that box of 64—Burnt Sienna, Carnation Pink, Periwinkle—are seared in my mind. We also selected rectangular erasers the color of pink bubblegum and thick lead pencils in assorted colors of red, green, and blue that all fit into a pouch on the side of my satchel. I used the other pouch to hold my milk money for recess. During our shopping trip we'd stop at the local department store, Neal Logue's, to browse the bolts of corduroy and cotton prints, then thumb through the large Simplicity and Butterick books, looking at patterns for back-to-school jumpers and dresses with crisp Peter Pan collars.

One year we surveyed the rows of lunch boxes at Ben Franklin Five and Dime Store. I chose one with a *Jungle Book* theme, based on the debut of the 1967 Disney movie. My mother packed my lunch box—which I often opened to find, to my dismay, a "boloney" sandwich. I was in the third grade and begged for an apple red flip notebook, like one I'd seen belonging to my left-handed classmate. My mother gave in. The red notebook had a pencil case at the top and a clip to hold blue-ruled paper on which I would learn to write in cursive. The top folded all the way back, much like a page in a legal pad. Later, in 4th and 5th grades, I opted for a yellow zippered pencil holder that fit into my three-ring blue canvas binder, which I would decorate with flowers and doodles throughout the school year.

A few weeks ago, my five-year-old granddaughter, Alice, and I headed toward the children's section at Dillard's. Alice spotted a display of school backpacks. She reached for a large one covered in pastel yellow, lavender, and blue smiley faces. Like Goldilocks, she found that one too large, another too dull, but finally selected one just right. Her choice was Mountain Meadow green, trimmed in gray, with daisies and feathers in Orchid lavender, Blue Violet, Olive Green, Inchworm yellow-green, and white. With a mixture of wistfulness and glee, she discovered a pouch for her water bottle and two zippered pouches inside the bag for her snack, pencils, crayons, and erasers. Suddenly, I too was a kid again, the excitement of a new school year spread before me like a blank page in a Blue Horse table.

P.S. Of course, we purchased the backpack.

The Pecan Pickers

Kay Whaley

During the summer of 2024, my husband and I joined our daughter's family for a vacation to Sedona, Arizona. While the younger crowd took a harrowing jeep ride through the red rock mountains, Mark and I visited the art galleries and boutiques. While we browsed through a shop named Just Us Girls, the young sales associate invited me to step out of my fashion comfort zone. "Try on this M.C. Hammer style skirt!" she oozed. "I think it's perfect for someone your size!"

The "skirt" looked like a pair of balloon legs with huge pockets that opened right above the knee and sagged down to the ankles. Dubiously, I stepped into the dressing room and obediently tried on the skirt. I slipped my hands into the oversized pockets and stared into the full-length mirror. Staring back at me from the mirror was my great aunt Minnie—we kids called her Tee—wearing her long, red jacket, sleeves rolled up and pockets hanging low, heavy with the pecans she'd spent the morning picking up and depositing onto newspapers spread out across her back porch.

Suddenly, I was once again my ten- or twelve-year-old self, traipsing behind Tee through her yard, dropping my stash of pecans into a brown paper grocery bag, eagerly anticipating the money I would make when my mother loaded the sacks of pecans and my brothers into her baby blue Comet and drove us to Mr. Edwards's shop. Mr. Edwards, a seasonal purchaser of pecans, set up his scales outside a ramshackle shop right at the edge of town near the railroad tracks. There was always a crowd waiting to sell their pecans to Mr. Edwards, so we would take our places at the end of the line. When it was our turn at the scales, I would watch as Mr. Edwards heaved our grocery bags, filled to the brim with Stuart pecans, onto his scales, pronounced their weight, and counted out our reward from his roll of dollar bills.

Cash in hand, I was officially a pecan picker, just like Tee! With money in our pockets, my brothers and I couldn't wait to show Tee our dollars. Eyes sparkling, she'd giggle along with us, her laughter at times punctuated by a cough, the result of years of cigarette smoking.

I learned about the pecan business rather indirectly from Tee. My dad always said she could hear the first pecan of the season fall onto the street in front of her house, so she was always the first in her neighborhood out for the harvest. When I followed her around the yard, I learned she discovered pecans hiding under fallen leaves, so I began hunting pecans as though they were Easter eggs. On windy days, I would see her stand at her screen door, watching the trees as pecans dropped like manna.

It would take a few more years for the knowledge to sink in that Tee had not always been a pecan picker. She had had a forty-year career with AT&T, serving as the first female manager of the phone

company in Eufaula. As we grew up, my brothers, fellow pecan pickers, and I would spend many afternoons sitting with Tee on her front porch while she rocked, drumming her fingers on the arms of her chair. As the years passed, she talked less and rocked more. I remember the wistful, faraway look in her eyes and the flicker of a smile as she gazed past the spot where the largest pecan tree once stood.

Today, there is not a single pecan tree in my neighborhood. But on a windy day when the leaves are swirling and inevitable storms are brewing, I'd like to pull out an old jacket with big pockets like Tee's and traipse around the yard with a grandkid or two in tow.

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

Dream Home and Aftermath

Bill Wilson

Our Dream Home

It was because of my brother-in-law that Annie and I bought a house. Newly married, neither of us was good with numbers. We asked her brother, Chris, who had an MBA, to do our taxes. We figured he'd know what he was doing.

With no deductions, our tax bill approximated the national debt. Chris took a few drinks of liquid courage before he could tell us what we owed to Uncle Sam. "You have no deductions. You owe a ton of money. Buy a house. Buy a car. Run up your credit cards. You don't want this to happen again."

Liz McDougal, a friend, had a home in Northport, a picturesque village on Long Island's North Shore. Liz knew a realtor, Adele Byers. Guided by Liz's friend, we began house hunting. Adele showed us a former captain's house on Bay View Avenue overlooking Northport Harbor. We'd be able to keep an eye on our sloop, *Fairwind,* moored about twenty yards off the town dock, she explained.

I vetoed Bayview Avenue because of its heavy traffic and noise. I'd had my fill of clamor in our apartment on Manhattan's East 79th Street. At two in the morning, the bouncer was throwing out drunks from the bar across the street. At three in the morning, a produce truck from the East Bronx market started unloading crates of lettuce, tomatoes, and cabbage at the A&P next to the bar. I hoped that Northport would deliver us from the nightly cacophony.

"I want a house in the quietest, darkest neighborhood in the village." Annie agreed. The realtor found us a nineteenth-century classic. We fell in love with 7 Mariners Lane the moment we saw it—a beautiful old house with just enough yard, little traffic, and—best of all—no noise. Within two months, we were living in our forever home.

The Dream Revoked

"Forever" lasted three years. Shortly before we bought the house, I had taken a new job as public information director for a policy group. Our analysts monitored Federal taxing and spending. As government outlays soared, the board decided that, like bank robber Willie Sutton, we should go where the money was. This was an order, not an option. We moved within six months after we got our marching orders.

Annie, a company nurse, had been assigned by her employer to certify as a substance abuse counselor. She undertook her training at South Oaks Hospital in Amityville, Long Island. I would move to D.C., but my wife needed to finish her certification program.

I swallowed hard, knocked on my boss's door, and entered. "Bob," I began. "I have a problem. My wife is a career professional. She has spent six months working toward certification as an employee assistance counselor. She has six months to go. I can't ask her to stop. I will have to commute from D.C. on weekends."

Bob Brown, a man of few words, nodded yes.

I continued, “I will need the company to pay for the commute.” Another nod. “Yes.”

“I will also have to rent an apartment here while Annie stays on Long Island.”

Bob took the briar pipe from his clenched teeth, swallowed hard, and said, “We knew there’d be some disruptions. We budgeted for them. Find yourself an efficiency apartment.”

Why was my boss so accommodating? In my first month on the payroll, I had scored the public relations equivalent of a home run with bases loaded: California, my boss's home state, had passed Proposition 13, severely limiting California real estate taxes. Other states were interested in this innovative approach to limiting property taxes. We needed to monitor Prop 13’s impact closely.

I used several routine publicity strategies to get media coverage. Every major and mid-sized paper in the country ran the story. My boss, who knew little about PR, was impressed when, a few weeks later, I dropped several thick binders of news clippings on his desk. My publicity coup for Prop 13 was why Bob had agreed to my requests. As a friend once told me, “It’s better to be lucky than smart.”

The Dream Becomes a Nightmare

Annie finished her training at South Oaks and joined me in Arlington, Va. We decided to sell our “forever” home. A retired New York City cop bought the house. My dad had been a retired cop, so I relished the thought that my beloved forever home would, as it were, remain in the family.

Then Murphy’s Law on steroids kicked in. The buyer asked if he could have early access to the house so he could paint. I’m an accommodating guy, so I said OK. He was a cop like my dad. How could he behave other than honorably? I soon found out.

Two weeks before I was to travel north to close the sale, our realtor called. “This guy wants you to put $3,000 in an escrow account. He says the bathroom is defective. (It was.) Lord knows what else he’ll come up with.” The “honest” cop had used his early access to search out any defect he could locate even though an engineer had already vetted the property.

I was furious. I felt betrayed. It took Annie two days to peel me off the ceiling. I told her that I regretted that I had not kept my dad’s 38 Police Special so I could shoot the SOB.

Although I never received a nickel of the escrow money, I gloated over one thing: Both the engineer and the detested cop had missed a flaw beneath my manicured lawn. The eighty-year-old septic tank was about to collapse—and soon.

My First and Only Camping Trip

Bill Wilson

In The Bronx, my world, we don't camp. I am a city kid. Roughing it for me is when the hotel's TV remote needs a new battery. Yet, here I was, a 35-year-old writer from New York City who had never seen the inside of a pup tent or been farther west than suburban Chicago. I had joined two friends for a trip from Denver, Colorado, to the Navajo reservation in Shiprock, New Mexico. We had been invited to celebrate Thanksgiving of 1971 with Steve's brother John and his family.

Steve, a Denver-born, pot-smoking hippie journalist in his late 20s had some experience as a skier and camper. Candace, Steve's girlfriend, was a mystery. I never learned whether she was at all outdoorsy, but Candace was Colorado-born and bred. Unlike me, she had probably grown up hiking, snowshoeing, and camping.

We squeezed into Steve's ancient VW Beetle and crammed our gear and provisions into the bug's rear well. Steve pointed her nose west to the Rockies and the Continental Divide, where we would hang a left and begin our real adventure.

Steve was a good friend, but that didn't make him a good wilderness guide. Steve's hippy lifestyle militated against careful planning and foresight. Candace, the young woman currently occupying Steve's affections and his social calendar, guaranteed that our borrowed pup tent would be almost as crowded as the VW. I discovered later that night that proximity had its benefits as well as its drawbacks.

After we hung our left onto I-285, a blizzard interposed itself between the aptly named Purgatory ski resort and Durango, Colorado. Used to driving in Colorado's bad weather, Steve managed to reach Durango without mishap. I sat in the back seat, squeezed among the backpacks musing that a Humvee would have been a more suitable conveyance for our 102-mile excursion along the Continental Divide.

We emerged from the blizzard, haggard but alive. Steve later told me that a state snow plow had gone over the side of the interstate during the storm. How a VW succeeded where a huge Snow KAT had failed still puzzles me. Divine Providence? Karma? Fate? Dumb luck? I have no answer, but my bet is on dumb luck.

A short hop on local roads brought us to Durango, Colorado, originally a railroad town built to serve the mining industry. Durango is now part cow town and part tourist destination. If this place was ever a boom town, it is one no longer. Some 39 farms and ranches are currently on the market.

"I need a drink," I told Steve, once we were rolling over paved streets and my blood pressure had returned to something approximating normal. My friend obligingly stopped at the first saloon we saw.

Steve peeked in the door, and said, “We can’t go in here.”

“Why?”

“This is a cowboy bar. If I go in there, those guys will beat the stuffing out of me.” (He did not say “stuffing.”) Steve’s long hair, Fu Manchu mustache, and bell-bottom jeans would never pass muster in a pub full of dudes in ten-gallon hats and cowboy boots. We moved on to a more genteel venue where I downed a couple of glasses of liquid solace, and our quest for Shiprock moved forward.

My foray into the world of camping was about to start. We were bound for Chaco Canyon, 114 miles South of Durango. We would camp in the historic New Mexico site, concluding our trip the next morning at Steve’s brother’s house. The route was relatively flat. The snow was behind us. What could go wrong?

I was soon to find out.

Camping has never been my forte. Steve had planned our trip (to the extent that it had been planned) to include a night’s camping in the ancient Hopi/Pueblo ruins of Chaco Canyon. This area was mostly neglected when we pitched our tent. The area would not be designated the Chaco Culture National Historical Park until 1980. Seven years later, it was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The canyon was dark, cold, and deserted when our dust-covered bug rolled into the campsite. We donned every piece of warm clothing we owned, wolfed down a couple of sandwiches and some liquid concoction Steve had brewed, and crawled into our sleeping bags. The tent barely held the three of us, but we willingly sacrificed space for body heat. It quickly became apparent why my friend had chosen an abandoned native American ruin as our shelter. He planned to scare the tenderfoot—me—to death. What the snow had failed to accomplish, he hoped tales of terror might achieve.

Chaco Canyon, the Land of the Skinwalker, with no lights or heat and the occasional howl of a coyote, is a scary place. Steve began weaving his tales of the local monster immediately after he extinguished our single Coleman lamp. Candace and I huddled in the dark as our narrator described the mythical, malevolent creature found in Navajo, Hopi, and Pueblo legends.

The Skinwalker is a shape-shifter—sometimes animal sometimes human—who prowls the earth killing cattle, causing humans to disappear, leaving blight and tragedy in its wake. So evil is this being, that native Americans are mostly silent about its nature, origin, and depredations. The

legends are so closely guarded that anthropologists have been able to learn almost nothing about the Skinwalker. Fear of this being is so ingrained that the native Americans are reluctant to talk about it, even among themselves.

Having bestowed a sleepless night on Candace and me, Steve rolled over and snored the night away. We huddled in our camping gear, partly to stay warm, partly in the hope that two frightened neophytes might defend ourselves should the night creature decide to show up at our tent flap.

A chilly sun rose over the Four Corners the next morning. Candace and I had finally dropped off into a broken sleep. Steve woke us up, helped stow the gear, and headed south. Two of us, at least, were grateful to have survived the storm and the Skinwalker. Fancies of warmth and Thanksgiving dinner danced in our heads.

More adventures lay some two hours ahead. But that's a story for another day

How Writing Poetry Eludes Me:
Why You May Never See Another Poem by Me

Terry C. Ley

Poetry hides from me in comic book balloons and in dialogue from television reality shows.
It teases me, hiding 'midst prose by William Faulkner and Ted Kooser.
It challenges me in accessible lines by Dr. Seuss, Maya Angelou, Billy Collins.

Assonance, dissonance, rhyme, stanza, pentameter, and the whole darned
Smirking Sonnet Family—all chuckle (in rhythm) as I put this pencil to this paper.

Adopted Egg

Peter Wolf

Shopping at Capital Court, an open-air mall, was something we did only occasionally. It was a long way from our house and there were only a few stores that had merchandise we couldn't get closer to home.

For a kid, there were fascinating aspects to Capital Court. At Easter, they set up a display of farm animals in the open walkway between stores. There were cages of newborn bunnies and a hatching station for chicks. The eggs were under a heat lamp, and we could watch as they hatched. I asked Mom why the eggs in our refrigerator didn't hatch like the ones at the mall. She pointed out the heat lamp and told me they needed the higher temperature. "They feel the warmth and think it's their mother. They break out of the shells so they can look for their moms."

"But they don't find their moms. Aren't they sad?"

She answered, "No. They come out of the eggs and find all their friends and get excited andgo play. They have little brains and forget about their moms quickly."

"If I was a chicken I would be there when my eggs hatched," I told her. She thought this was funny. "I wish I had my own chick," I told her.

Before going to bed that night, I grabbed an egg from the icebox and went to my bedroom. I slipped it under my pillow to keep it warm. If the egg felt my warmth, it would break out and I would have my chick.

With church the next day and school the day after I was distracted and forgot about the egg. Days later when Mom went into my room to clean up, she smelled something awful and began an investigation. The egg had begun to rot. When I got home from school, she asked how my egg was doing. I was in shock and fear. How had she found out about the egg and had it hatched while I was at school? Did I miss it? Was I a bad chicken mom?

She explained how the thing was discovered and how bad it smelled because it was dead and rotten. I hadn't noticed. The room smelled the same to me. I figured I was in big trouble for making a mess and for killing the egg. I was going to get a bad spanking.

When I mentioned I was sorry for hurting my project she said it was already dead when it was in the ice box and never would have hatched. She mentioned it was nice I tried to bring a life into this world. "Am I still gonna get it"?

She smiled and said, "No, but don't do it again."

Bullshitter

Peter Wolf

My brother Rudi, who was nineteen years older than I, got dementia near the end of his life. As he aged, the disease progressed until he was unaware of who he was or who the people around him were.

While he still had some faculties, he had access to his phone and would call me multiple times a day. I'd answer, "Hello, you've reached Peter Wolf."

"Who?" he would ask.

"Peter, your brother. Remember, you called me."

"What are you doing?"

"Working."

"Where?"

"Husqvarna in Nashville, Arkansas," I'd answer.

"How long have you been there?"

"Three years," I'd say, and then I would tell the rest of the details of how I came to this job and why. Eventually, I would have to dismiss him as I needed to return to work.

He'd call again fifteen minutes later, and we would duplicate the conversation. This routine happened a few times each week. It grew irritating.

Knowing he would not remember what I said, I decided to have fun and maybe stimulate his brain. What harm could it do? He'd forget what I told him in a few minutes anyway. I decided to get a little entertainment out of these mundane exchanges.

I could have ignored the calls, but what if it was an emergency? What if he had wandered outside and gotten lost and this time it was a cry for help? Would he contact me first if hurt? He didn't seem to know his wife, Rosemari. From the basement recreation room, he once called and asked, "There's an old lady upstairs who cooks and takes care of me, but I don't know who she is, how she got here, or why she is in my house. Do you know?"

He'd call, and instead of answering true, I would exaggerate my life. The stories got more exotic as time went on, and my activities became more reckless and troubling. No matter how crazy my response would be, he would usually accept the answer without much doubt.

One time, I told him I was in China helping to overthrow the communist regime. He laughed and said, "You are such a bullshitter," an unusual response from him.

I'd ended the call by telling him I had to go and explained why. "Assassins are banging on my door, and I have to get out of here. If you don't hear from me again, don't mourn, as I have lived a charmed life." He laughed as the device clicked.

Did he understand I was making up a story and just enjoyed it? Did he fade out as the story evolved and now believe it to be true? At least his reaction showed I was doing no harm, making him more confused.

As time passed and his grasp on reality slipped, my tales became even more outlandish, and he could not tell if I was kidding him or telling the truth as reality was somewhere out on the border of his consciousness. Details would be enhanced on the second and third calls, and more plots would be added. Fiction writers would have been envious of my creativity.

Before they finally took away his cell, "Selling Heroin," "Running for President," and "Pimping Whores" went unchallenged, as did "Working as a Hitman for the Mafia." He didn't question my locations like Milwaukee's ghetto, Washington DC, Phnom Penh, or Sicily. Stories were populated with exquisite detail, and nothing was off the table. I let my imagination run wild. My fibbery almost reached Donald Trump level. If it is still in existence, I would have been made president of the Liar's Club.

My wife and I had visited forty-four of the fifty states and missed Kansas. We had a free weekend, and the Sunflower State was only five or six hours away from where we lived. Terri and I decided to go on a journey.

We researched what there was to do and see in Kansas. We focused on the southeast, the closest part of this state to our house, in southwest Arkansas.

While I was driving, Rudi called me; I never found out how he got his phone back. "Whatcha doing?" he asked as usual.

I decided to tell the truth as a change of pace. "We're in southeastern Kansas and going to see one of the largest steam shovels in the world. It was digging coal when the market price of the mineral dropped to the point it wasn't cost-effective to continue running the operation, so they just abandoned the shovel at the work site. Now it's a tourist attraction."

He started laughing, and said, "Wow. That is a good one. You are such a bullshitter," and began laughing again. I had caught him in one of his last few lucid moments and apparently, he had been hovering near capacity when I told some of my other tales.

After I hung up on the last call my brother Rudi made to me and drove down the roadway, I realized how funny this exchange was. He readily accepted me telling him I was in Southeast Asia fighting the Viet Cong, that I went back in time to talk to King Arthur and his court, and that I was excavating a recently found Pharoah's tomb in Egypt and hoped I wasn't cursed, but visiting Big Brutus in West Mineral, Kansas, was a tale too far, way too exotic and unbelievable.

Robin

Peter Wolf

"Scum bag, loser" is what you would think if you saw him in a bar. He was a tall, skinny man with long, scraggly hair and bloodshot eyes that bulged from the pressures of life. Nicotine had leathered Robin, and Pathos fit him like a spandex suit.

While working together in the Engineering Services department at Briggs & Stratton Corporation, I slowly got to know him. Information came sporadically, as he wasn't one to talk about himself. He didn't feel there was much in his past to brag about, and he was reluctant to share the bad things that had happened.

Robin was a temporary technical writer for our team because he needed a job, and we had a lot of work. Although this was not his preferred job, nothing in his desired field was available to him.

At a previous employer, he worked as a technical illustrator. This was a job Robin loved. Though he never had formal training as an illustrator, his drawing skills developed naturally.

He attempted freelance artwork, but his physical appearance cost him many possible jobs. No one took a chance to discover the ability hidden beneath his rough exterior.

The true joys in his life were his close friends. There weren't many, but you received an unconditional commitment when you made his list.

Robin introduced me to one of his pals, Frog, who owned a service station near my house. He did this so I could enjoy discounted prices on car repairs. I had been folded into his network, and I was entitled to the privileges that went with it.

Robin and his friends would fish, drink, and improve the lake property he owned jointly with his buddies. I suspected his portion of the land purchase came in labor. I was invited to the lake but never went.

When he was first hired, we were virtual contemporaries even though he was a temporary employee. I worked as an illustrator, and he as a technical writer. Our combined outputs were IPLs, Illustrated Parts Lists. Dealers used these manuals to find parts required for maintenance and repairs. With the model, type, and trim number, a shop could find an exploded view of the engine and see the individual parts and where they belonged in the assembly. I created the art, and Robin added the text details.

Our relationship changed when my boss left the company, and I was put in charge of the group. In addition to the supervisory work, I continued doing my old illustration job.

During this transition, many new products were introduced. This meant the number of parts drawn also increased.

The dual burdens of supervising and illustrating eventually overwhelmed me. I could not keep up, and our publishing cycle times increased.

I noticed Robin and our other authors were waiting for my art so they could proceed with updating and assembling books. I thought I could ease my workload by teaching Robin to draw on the computer. Everything he'd created in the past was on paper, and he was not technology-savvy. I thought his background made him a natural. Since he knew how to draw, I thought I could teach him how to use the software.

He proved to be a slow study. His work was good, but it took him forever to finish a drawing. I could complete ten to his one, and this was after he had been using the software for months.

I found him detail-oriented and hindered by attention to little things that did not matter. He tried to make perfect representations, which are not required on illustrated parts lists. No matter how often I told him these were only representations, he could not shake his standards.

Since he was a friend, it was hard for me to criticize and correct him. I showed him shortcuts, which slightly increased his speed but not to where it should have been. His low output was probably why he was not illustrating for another company. On the rare occasion when he drew a part fast, I made sure to compliment him, thinking he would get the hint that speed meant praise, and this would increase his output. Robin would glow after receiving my accolades. I figured he hadn't gotten much in the past.

When the drawing workload lessened, I put him back on authoring IPLs exclusively. His shoulders slumped when I told him he wasn't drawing, but he never complained.

Occasionally, when we had caught up on our books, I would give him parts to draw that I didn't need right away. He grasped these with renewed fervor and slowly increased his parts-drawing speed, though it was still not where it should have been. He might have gotten there with enough time.

The department's goals changed again, and I no longer had time to draw parts. We decided to hire a full-time illustrator to take my place. Robin was a natural choice since he was getting better. He had been loyal to me, did anything I asked of him, and was excited about the prospect. The opening would allow him to be paid for doing something he loved.

During a background check, Human Resources found something that prevented us from employing Robin. I never found out what it was, but I knew it was part of his past and not his future. No matter how hard I argued, the HR department would not allow us to bring him on.

When I delivered the bad news, it destroyed him. He never said a thing, but his eyes grew red, and his arms fell limp.

Once again, he had been thrown a curveball. The hope he had of a pay raise and insurance was gone. Grandma, whom he solely supported, had to stay in her nursing home. Robin had told me she thought of it as a prison. He could not afford to move her to his house without a pay increase. The chance to get financially stable slipped away again.

Over time, I noticed his output after lunch decreased, and his eyes became more bloodshot. Then, he started missing work on Mondays and occasionally Fridays.

I kept him on staff as a temp for as long as I could and justified it because of his past loyalty. But I retained him because of friendship, and I didn't want him to live without income. I also thought of how much I had invested in him and hoped I could somehow bring him on board, as I still thought he could be an asset.

Before long, his lack of production became a burden to our group. What he didn't finish got pushed on the others. We had talks about his performance, but it did not improve, and I had no choice but to fire him.

Months passed.

Through his temp agency, I learned that he found work at a couple of other places but was always let go. I tried telling myself this confirmed I had been right; the other companies proved it to me. I still felt like a betrayer.

Then, news came that Robin was seriously ill. I called his house, and his mother said he was in intensive care. I didn't feel comfortable asking her questions about his condition since I felt an undercurrent of dread in her voice.

I called Frog to get an update. He told me Robin was dying. He was not sure why but thought his liver was giving out. Frog said this matter-of-factly, but a hint of suppressed emotion came with it. Robin didn't want to burden his friend with his problems, so to divert attention, Robin told him they would go fishing when he got out of the hospital. Based on what he had learned from Robin's mom, Frog said it was obvious Robin wasn't ever going near a lake again.

My girlfriend Terri and I went to visit Robin the next day. He practically glowed when he saw us, yet I could tell he was sad. He tried to look strong as if everything was all right. His act was not convincing. The IVs in his arms, the oxygen mask, the skeletal look of his body, and the impending doom on his mother's face revealed the real story. I could tell he knew he was dying.

Robin seemed very glad I had come to visit. His reaction startled me. I expected him to ask me to leave and to tell me I had betrayed him and had given up too early.

He attempted to talk but couldn't speak clearly because of the oxygen mask, but he mouthed me a message anyway. I heard him repeating, "I'm s…y, I'm s…y, I'm s…y." I couldn't make out more; it was a struggle, so I didn't ask him to clarify.

When I glanced away, I noticed illustrations thumb-tacked to the wall. Looking closely, I saw pictures of parts Robin had drawn while working for us. They were mainly the ones I had complimented him on. I asked his mother, "What's all this?"

She said that after he was admitted to the hospital, he asked her to go to his house and get the pictures sitting on his kitchen table. "Bring them here, put them on the wall." Out of all the art he produced, the last thing he wanted to see before he died were the drawings I had complimented him on; he was most proud of those.

It felt like I had been punched in the head and was losing control of my emotions. I never knew how much my faith in him impacted Robin. Guilt washed over me as I realized I should have done more to get Robin hired, keep him on longer, or find a way to help him.

I attempted to compose myself and rein in my galloping emotions. I'm a man and don't publicly show my feelings, especially toward a guy.

I knew I had to say something. What came out was stupid and insincere. "When you get better, maybe you can draw for us again." He brightened for an instant, and then a gloom came across his face. This would never happen, and he and I both knew it.

I wanted to run from the room, run from my failure to stay loyal to my friend, run from the grip of death, run from the gloom that hung over the intensive care unit, but I couldn't.

When I looked into his eyes, I saw that Robin wanted me to stay longer, like he had more to tell or just wanted to spend more time with me.

The sadness and cowardice inside me began to surface. I could not stay without breaking down. I had to escape but couldn't rush out.

I grabbed his hand to shake it goodbye as a final act of civility. His grip was surprisingly firm.

Instead of the lilt feeling one gets when parting from a friend, I bore the heavy burden of guilt. I was once again abandoning Robin. I jerked away to release his hold; sure, he wasn't going to let me go. My foot was already aiming toward the exit.

Without conviction, I said, "Be strong and get better." I could see my false words told him I was lying, and I didn't think there was any hope for him. A deep sadness washed across his face.

Terri and I quickly left the ICU. Standing outside the hospital, I realized what Robin was trying to say to me: "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." He was apologizing for letting me down. I cried thinking, *No. I'm sorry*. He died a few days later.

Only his close friends and his mother attended the funeral. I felt like an outsider making a mockery of the whole thing. I did not deserve to think of myself as his friend. I failed. I should have done more.

Irish Ancestors

Bill Wilson

I stand where my grandparents lay—
in a ruined graveyard
littered with tumbled stones,
a centuries-old churchyard
long since fallen to ruin.
No crucified God is worshipped here.
No yawling babe feels the wet chill of Baptismal water.
Lichen and mildew obscure aged words on ancient markers.
Long-dead ancestors effaced by time, already anonymous,
are lost to me— obscured uncles and aunts
I have never known and will never know.

A recent marker from my Aunt Hannah stands out,
Dark marble shines forth oddly amid the time-wrecked sandstone.
Boldly the words announce "Erected by Hannah Wilson Doherty
in loving memory of her parents, William & Mary Ann Wilson."
Thank you, Aunt Hannah. I knew you. You knew
William and Mary Ann and long-dead siblings,
names no longer legible on moss-laden stones.

My time will come—ashes interred in a hillside in West Virginia
or in a new-built columbarium in Alabama.
Where matters little. When matters not at all.
My last day is already written
in some celestial calendar. The date lies beyond my ken.
Will I then have some Hannah Doherty
to immortalize me?

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