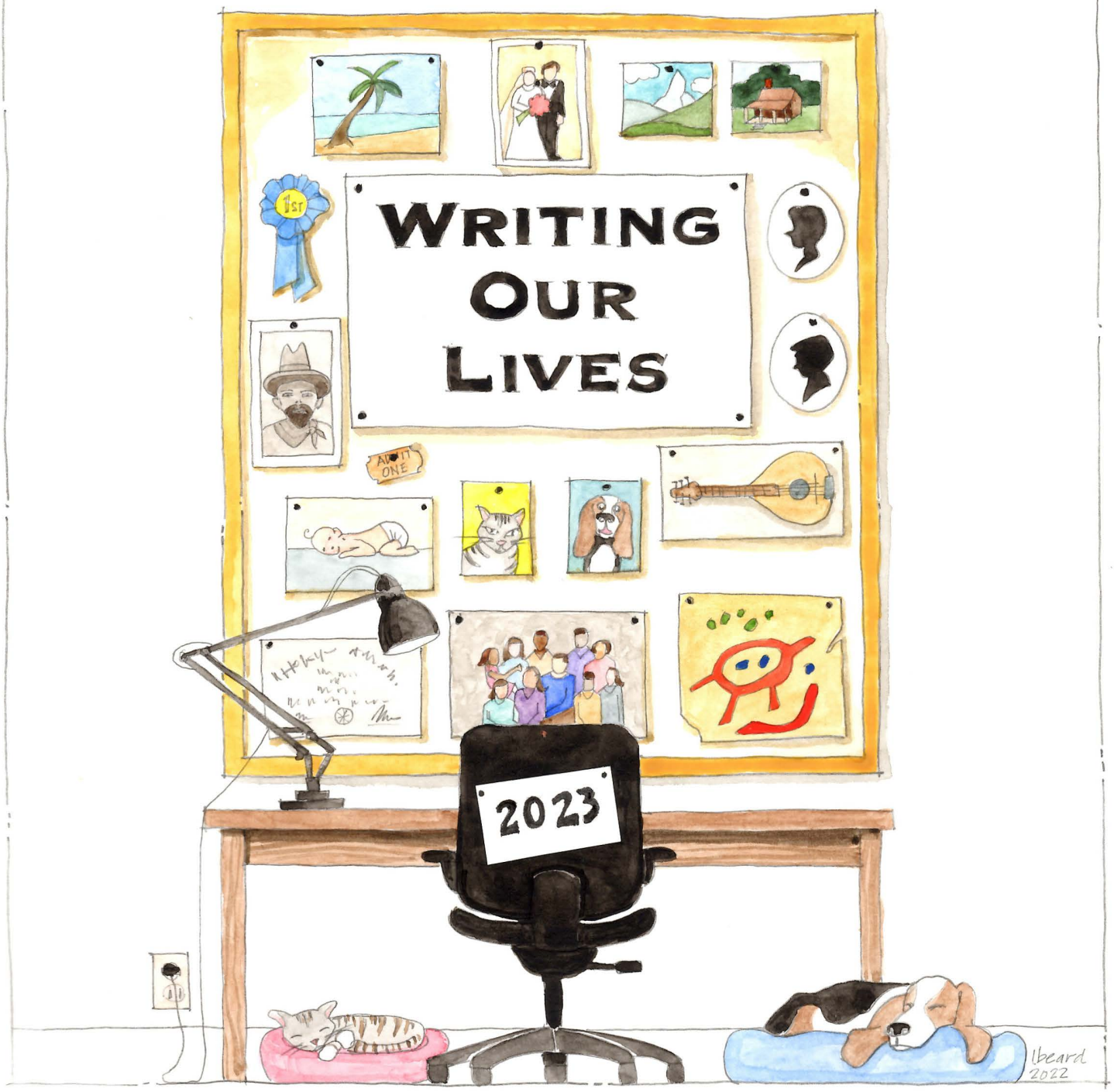

Osher Lifelong Learning Institute
at
Auburn University
Auburn, Alabama

Writing Our Lives

2023

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 or four terms.

Terry C. Ley, editor
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A Poet's Voice

We often find our inspiration or motivation by attending to the voices of professional writers, especially when they share pieces of their own lives with us, as G. E. Patterson does in "Autobiographia."

An African American poet, Patterson grew up along the Mississippi River and was educated in the mid-South, the Midwest, and the West. He is perhaps best known as a public artist whose work often supports food access, energy awareness, civic practices related to women, and urban renewal.

"Autobiographia" might inspire our gratitude!

Autobiographia

G. E. Patterson

I had everything and luck: Rings of smoke
blown for me; sunlight safe inside the leaves
of cottonwoods; pure, simple harmonies
of church music, echoes of slave songs; scraps
of candy wrappers -- airborne. Everything.
Mother and father, brother, aunts, uncles;
chores and schoolwork and playtime. Everything.

I was given gloves against winter cold.
I was made to wear gloves when I gardened.
I was made to garden; taught to hold forks
in my left hand when cutting, in my right
when bringing food to my mouth. Everything.

I had clothes I was told not to wear outside;
a face you could clean up almost handsome;
I had friends to fight with and secrets, spread
all over the neighborhood; the best teachers,
white and colored. I'm not making this up.
I knew that I had everything. Still do.

Tom, Dick, and Terry

Bonnie Adams

I'm drawing attention to these three men because they're not just any old Tom, Dick, or Terry, a set of nobodies, not even your average run-of-the-mill Joe Schmo. Oh no! I pay homage to three exceptional teachers who have energized me, who have paved a path for myself and others to progress, to be inspired through their OLLI classes.

My husband, with maybe just a hint of jealousy, started the day with his usual query, "Who are you seeing today, Tom, Dick, or Terry?" He understood my lure to their classes. Why else would I find hours of enjoyment in isolation, in my easy chair raptly exploring new ideas? Their classes initiated interesting discussions between Bob and me and even our extended family. My grandson Sam would often retort, "Yes, Grandma, I know, we need to reach a higher level of consciousness!"

I believe certain wiser souls are put in our path to raise our energy, to open us to new possibilities. Tom Neilson would be one of those wiser souls. In his class, we were encouraged to stray from our lane, open our minds, and have faith in our futures. In his class I became brave enough to share my near-death experience, and as far as I knew no one thought I was totally off the wall! We shared synchronicities, even transcendent experiences, and felt validated. We learned how common these phenomena were, this knowing and feeling of connectedness to all things. We learned how these experiences increased our love for and ethical behavior towards one another and why it's critical to our evolution and the future of our planet. We felt its importance as we read "Extraordinary Knowing" and "One Mind" and explored the websites Tom introduced us to. They were a springboard of understanding for me.

It's hard to condense even a small part of the knowledge, all scientifically based, that Tom brought to us, but here are some: "When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change." "Our universe is not random but perfectly patterned." "The mind creates matter; matter does not create mind." "Our immortality comes factory- installed; we don't have to earn it." Also, did you know that plants grow faster with blessed water and you're 67% more likely to experience a good mood after eating Intentional or blessed chocolate? When a rat learns something in Bangkok, the intelligence of rats everywhere is raised. Hopefully, this also applies to humans! Who doesn't love this stuff? During the weeks we focused on synchronistic events, they happened more personally and more frequently. Sting entered our classroom with these outstanding lyrics.

A connecting principle
linked to the invisible
something inexpressible
causally connectable
effect without a cause
subatomic laws,
scientific pause,
— Synchronicity!

This is just a small example of the knowledge we gained in Tom's classes.

But I'll bet he is still exploring, experimenting, and keeping up with his favorite teachers, like Larry Dossey, Lynn McTaggart, Irvin Lazio, and Stephen Schwartz. I'm sure his students are and I certainly am!

Up next is our resident mystic, Dick Graves. Upon entering his class you'll notice peaceful anticipation and then realize most of us are repeats in his classes. Here we meet those interested in the outer reaches of consciousness and in developing more spiritual awareness. We will explore the ancient spiritual teachings of 13th-century mystics with a new slant.

As Yates said, "Mysticism is one of the great powers of the world." This came through for us as Dick enveloped us in spiritual insights, revelations, and wisdom. Mystics are found in every religion and are common among those with no religion. Today we realize mystical experiences are a commonality among people everywhere. They invite us to awaken to our connectedness, our oneness. We learned the origin of some of our favorite quotations like Julian of Norwich's "All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well" or Rumi's "Why do you stay in prison when the door is wide open!" or my favorite Zen teaching, "Nothing you do will do. Now what will you do?" Yes, Dick certainly got us thinking!

We shared glimpses of our mystical experiences in a booklet. Even in our small group, there was a wide variety of experiences, affirming this is often an overlooked nature of our being. There were life-changing moments and some that just reinforced that we're traveling the right path. These moments are hard to talk about but reveal the truth of us at our core. Dick recommended we try, like Emily Dickinson, to "tell the truth but tell it slant." He gave us a reverence for the sacred and a drive to find meaning in life. But here's a sad personal confession: I must admit I was a failure at Sufi dancing. A rolling dervish I am not!

Why would it surprise you that our mystic is also a poet? Dick's poems and meditations in his recent book *Still Point* reveal his wisdom and his "dance," and it's been a delightful one!

This brings us to Terry Ley and his Writing Our Lives class. What is it that brings us back time after time, year after year, sitting together, pens poised, full of potential, our paper waiting to reveal our multitudes of experiences? We come together because it's more than just a class; it's a club, a fellowship—a fellowship held together by Terry's undying enthusiasm and his energizing encouragement. We're motivated to glimpse into specifics in our lives, into forgotten tiny corners where memories bubble up when inspired by creative writing prompts. Time is taken to just think, for memories might bring a smile, a tear, or even a deep belly laugh. Terry then employs us to write, write, write. Write what comes to your mind, be messy, don't worry about spelling, don't worry about form yet, just get the words down.

When writing together I imagine words, thoughts, feelings, and experiences of others falling all around me, opening my mind, giving me the courage to tell my story, however insignificant it may seem to be. We're made to realize how our past adventures helped form us, change us, and give us

insight into where our life's paths have taken us.

When sharing our writings out loud we learn to conquer our shyness, self-doubt, and sometimes even our shaking, quaking, and butterflies. We find a voice here, hear the voices of others, and gain an understanding of how unique we all are. I've been told writing preserves our mental faculties and gives us an active sense of humor in old age. So true. Terry sometimes has to settle down punsters and jokesters so he can continue his class.

Some of us collect memories for our children and our grandchildren so that they may know us in a new way. Some just write for enjoyment, and some to remember and understand their lives better. We're free to do it our way. It was pointed out that you can tell your grandkids to go ahead and make a mess of things because in twenty years it'll make a great story!

Terry does not ignore his admonishment to write, write, write! He has published *Writing My Life,* his own patchwork quilt of cherished memories.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention Cathy Buckhalt, a strong teacher whose voice of experience partners with Terry's and enriches us all. Many inspirational memoir books helped fuel our writings as did visits from authors and poets, some of whom sit beside us in class. If anyone would care to borrow a memoir book, a book of poetry by Kooser, stories by Rick Bragg, or a book of remembrances by our own Mary Belk, I'm your person!

Thanks to Bernard Osher for the opportunity to be perpetual students and kudos to these three gentlemen and to all our OLLI teachers and our leader, Scott Bishop. They, like Tom, Dick, and Terry, receive no superhero display of adoration but, like us, are seekers and travelers willing to share their gifts of time, expertise, and enthusiasm.

We thank you all!

Tomorrow we will write, write and not waste time. We will make dark marks on the page, the gift to which we have been given, the gift that has been given to us.

– Robert Benson, *Dancing on the Head of a Pen*

The Things I Would Carry

Ken Autrey

These days, media reports of the Ukrainian refugee crisis are filled with images of women and children, bundled against the cold, lugging bags or suitcases along narrow roads against a backdrop of disabled tanks and miscellaneous military wreckage, sometimes even abandoned bodies of soldiers or civilians. Fleeing the bombing, leaving their ruined neighborhoods behind as they trudge along, the hungry, expressionless faces seem resigned to a bleak and uncertain future. I imagine the hurried packing before departure and wonder how you could possibly decide, perhaps within minutes, what, among a lifetime of possessions, should go into a pack or bag to form a burden light enough to carry through blowing snow for miles as you likely leave your past behind forever.

Of course, refugees have faced this dilemma for ages: stay home and risk almost certain chaos, even death, or gather your kids and a few belongings to escape and leave the past behind. We've seen footage of desperate, often starving, refugees fleeing violence in Darfur, Iraq, Syria, Myanmar, Guatemala, and other misbegotten areas with little more than crusts of bread and the clothes on their backs. Perhaps we console ourselves with the assumption that they had little to begin with and thus had few items of value to pack—or that they fled from circumstances so dire that what they carried was insignificant compared to the urgency of departure. But, it would be inhumane to assume that a sudden uprooting would not be agonizing for anyone.

Tim O'Brien's collection of linked stories, *The Things They Carried*, one of the finest literary works about the Vietnam War, begins with the title story, an account of what the men in a platoon, out of necessity or choice, carried in their rucksacks. While these men are soldiers, they are also at least temporarily refugees from their past lives, and often the items they choose to carry are reminders of those lives, such as photos, charms, or tokens from loved ones back home. Other items are essential to their survival against natural or enemy dangers: knives, compasses, machetes, mosquito netting, bug spray, rifles, and ammo. In addition, like refugees the world over, they carry inner psychic burdens, such as platoon leader Lieutenant Cross's longing for Martha with a love that is almost certainly not reciprocal.

Recently, I read a book by Tiya Miles called *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake.* The title echoes O'Brien's but refers to a very different sort of burden. While the contents of the packs humped by O'Brien's soldiers are striking for their variety and bulk, Ashley's sack would have weighed no more than a couple of pounds. The actual sack is displayed today in the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. It is made of rough, brown-stained cotton and is embroidered with these words:

My great grandmother Rose
mother of Ashley gave her this sack when she was sold at age 9 in South Carolina

it held a tattered dress 3 handfulls of
pecans a braid of Roses hair. Told her
It be filled with my Love always
she never saw her again
Ashley is my grandmother

Ruth Middleton
1921

The stitching is black except for the line "It be filled with my Love always," which is red. This sack, measuring 33 by 16 inches, was rescued from a Tennessee flea market in 2007 and was subsequently displayed at Middleton Place, an antebellum plantation near Charleston, South Carolina, before being loaned to the Smithsonian. Based on the minimal evidence from this artifact, historian Tiya Miles investigates its probable historical origin, concluding that Rose and her daughter were enslaved by one Robert Martin, who owned a house in Charleston and a plantation in Barnwell County, South Carolina. The specific circumstances of Ashley's sale remain a mystery. This was one of countless wrenching family rifts caused by callous slave owners.

Miles's book makes this scant family history a means of exploring the possible significance of the sack's meager contents, and these few gifts become metaphors in her attempt to shed some light on the struggles of enslaved people in the nineteenth century, so often deprived of all but the barest of belongings

When I read about such harsh historical realities, the sundering of individuals from families and possessions, I give thanks for my own security but also imagine what my own forced exodus might entail. Given where I live, short of a tornado or house fire, it's hard to think of any disaster that would force me to flee so suddenly that I'd have to gather my most valuable possessions within minutes. You have only to look to California or Colorado to find communities in which, just this past year, raging forest fires caused families to escape so quickly that they had no time to rescue anything more than the family pet from rampaging flames. Fortunately, my house seems impervious to fire, flood, or hurricane, but I can't help but consider what essentials I'd grab if I faced such a conflagration.

In an emergency, I'd certainly want to make sure our cat was safe, although she doesn't take to being picked up and carried for any reason. She'd be more likely to scurry out the door on her own, seeking shelter in the far reaches of our lot, tending to her own safety. I would hope to have the presence of mind to grab my laptop, my passport, and other important papers. I'd like to salvage one of my guitars as well, but I'd have trouble choosing between my 1969 Guild and my more recent model Martin.

There are multiple items around the house that remind me of my parents, such as a dictionary stand my dad fashioned out of walnut from a tree he had cut down, but that's far too bulky to transport in an emergency. I could grab the rolling pin my mom used for decades; I still use it for rolling out biscuits or pie crusts on the dubious assumption that her aura continues to bring my efforts in the kitchen a little closer to hers. But overall, my parents were not big on keepsakes or memorabilia, so there's little beyond the photos on my laptop, many of them digitized from old family prints, that

would help me sustain a meaningful connection with them.

If forced to leave my house suddenly, a pair of well-worn pink ballet toe shoes would be among the items I would hope to salvage. During my more than forty years of teaching, students occasionally gave me gifts, usually a small memento from an overseas trip or books they thought I might like. But those toe shoes stand out as my most cherished gift.

Shortly before her graduation, about 25 years ago, one of my favorite students, Wendy, stopped by the office. She was carrying a pair of beat-up toe shoes, their pink satin scuffed and faded, long ribbons trailing from each like linguine noodles. She was heading for law school, and I knew I was not likely to see her again for a long while, if ever.

A year earlier, in my Advanced Writing class, Wendy had written a stunning essay about her background as a dancer. She had grown up in Charleston and fallen in love with ballet. Eventually, she auditioned for the dance school of the American Ballet Theatre and was accepted. She spent her junior year in New York immersed in the discipline that she loved. She was scheduled to tour Europe in the summer with a group of young dancers from the school and decided to visit home beforehand. Back home in South Carolina, she was horseback riding one afternoon when she fell and wrenched her knee. The damage turned out to be considerable, and in the end, this accident not only nixed her trip to Europe; it also ended her career as a dancer.

She was devastated. Back home for her senior year, unable to dance, she moped forlornly through the fall when finally her English teacher called her aside and asked her what was wrong. Wendy explained how the knee injury had ended her hopes to become a dancer. Her teacher then told her, "When you find yourself thwarted in something, the best thing to do is to take the energy and creativity you devoted to that and pour it into something else. For you, I suggest writing." That's what Wendy did.

In my office, Wendy handed me the shoes, explaining, "These were my first toe shoes. The tradition is that you keep them and give them to your best teacher. I'd like to give them to you."

I didn't know what to say. I couldn't speak. Tears crept down my cheeks. It was the only time I'd ever cried in front of a student. I was touched to the point of embarrassment. Because of the essay she had written about having to give up dancing, I knew the significance of these shoes for her, and I'm sure she knew the power of this gift would not be lost on me. To this day, they hang on the wall above my desk, oblong and toe-padded, tilting away from one another to form a pink heart.

Mexico City 1968

Leslie Beard

It is the first day of our vacation when I see the penitents. They walk on their knees, heads bowed, across El Zocalo, the enormous concrete plaza bordered by busy streets, to the Metropolitan Cathedral of the Assumption of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary into Heaven. Old and young, male and female, they clutch their rosaries and pray the decades of The Sorrowful Mysteries in a language I don't understand but in a meter I know well. I am eight years old and made my first confession just last May.

Our catechism class discussed the nature of sin (a failure in love for God and neighbor), created a list of probable sins for young children (hitting your brother, sassing your mama), and memorized the Act of Contrition (O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee…). And of course we practiced the usual prayers given to children as penance: the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be. Sin was a stain on the soul and only Confession, Contrition, and Penance could wash it clean. Try as I might, I couldn't think of a single *interesting* sin I'd committed, such as cursing or vandalism, and so I chose from the class list the boring, venial sins of complaining about chores and arguing with my siblings.

Mama tells me the knee-walking grandmothers and teenaged boys are penitents, and all the noise of the Zocalo—car drivers honking and cursing, tourists reading loudly from their guidebooks, and university students chanting political slogans—fades away. I stare at the trails of blood left by the torn knees of the pilgrims, the streaks already drying to rusty stains under the pulsing sun. I have plenty of experience with skinned knees and I know they really hurt. Riveted, I gape in awe. When I hear my name called, I turn and run to catch up.

The church is cool and dark and enormous inside. Side chapels burst with statues, kneelers, flowers, and votive candles in red glass cups. We stop at the Jesus, Lord of Chocolate statue. He is shown just after the third sorrowful mystery: the crowning with thorns. He's seated and looks exhausted, and there's a basket full of cocoa beans—offerings—at his feet. Painted blood runs down his legs from torn knees.

A priest chants a Mass at one of the altars, the Altar of the Kings in a towering gold-encrusted apse, heavily carved and full of statues. I now know why there are so many poor people on the streets. They give their riches to God. We sit to rest in a pew. My oldest brother leans over to whisper church history in my ear. This cathedral rose at the center of the sacred Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlan. A block away, on their massive pyramid temple, the Aztec priests sacrificed thousands of humans—even little kids!—to their gods. They also sacrificed jaguars and dogs and hummingbirds. The Spanish, led by Cortés, conquered and exterminated the native population and tore down their buildings. I imagine a towering, bloody hill of dead people stacked in layers.

Groups of American tourists walk past us, up the aisle, to take photographs. Their cameras flash and their voices boom rudely over the Latin drone of the priest. The tourists move on, the priest offers up the sacrifice of the Mass, and we watch the communicants eat the body and drink the blood of Christ. The priest, the tourists, and my brother all fade away as I rub my knees and remember the bloodstained concrete. After a time, we rise and leave quietly to get some lunch.

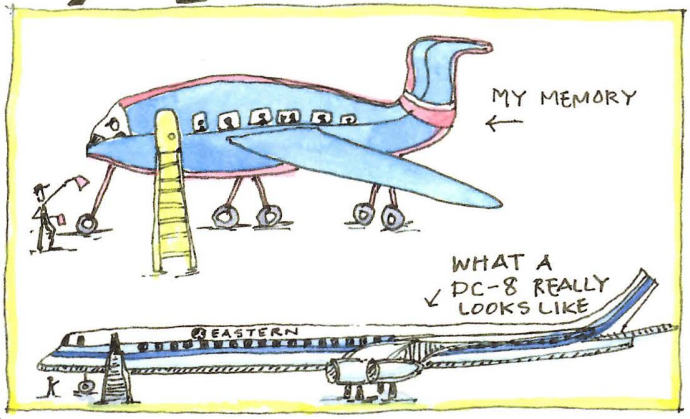
I've returned many times to the puzzle of sin, penance, and redemption. Does self-inflicted pain help redeem the world, discipline our spirit, or just ease our guilt? Didn't the crucifixion end the need for blood sacrifice, at least among Christians? Is there not enough suffering in the world already? What does God ask of us? What do we ask of God? And I wonder, especially, how far we will go to make meaning of our suffering.

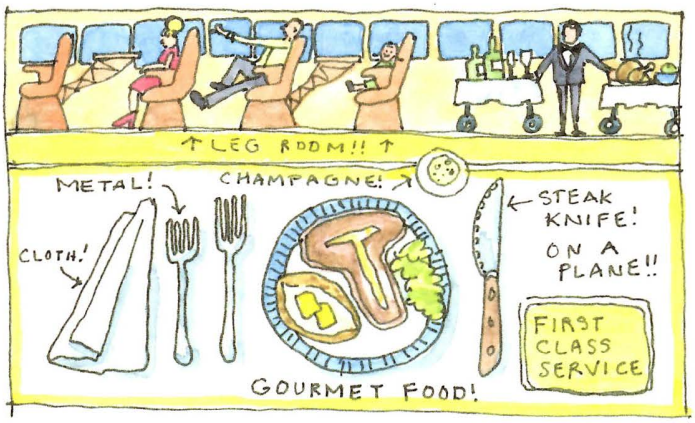
(Note: Leslie Beard's graphic story related to this one follows.)

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*

Flying down to MEXICO - April 1968



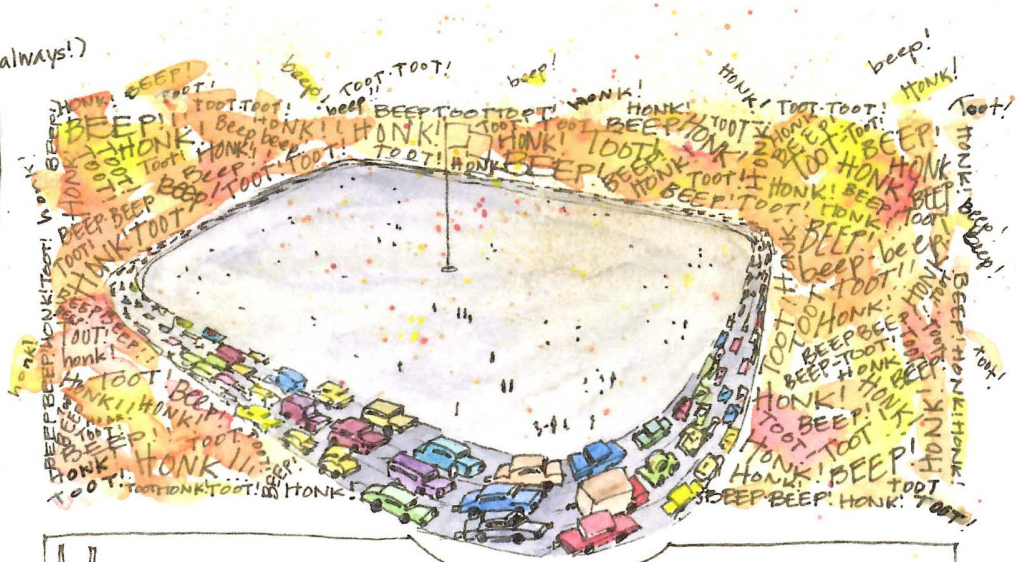


My father loved everything about airplanes, especially war planes.

Eddie Rickenbacker (1890-1973), WWI American fighter ace and Medal of Honor recipient, was a manager, owner, CEO, and COB of Eastern Airlines from 1935 to 1963.

In April of 1968 my family piled into our red station wagon and drove from our home in Baton Rouge to the airport in New Orleans and took an Eastern DC-8 First Class flight non-stop to Mexico City. It was my first flight (& my 1st and last first class experience). We all were dressed up (you did that to fly back then). The cabin was spacious, the food delicious, and the service impeccable. It's been downhill in the sky ever since.

I think it was the red station wagon that was covered in hippie flower stickers.



We stayed at the Majestic Hotel on Zocalo Square in the heart of the city. Because there was a race-track around the square, my mom slept in the bathtub, the quietest spot she could find. The drivers honked their horns all night long.

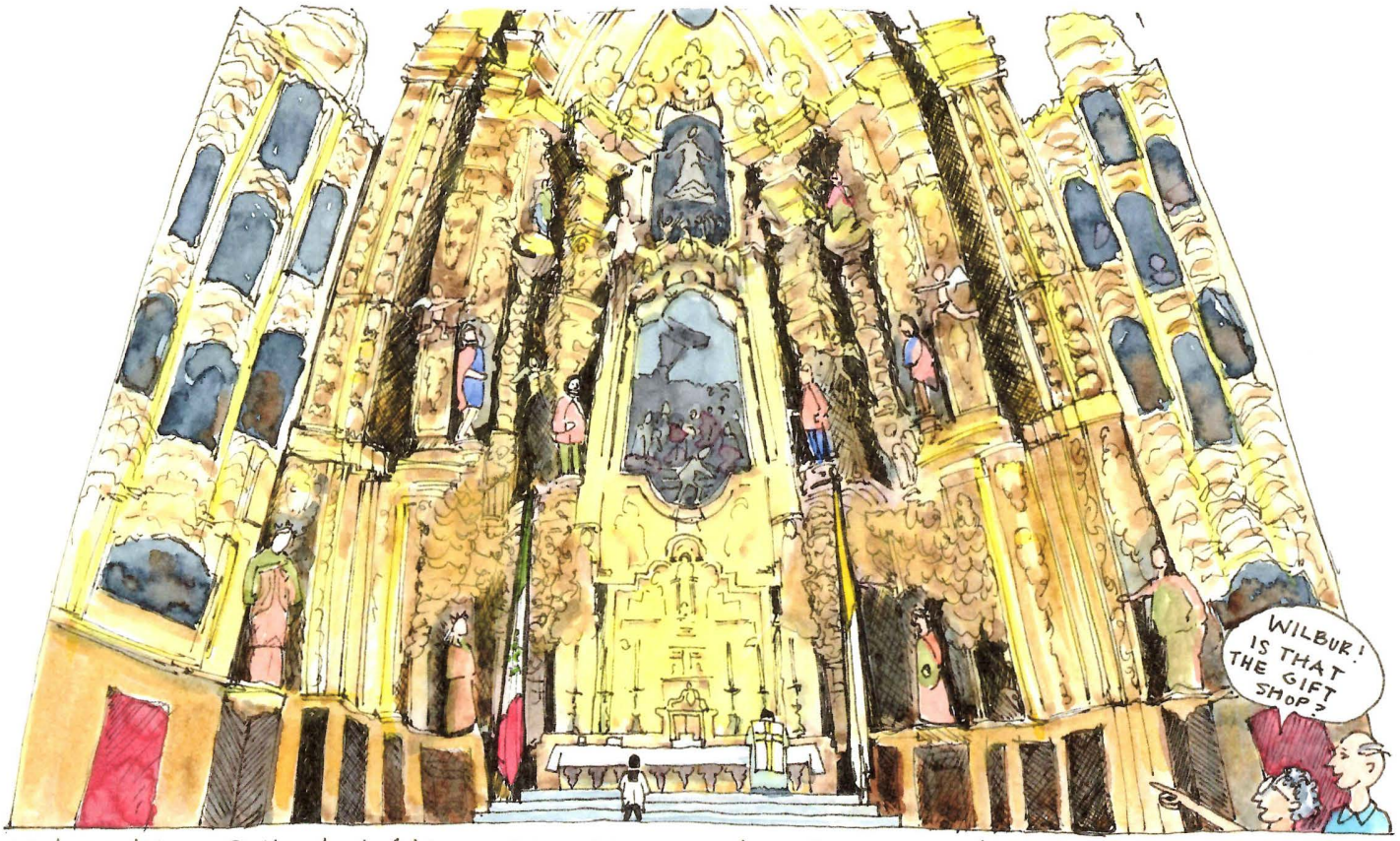
Mama's pink sponge rollers

There was a humongous old church on one side of Zocalo Square. The whole right side was sinking into the mud! This cathedral was built (1573-1813) on the site of the church before it (1521) which was built on the site of the sacred center of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan.

The Spanish conquerors tore down the main Aztec temple (Templo Mayor), the site of human sacrifice, and used its stones to build their church, site of the sacrifice of the mass.

We saw people walking on their bloody knees across the square to the church. Mama said they were penitents. I'd recently had my first confession and I'd had to make up sins worthy of confessing.

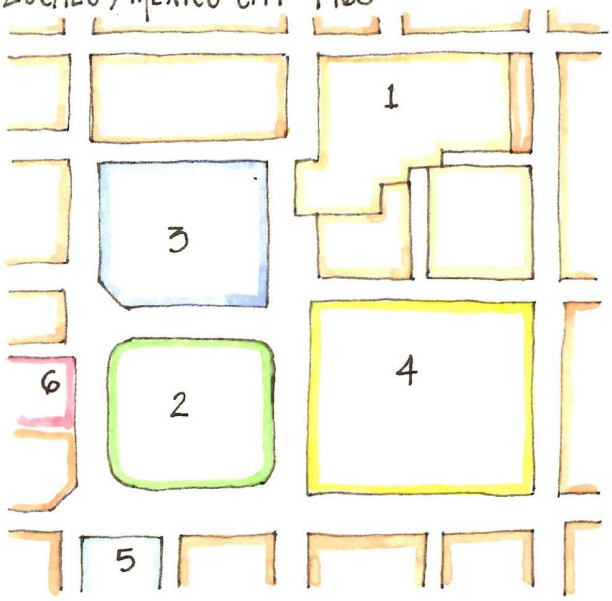
So much sacrifice. So much blood.



Metropolitan Cathedral Altar of the Kings, aka. la cueva dorada (the golden cave)

1968...

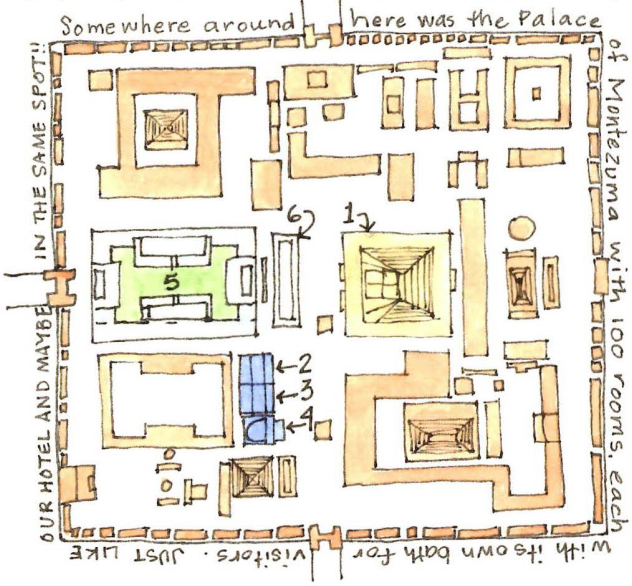
ZOCALO, MEXICO CITY - 1968



1. Templo Mayor
2. Zocalo Square
3. Metropolitan Cathedral
4. National Palace
5. Town Hall
6. Majestic Hotel

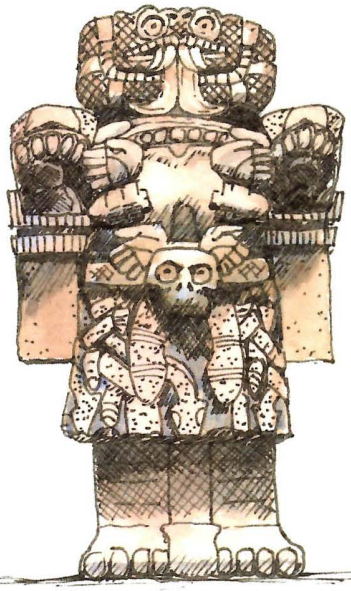
1521...

SACRED PRECINCT OF TENOCHTITLAN - 1325 - 1521

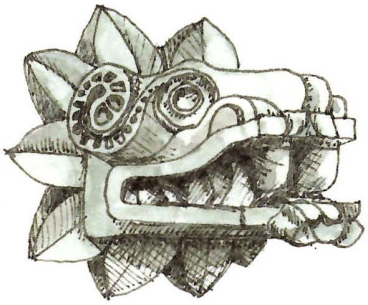


1. Temple Mayor
2. Shrine of Huitzolopochtli
3. Shrine of Tlaloc
4. Shrine of Quetzalcoatl
5. Ball court
6. Skull rack

lots of (scary!) Aztec gods were worshipped in Tenochtitlan. Lots.



Huitzilopochtli
patron god, diety of war, sun, and human sacrifice



Quetzalcoatl
feathered serpent god of wind and learning

The Aztec capital Tenochtitlan had a population of 150,000 to 200,000 in 1519 when the Spanish arrived. There were shrines for many gods.

(SCARY!)

Tlaloc
god of rain, fertility, and water

Aunt Mattie and Uncle Joe

Nancy Bissinger

Opine is a small farming community near the Tombigbee River in west central Alabama. My dad's family moved there from Georgia in 1810 and the family home is there still. Progress is only slowly making its way into Opine. I remember ice cold well water from the bucket hung on the porch. Everyone drank from the same dipper. I remember out-houses in the pitch black dark of a moonless night. I remember the heat of the kitchen fire as the only heat in the house. Layers of quilts kept me toasty in bed. I don't remember Aunt Mattie and Uncle Joe. The home where they lived near the edge of the road has long since been moved and for at least thirty years has been used as the hay house near the chicken coop.

My dad and his sister spent part of every summer in Opine as children. Dad stayed with Aunt Margaret and Uncle Albee in the old family home, and Gloria stayed with Aunt Minnie; but Aunt Mattie and Uncle Joe were their favorite relatives. They drove up from near Mobile and if recent rains had not rendered the steep red clay roads impassable, continued on to Opine,

Aunt Mattie was usually out in front of the house. Sometimes she was on the porch, shelling peas or beans in her straight chair. Other times she was sweeping the yard so the grass wouldn't grow. No one actually the remembers why people up there swept their yards, but everyone remembers that they did. Aunt Mattie was less than five feet tall and round as a butterball. She always sat with her legs apart, so the big round white enamel bowl full of crowder or purple hull peas was held between her knees. She'd grasp the pointy end of the pea pod and pull the string all the way down to the other end. She'd insert her thumb at the bottom and push each pea out into the bowl, then throw the string part and the pod in the paper sack at her feet. Eventually the pods and strings were thrown across the fence for the cows. Some batches of peas were canned, but a pot of peas or beans waited on the wood burning stove to share with anyone who stopped by for a visit. Aunt Mattie was a warm grandmotherly type even though she and Uncle Joe never had any children. She wore long dresses she made from printed flour sacks, with long sleeves, high necks and a tie at the waist. Her face was rough from many hours working in the sunny kitchen garden and she had a wart the size of a raisin on her chin. There was always a sweet gum twig sticking out between her teeth, and when she wasn't chewing on it she was using it to dip snuff. She spent a large part of those hot summer days canning and preserving the fruits and vegetables grown on the farm

Uncle Joe was as tall and thin as Aunt Mattie was short and fat. They were much like Jack Spratt and his wife. He would sit on his straight back chair on the porch, but only on two legs. He grew corn in a huge garden behind the house and raised cows in the pasture. Buttermilk and cornbread were staples in their diets. Aunt Mattie churned the milk and stored it in the well to keep it cool. Uncle Joe took the corn by ox cart to one of the grinding mills, which were built every half mile along the red clay road. Every day in Opine was

much the same as every other. Church suppers out in the yard were family entertainment and quilting bees were a regular occurrence.

Aunt Mattie and Uncle Joe died of old age some time after my father became a teenager and his interest in Opine waned; and before he settled down and returned with his family to share in his memories. I brought my children to Opine as often as I could get there...three maybe four times each year. There is indoor plumbing now, electricity and refrigeration, some people have gas heat, and two party phone lines were only completely eliminated in the seventies, but most of the people who live there still preserve and can from their gardens and raise livestock. They still sit in straight chairs, the men on two legs leaning against the wall and the women with needlework or a bowl of peas on their laps. There is only one mill along the road for grinding corn and only one family makes their own cane syrup and sugar from the sugar cane, but Opine is still a small farming community and the people who live there now are still as soft and as natural as Aunt Mattie and Uncle Joe.

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

A Magical Weekend with My Boys

William Blake Brown

A few months ago, younger son Jamie asked me to keep my calendar clear for November 4-6.

Why? I asked. He'd tell me when I needed to know. For weeks he was less forthcoming than a Swiss bank. On November 3, he came to spend the night so we could get an early start on Friday. Early start to where? I'd be told on Friday.

When we set out toward Mobile on Friday morning, I wondered whether we were going to Baton Rouge, home of my alma mater and site of a big football game that weekend. My guess grew stronger when we hit Interstate 10 and headed west. But when we passed the exit toward Baton Rouge and continued toward New Orleans, doubt crept in.

That was just a feint, though, and we skirted New Orleans and turned toward Baton Rouge. Jamie still didn't amplify. He kept checking his watch and said there was a special place he wanted to stop for lunch. As we exited at Gonzales, I was instructed to close my eyes and bow my head. He wanted it to be a surprise, he said.

When the car stopped a few minutes later, he told me to open my eyes and look to the right. Outside the car window was not a restaurant but older son Jeff, who lives in San Antonio. A surprise became a big surprise.

The two of them had been planning for months to do something with Dad. They'd thought about a concert, but dates just didn't work out. They thought about a football game. Should it be one that LSU would be likely to win or roll the dice and go for a big game? They opted for a big game. At the time it was a given that LSU would lose. So, their plan was set in motion.

On Friday we left one of the cars parked on campus and had dinner with Chuck and Tarilyn (he's Adelaide's nephew). On Saturday, Tarilyn equipped the three of us with LSU jackets and dropped us on campus.

It was the first time since I graduated that I had been back on a football weekend. The stadium is bigger, the crowds are bigger, but it still felt like home. Inside the stadium, the atmosphere was electric, and the roar from the crowd (including the three of us) was continuous. Jeff's an FSU grad, and Jamie graduated from Auburn, but for a few hours they became my kind of tigers.

And all three of us were in the crowd on the field after the game. As I was trying to hoist myself over the barrier, a tall young man who was already on the field picked me up and swung me over.

Billy Cannon's famous Halloween punt return against Ole Miss is one bookend of magic moments I experienced in Tiger Stadium. LSU's 1-point win provides the other.

But what really made the weekend magical was being with my boys. I'm sure that somewhere their mother is smiling.

Chinese Naming Traditions

Lili Muljadi

According to the Chinese tradition, we have a very interesting way to name our sons. I am going to use our family names to try to explain it.

My father's name is Oei Sioe Hay. Oei is the family name. Sioe is the middle name. Hay is his given name.

His brothers' names are Oei Sioe Lam and Oei Sioe San. The brothers have the same middle name.

In the next generation, Oei Sioe Lam's son names are Oei Hok An, Oei Hok Liang, and Oei Hok Sian. Oei Sioe San's sons' names are Oei Hok Oen and Oei Hok Sam. Oei Sioe Hay's son's name is Oei Hok Sun. Do you notice that all the brothers and cousins have the same middle name?

At my grandmother's funeral, my father and I met my father's cousin for the first time. He had seen my grandmother's obituary in the newspaper. He lives in Semarang, and we live in Surabaya. The distance between Semarang and Surabaya is 350 km. When he introduced himself to us, we immediately knew that he is my father's cousin. His name is Oei Sioe Sien. The family name is the same, the middle name told me that he is from the same generation as my father.

The middle name came from a Chinese poem. This system of naming a son has been practiced for many generations—until 1967.

In 1967, in an attempt at "assimilation," the Indonesian government issued a decree compelling all Indonesians of Chinese ancestry to abandon their Chinese names in favor of Indonesian ones. It was followed by a ban on the public use of Mandarin and expressions of Chinese culture.

Some families still follow the naming traditions but do not record the Chinese name in any legal documents.

The Bengal Bar & Lounge

William Blake Brown

The Bengal Bar & Lounge was a typical college-town watering hole: Seedy, but too dark for you to notice once you were in the place. The odor of stale beer competed with equally stale cigarette smoke. In the bathrooms, the smell of sick made those odors seem benign.

The bar stood a mile from campus. All the bars on all of the roads were a mile from campus, which made sense only if you were trying to make a dent in the youth population. You had to drive to get to the bar, where you did what you do at bars: drink, Then you drove home. The peculiar zoning law was made even more absurd if you considered that the legal drinking age in Louisiana was eighteen and that LSU had to accept anyone with a Louisiana high school diploma—for one semester anyway. Many of those freshmen were from small towns and were on their own for the first time.

But the Bengal was our bar. The news staff of the *Daily Reveille*—which actually published only four days a week—commanded a table every Thursday night to celebrate getting out the week's last paper. We called the gatherings So Happy It's Thursday. You can figure out the acronym. Beer was cheap—twenty-five cents for a 12-ounce can of Falstaff, thirty cents for a 10-ounce can of Schlitz. (Being a connoisseur, I started the evening with a couple of cans of Schlitz and moved on to Falstaff.) The beer was served in small glasses, small enough for several of them to fit into a jacket pocket. My apartment kitchen was among those stocked with the Bengal's glasses.

The low light covered a lot of ugliness, but it was easy to bump into things—or people. Nobody was offended unless their beer was spilled.

A jar of pickled eggs sat behind the bar. Exceptionally hot sausages were served with hot mustard and saltines. The gumbo packed some extra heat, too, and more than one of us took an oath on Friday morning that we would never again consume stuff that would rip our guts out. Those oaths were always forgotten by the following Thursday.

There were no housing rules for male students, but for women, *in loco parentis* was real, and the *parentis* was Helen Gordon, the dean of women, who was every girl's strict mother. The women's dorms had closing hours, and woe betides the woman who got home late.

The girls who worked on the *Reveille*, however, had unlimited late permissions. All they had to do was call the "late lady" and tell her they were working late on the *Reveille*. The pay phone at the Bengal was in an alcove, but the noise from the jukebox (seemed like Ray Charles was always singing about the girl with the red dress on) and the general hubbub reverberated.

The girl who had been drafted to call the late lady cupped her hand around the mouthpiece and stayed on the line as short a time as possible.

The ritual was always the same. My girlfriend and I sat in the front seat and drove to the late lady's dorm. We'd try not to giggle or breathe on her as she huddled in the back seat.

I would drive her to my girlfriend's dorm, where she would unlock the dorm door, let my girl in, and lock it again. Then I drove the late lady back to her dorm.

The late lady was no fool. She knew what was going on, but she was also discreet. I don't remember the late lady ever saying a word to me, and I never tried to make conversation.

Some years later, I was in Baton Rouge and made a stop at the Bengal. It was daylight, and the bar was even shabbier than I recalled. There was light inside as well. They hadn't spent a lot on decorating.

Just as well. We didn't go there for the décor or the ambiance.

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*

Blessing in Disguise

Wendy Cleveland

When a plate of gooseneck barnacles is served in front of you, do you lick your lips or slide beneath the table? Are your gustatory delights determined by your upbringing, those menus planned and carried out by a family member who highlighted certain foods while ignoring others? I've long been convinced that my Pennsylvania Dutch bland diet influenced my reluctance to try new foods. The most unusual food I had ever tried was octopus draped over a salad in Venice when I was 21 while trying to "find myself" on an eight-week solo trip through Europe via Eurail passes and Frommer's *Europe on $10 a Day*. I wanted to be daring, to discard my childhood diet and try new dishes. However, after chewing one limb of this rubbery mollusk, I vowed that chicken potpies, wieners, and sauerkraut would be the extent of my culinary socialization. However, the cliché *ignorance is bliss* can sometimes be a blessing when applied to food, as I found out recently during a vacation in Italy.

Near our apartment in Montalcino was the tiny town of San Giovanni d'Asso in central Tuscany with its impressive castle overlooking rolling hills of vineyards and olive trees. The castle was fortified with brick between the 12th and 14th centuries and is now used for exhibitions and houses the Truffle Museum, a collection of modern rooms devoted to the history, hunting, and cooking of this subterranean fungus. Next to the museum is the highly recommended Ristorante del Castello. The first time we dined there on the terrace at sunset, I enjoyed tagliolini al tartufo, a pasta dish with buttery noodles, Parmigiano Reggiano cheese, and shaved truffles that gave it a woodsy flavor. I had eaten black truffles on a previous trip to Norcia, in the region of Umbria, and decided they were much better than American mushrooms I finally tried when I was 43.

The weather was cool and rainy on our second visit to del Castello. I had googled the menu with English translations ahead of time, and one item caught my eye: slow-cooked meat with polenta. Thinking about a beef stew on a chilly fall evening solidified my choice, and I couldn't wait to try it. When I was a child, my mother made a delicious beef stew from a recipe I continue to use today. On winter Sundays she threw together a pot roast using chuck steak. She prepared it in a large roasting pan, slid it into the oven at a low temperature, and off we went to church, probably not the wisest decision, but coming back to a house that smelled so wonderful and sitting down to eat tender beef in simmered gravy with carrots and potatoes was one of my fondest food memories. This came to mind when I ordered slow-cooked meat at the castle, with its warm lighting, elegant décor, and a glass of local Offida Zeii Rosso. The dish did not disappoint! The round cake of polenta was soaked in rich dark gravy, with three pieces of meat that were so tender I could cut them with my fork. Our waiter, Ricardo, was pleased that I found the dish *delizioso*.

After we returned to our apartment, I googled slow-cooked meat and was surprised to find, among several recipes, a description of beef cheeks. BEEF CHEEKS! My imagination ran wild with images of a tender-eyed cow chewing a cud, her cheeks sawing

back and forth, and then being sliced away. I read on and learned that beef cheeks, taken from the facial muscle of the cow, contain lots of connective tissue, making this cut of meat very tough and requiring 10-12 hours of braising in beef stock and red wine. One site said they "pack a ton of flavor," and I had to agree. I can only describe the texture as velvety, a tender cut that fell apart much like pulled pork.

But I wonder if I would have ordered this entrée had I seen it on the menu as beef cheeks and not slow-cooked meat. Growing up with a bland meat, vegetable, and starch diet stayed with me for many years. I never ate a tossed salad before I went to college. Never touched tofu, frog legs, duck, or ratatouille. My mother's Catholic upbringing meant fish on Fridays, which often meant fish sticks, occasionally salmon loaf or tuna casserole. I was well into adulthood before I ate scallops, grouper, lobster, and swordfish. Escargot is still a no-no because of the texture, but I did try oysters long ago to dispel the impression I was a hayseed, swallowing them whole and chasing them with champagne.

Are our food insecurities the result of our upbringing? Are we afraid of trying unknown dishes? Can we overcome our reluctance to eat foods that have strange names or come from foreign countries? I wonder if I could learn to be a more adventurous eater, willing to dig in and try dishes with names like sashimi, pickled herring, skewered satay, and kimchi. Perhaps my new love of beef cheeks will motivate me to do just that.

P.S. The Steak Factory in Opelika will sell you a three-pack of grass-fed beef cheeks (approximately 3 pounds) for $185.00

A memoir is not a newspaper article. It's not expected to be word-for-word true. If you have to write it perfectly, the story won't be told, and the most important thing is that you tell your story.

– Pat Conroy

Wanderlust

Wendy Cleveland

My solo travels began when I was old enough to save my allowance. For a quarter I could take the bus from my home in the suburbs to Woolworth's five-and-dime in the center of Reading and get off at 6th and Penn Streets, a bustling hub of stores, banks, and restaurants. I had ridden with my mother many times to visit my grandmother, shop, have lunch, then visit the public library a block away.

From my window seat on the bus, I observed houses outside of my neighborhood and wondered who lived behind the fringed curtains. I viewed the movie theatre attached to the firehouse, and when the bus stopped at the ESSO station I squinted to see the girlie pinups hanging in the repair bays. I enjoyed being alone, riding over the viaduct and down Perkiomen Avenue and on through City Park with its band shell and canopy of shade trees.

My trips to Woolworth's were always memorable times overloaded with sensory details as I stepped through the heavy doors and breathed in the familiar smells of old pine floors, roasted nuts, perfume testers, and a host of bakery treats lined up behind glass counters: cookies, cakes, pies, iced donuts, breads, cinnamon twists, and all shapes of chocolate candy—crunchy, creamy, nutty, and chewy. Parakeets cheeped and the hi-fi blared the current Top 20 songs.

My grandmother was the bakery manager at Woolworth's, the perfect job for this woman who loved to bake. Before I shopped with my allowance and babysitting money burning in my pocket, I ran upstairs to the bakery where I was greeted by my grandmother's co-workers with floury hugs and sugary kisses. The bakery was sweltering in summer, even with huge circular fans moving the air. Tall windows let in sun most of the day, and hot ovens baked pies, cookies, and cakes from 7:00 until 3:00. In winter, however, this upstairs room was cozy and warm. On the Saturday of Thanksgiving weekend, Santa came to town, and a parade marched down Penn Street with floats and bands. My dad took me up to the bakery, where we perched on stools for a bird's eye view of the festive sights and sounds. Grammy provided warm donuts dripping with a white sugary glaze and mugs of steaming hot chocolate.

After visiting the bakery, I went downstairs, where I browsed the long lines of wooden counters with their glass dividers. Among the merchandise items were clothing, stationery, toys, sporting goods, housewares, gardening tools, comics and magazines, jewelry, records, sheet music, and sewing supplies. Along the back wall were aquariums with goldfish and guppies. Glass bowls contained little green turtles that slept (or died) on their plastic islands complete with tiny green palm trees.

My favorite section was cosmetics. Still too young to use make-up, I spent a lot of time browsing. The photos of gorgeous models made me want to hurry into my teens so I could apply mascara, eyeliner, and eye shadow for glamorous eyes, and wear red lipstick

with names like Cherries in the Snow, Hot Coral, and Persian Melon. Foundations came in liquids and creams with Max Factor's pancake, the perfect powder to create a natural glow. I splurged and spent $1.00 on a tube of Tangee Lipstick, tangerine-colored, much like today's lip gloss, a light shade that my mother approved of, though I really wanted to wear Revlon's daring Fifth Avenue Red.

Next, I travelled to the music aisle where I flipped through the latest Billboard Hot 100 records. Vinyl 45 records cost $0.85 but newer releases shot up to $1.25, which was more than I could afford if I wanted to buy lunch.

After my journey through the aisles, I found a swiveled red leather and chrome-trim seat at the long lunch counter and checked the mouth-watering menu items. With my meager allowance I could afford a chicken salad sandwich for 65 cents and a cherry Coke for a dime. I loved eavesdropping at this counter crowded with sales clerks, shoppers, bank cashiers, and beat reporters. My favorite seat faced the dumbwaiter where desserts flew down from the bakery, the most popular being the No Bake Classic Woolworth Cheesecake.

I loved those trips to town in a world that was still relatively safe. Eleven years later I embarked on a six-week solo adventure through Europe with a Eurail pass, a map, and Frommer's *Europe on Ten Dollars a Day.* Lost in Venice, I stumbled on a beautiful garden where Peggy Guggenheim invited me in and later pointed me in the right direction. Traveling solo, I've learned to appreciate foreign languages, unfamiliar foods, beautiful landscapes, and helpful people. As Tolkien said, "Not all those who wander are lost."

F.W. WOOLWORTH CO. NO-BAKE CAFETERIA ICE BOX CHEESECAKE

Crust:
2 cups graham cracker crumbs
1 stick butter, melted
1 tbs. granulated sugar

Filling:
3 oz. package of lemon Jell-O
1 cup boiling water
8 oz. cream cheese at room temp.
1 cup granulated sugar
5 Tbs. lemon juice
12 oz. evaporated milk, well chilled

Crust:
Blend cracker crumbs with melted butter and sugar. Press all but eight ounces around sides and bottom of full size steam table pan, saving remainder for top of cake.

Filling:
Dissolve Jell-O in boiling water. Cool until slightly thickened – 20-30 min.
Beat cream cheese, sugar, and lemon juice until smooth.
Add thickened Jell-O. Beat until well blended.
In another bowl, beat chilled evaporated milk until fluffy. Carefully fold in the cream cheese mixture and blend well with rubber spatula. Spread filling over the crust and sprinkle with reserved graham cracker crust crumbs on top.
Chill at least 2 hours and up to overnight. Store covered in refrigerator.

Going Places with Daddy

Betty Corbin

My dad, Dewey Turney, was the kind of man who didn't tell you he loved you, but you knew he did because of all the nice things he did for you. The earliest picture of me and Daddy shows him holding my baby sister Jean in his arms, and me, a toddler, standing by his side. We're in the street in front of the home in Auburn where I lived from the time I was born until I finished college. You can tell by the look on his face how much he loves his little girls.

When Jean and I were pre-school age, he would take us to Southside Grocery, the small neighborhood grocery store, when he went to buy a few things for Mama. Before he checked out, Jean would look up at him and say in a sweet, soft voice, "Daddy, I want something." And he would let us pick a treat, usually a popsicle, an ice cream bar, or a candy bar. Sometimes we'd go next door to Southside Drugs where he'd buy ice cream cones for a nickel.

Jean and I sat with Daddy on many bleachers and in many gymnasiums. First, we watched Little League baseball and high school football and basketball. Later we attended Auburn University events where we watched football, baseball, basketball, and occasionally track and wrestling. I can't remember when I didn't know the rules of football and basketball. Football was everyone's favorite, and Daddy was a huge Auburn fan. Jean and I were yelling War Eagle from an early age. It was always fun to go places with Daddy.

Since Daddy didn't get married until he was forty, I think we were the family that he feared he'd never have. Now and then he'd laugh as he said, "What chance does a man have in a house full of women?" But we knew he loved it.

Not only did he love his family, but he also loved his job. Daddy taught in the Animal Science Department at Auburn from 1940 until his retirement in 1972. He taught classes like Feeds and Feeding, Animal Nutrition, and Swine Production. Sometimes he'd take me and Jean to the farm to see the pigs. One day we arrived when a sow was giving birth. He whisked us away in a hurry.

He loved to teach and had a great memory for his students. Not only would he remember their names but also where they were from and a little about their families. Toward the end of his career, he taught sons and daughters of some of his former students. Daddy would remember his students' names many years after he had been their teacher.

When World War II started, Dewey was drafted, but due to his age, he never went overseas. However, his time in the army was important because he became friends with Jack Martin from Enterprise, Alabama. One of Jack's cousins was a young home economics teacher named Mary Love Martin. She and Dewey met at a party in early 1944, and their mutual admiration for Jack was an easy way to

start a conversation. He and Mary Love were married later that year. I was born in 1946, and my sister Jean in 1948.

Dewey and Mary Love were a great pair. They were both teachers, both had Master's degrees, which were much less common back then than now, and they both were great believers in education. Also, they were both committed Christians.

Each Sunday the four of us attended Auburn United Methodist Church, where we sat on the second pew, partly because Daddy was hard of hearing. He had a beautiful voice, and I loved to hear him sing hymns. I asked him once why he didn't sing in the choir, and he said, "They sing high-brow music." He was more of a Cokesbury Hymnal man.

Dewey had a big vegetable garden, where he grew corn, tomatoes, potatoes, okra, butterbeans, black-eyed peas, snap beans, and squash. It was quite a task to can and freeze all these vegetables. Jean and I helped by shucking corn and shelling many butterbeans and black-eyed peas. Dewey also grew beautiful flowers including zinnias, marigolds, irises, dahlias, and gladiolas. Mary Love used them to create colorful arrangements that decorated our home. Dewey also took an arrangement to his Sunday school class each week.

After Dewey retired in 1972, he had more time to attend Auburn sporting events and tend to the yard and garden. He also decided to start walking two miles a day, six days a week, and he rarely missed a day. If it was cold, he bundled up. If it was pouring rain, he walked inside the university's basketball arena. Sometimes I would walk with him when I was home for a visit. The best Christmas gift I ever gave him was a headphone radio that he used each day to listen to the local radio station as he walked. Now I'm retired and walk two miles almost every day, and I think of him.

I moved back to Auburn in 2009, and I'm once again a member of Auburn United Methodist Church. I usually sit on one of the first three rows, close to where I sat growing up. When we sing traditional favorites, I can hear Daddy singing "This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long." Or "Draw me nearer, nearer, nearer blessed Lord, to the cross where thou hast died." Although I get a tear in my eye, I smile in gratitude that Dewey Turney was my dad.

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

– Nathaniel Hawthorne

Joy, The Bible Study Cat

Betty Corbin

When I started the Bible study, I never dreamed I would end up with a cat. The name of the study was Fight Back with Joy, and it encouraged us to seek joy in our lives no matter how difficult our circumstances. Margaret Feinberg, the author, had a struggle with advanced breast cancer as she wrote the book. As I did the study, my husband Carl was suffering from an incurable lung disease called pulmonary fibrosis.

We had a study book with readings for each day and weekly meetings where we watched a video by the author and discussed the previous week's reading. One week the study book had a page called My Joy-Filled Dream List, which was a list of things we would like to do that would bring us joy. During our weekly discussion, I shared that my list included getting a puppy or a kitten, probably a kitten, since Carl said it would make him sad that he couldn't walk a puppy.

The following week Nancy, one of the study participants, walked into the room with a tiny black and white kitten wrapped in a blanket. She looked at me and said with a smile, "God sent you this kitten, and I named her Joy." Nancy had found the kitten at the Saco service station at the corner or Dean Road and Opelika Highway, where she heard it howling from under a truck in the street. She rescued it but could find no trace of a mother cat. No one at the station would take the cat so she brought it with her to Bible study.

Well, I was not so sure that God had sent me this kitten, and I couldn't take her home as Carl had not yet agreed to a kitten. Mary Frances, a cat-loving group member, said she would take Joy home with her while I discussed the situation with Carl. A few days later, she brought Joy to meet Carl. He took her in his lap and petted her, and Joy became our kitten.

The next day I took Joy to the vet to be checked out. She weighed only a pound, and the vet guessed that she was about five weeks old. Fortunately, she was healthy. Since we didn't know Joy's birthday, I chose April 15, a date around five weeks previous, which was also the birthday of Mary Frances, my friend who had kept Joy for a few days until she could meet Carl.

As we dealt with Carl's illness, Joy gave us a fun diversion. At times we were screaming "No! No!" and "Bad cat!" But it was fun to watch her play, to pet her, and watch her grow. She especially liked to chase the light from the laser pointer. She grew so quickly that it wasn't long before we saw her jump up on the toilet seat and consider taking a drink. During the summer, when I would send email updates about Carl's condition, I would often include pictures of Joy.

Now Carl is gone, and Joy is full-grown, and the first thing I do each morning is feed her. I like to play with her and watch her play. I love it when she sleeps in my lap while I

stroke her silky fur. When she snuggles up on my shoulder and licks my neck with her rough tongue, I know she loves me. And I'm grateful to God and Nancy for a cat named Joy.

Life Mirrors Light

Nancy Penaskovic

The Intricacy of light-waves
mirrors
the complexity of our lives.

Light travels at warp speed
as
do the days of our life.

We must slow down the pace of thoughts and feelings
and stay in the present moment,
however difficult, a task too often abandoned.

We demand special glasses to view the
eclipse of the sun.

We need to develop a new mindset
to precisely perform
our life's review.

Aunt Bernice, West End Church, and a Refrigerator with Legs

Betty Turney Corbin

As I went through a box of memorabilia from my parents' house, a newspaper clipping with a picture of my Aunt Bernice caught my eye. She was being recognized as one of the founders of West End United Methodist Church in Hartselle, Ala., at the occasion of a church anniversary and a campaign for building funds. Although I had always admired Aunt Bernice and knew she had been involved in starting a new church, this article gave me new details.

Because Aunt Bernice had such a difficult childhood, she seemed an unlikely person to be a church founder. She grew up in a rural area outside of Hartselle and received only an eighth grade education, the highest level of education available in her small community. She was born in 1901, the middle child of five children. She had two older brothers, Clay, born in 1898, and Leonard, born in 1900. She also had a younger brother, Dewey, who was my dad, born in 1903, and a younger sister, Dora, born in 1907. Their mother also gave birth to three other children who died as babies.

Bernice's mother, Martha Breeding Turney, known as Mattie, died in 1910, when her children were young. Clay, the oldest, was only 12; Leonard, 11; Bernice, 9; Dewey, 6; and Dora, 4. According to Clay, their father, Frank, was so devastated after his wife's death that he withdrew from the children and the farm. The only thing he continued to do was teach his Sunday school class and teach singing school during the summer. So, in reality, the children lost both parents.

After their mother's death, the children moved in with different aunts and uncles. Dewey lived with Aunt Eutence, their dad's sister. Clay lived with Aunt Ona, their mother's sister, and her husband John Sharp. Bernice and Dora lived with Aunt Clara, another of their mother's sisters. During that time, Clara taught Bernice to cook, wash, iron, and keep house.

After about a year of living apart, the five siblings and their dad moved back in together. Clay ran the farm and Bernice, who was only ten or eleven years old, ran the house. All the children had work to do to keep things going. For example, on Monday morning Clay would fill a washpot with water, build a fire around it, and carry two tubs of rinse water from the spring so that Bernice could do the family wash. Clay or Leonard would also build a fire in the stove so Bernice could cook. As was typical for rural Alabama in the early 1900s, their house had no electricity or indoor plumbing.

But their life was not all work. They went to church each Sunday morning and Sunday night, and the church was the center of their community. Also, my dad told me that he, Bernice, Leonard, and Dora had a family quartet that sang at local gatherings.

In 1926 Aunt Bernice married Owen Lyle, a man she grew up with in their community, but they didn't live alone. Bernice's dad lived with them his entire life except for a short while before his death, when poor health caused him to move into a facility. The

couple had one daughter, Mae Frances. They adopted Mae Frances after her mother, Bernice's sister Dora, died in a fire in 1935. Mae Frances was less than a year old when she went to live with Bernice and Owen.

Each August, when I was growing up in the fifties and sixties, my parents, my sister Jean, and I would make the four-hour trip north from our home in Auburn to visit Aunt Bernice, Uncle Owen, Mae Frances, and other aunts, uncles, and cousins in the area. We would have a family reunion picnic at a different location each year. Aunt Bernice was still the mother-figure, and she was certainly in charge. There was no doubt that she was the matriarch.

You might think that being the family's cook at such an early age would have turned Bernice against cooking, but the opposite was true. My mother, who truly loved to cook, said that Bernice loved to cook more than anyone she knew. And Bernice was a great cook. Not only did she cook the usual southern dishes, like fried chicken and roasts and home-grown vegetables with cornbread, but she would find recipes in magazines and try them out, delicious recipes like black walnut cake and apricot nectar cake. I still cook one of her recipes where I sauté chicken in butter and lemon juice in an iron skillet and finish it in the oven.

Bernice's kitchen was a busy place, and it included a refrigerator the likes of which my sister Jean and I had never seen. It was on legs and had a cylindrical motor on top, the kind of refrigerator sold in the 1930s. It was small and always stuffed full. General Electric should have used it as an advertisement for reliability. In addition to the refrigerator on legs, Bernice and Owen had a large chest freezer on the back porch that held frozen vegetables from their large garden. There was another appliance on the porch that Jean and I had never seen, a wringer washing machine.

Bernice's house was not fancy, but it was always clean and neat. There was linoleum on the floors instead of carpet or hardwood. It had a wide front porch where sometimes we would sit with Uncle Owen as he listened to a Birmingham Barons baseball game on the radio.

Bernice was a sturdy lady with short, dark brown hair that was naturally curly. I always saw her in dresses, never in pants, which was common for ladies of her age. She never learned to drive nor did she work outside the home, but she certainly worked inside it. Uncle Owen worked in the parts department of the local car dealership.

Aunt Bernice was an active member of First United Methodist Church in Hartselle. She taught Sunday school and led singing. Our family would go to church with her when we visited. Uncle Owen, however, stayed home. When Bernice's church saw the need to start a new church in a different part of town, Bernice was part of the group that founded this church.

When I was growing up, Daddy would write a letter to Aunt Bernice one Sunday, and she would write a letter to him the next Sunday. Since it was too expensive to call, this was how they kept up with each other's lives and how Daddy got the news from his family. Daddy and Bernice were both very disciplined people, and they faithfully carried on this correspondence for many years.

For many years Uncle Owen suffered from heart disease, and Aunt Bernice had fed him a special diet according to the doctor's orders. But one morning in 1973, she awoke to find that he had died as he slept beside her.

Bernice suffered from Parkinson's disease during the last few years of her life. A few months before her death, I went with my parents and sister to visit her in the nursing home. She could no longer communicate, but she smiled at us, and I hoped she knew us. I especially hoped she knew Daddy as they had been close for so many years. She died in 1984.

After I found the newspaper clipping, I googled West End United Methodist Church in Hartselle, found their website, and saw this information about the church's history:

> Four women and a pastor: Mrs. C.I. Lee, Mrs. Owen Lyle, Miss Carrie Teague, Mrs. G.W. Puckett and Rev. E.M. Barnes, Jr., from Hartselle First Methodist Church had a vision of a need in the West End section of Hartselle for Christian fellowship. On the night of October 31, 1954, they met in a metal covered shell of a building in west Hartselle to worship God. Only two girls, Faye Drake and Joan Brooks, were present.

Not only is the church that Bernice helped start in 1954 still going in 2022, but so is the refrigerator with legs. Bernice's granddaughter Jennifer tells me that her sister Judy has the refrigerator, which works, but not well. When I told Jennifer that I always associated that refrigerator with Aunt Bernice, she replied, "I love that refrigerator." I do, too, for the same reason that Jennifer does, because we both love and admire Bernice. She was an amazing lady.

My Life in Paperweights: The Past and Future

Margaret Craig-Schmidt

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever: its loveliness increases; it will never pass into nothingness."

John Keats

The oldest paperweight I have in my collection belonged to my mother when she was a child. I estimate that it must be around a hundred years old. Despite its age, it has only a few scratches, giving it a patina, like fine silverware. This paperweight represents my past and the legacy given to me by my mother.

Mama's paperweight is small—only two inches in diameter. Miniature, colorful flowers with abstract detail are arranged in stylized symmetry. The overall geometric pattern is in three circles: one green and white flower in the center; then six flowers in alternating yellow and orange colors; and finally, twelve flowers of blue, white, green, and orange repeated three times in the outer circle. All are preserved in a droplet of clear glass.

On a visit with Mama near the end of her life, I admired the paperweight sitting on the dresser in her bedroom where it had been for as long as I could remember. She told me that the paperweight had been hers since she was a child and that she kept it nearby so that she could remember the happy days of her earlier life. To my surprise, she asked me if I would like to have her paperweight. I immediately said, "Yes."

Mama's paperweight was one of the beautiful things which she enjoyed in her everyday life. She routinely kept a vase of dainty flowers beside the kitchen sink, admiring their beauty as she washed dishes. Every morning before Mama got out of bed, my father would bring her freshly brewed coffee in a bone china cup adorned with hand-painted pink roses. She would begin each day savoring her coffee in a lovely cup while she contemplated what the day would hold for her. Even today, her paperweight reminds me to enjoy the beauty in life every day just as Mama did.

One of the most recent additions to my collection is a paperweight made with "space age" glass. I purchased it in 2016 at the gift shop of the Natural History Museum of Utah in Salt Lake City. The paperweight is made of glass studied in NASA research on materials suitable for travel in outer space and stands in sharp contrast to the conventional paperweight that belonged to my mother. This paperweight represents the ways that technology has shaped my life and the legacy of my father, who always thought from the standpoint of an engineer, loving numbers as avidly as my mother loved words.

This modern paperweight was created by the glass artist Robin Lehman. It is made of dichroic glass. Exposure to

light turns the color of the paperweight from blue to pink, making it glow when the light strikes it and giving the appearance that the light is coming from inside the paperweight. It is relatively large, about three-and-one-half inches in diameter. In contrast to conventional paperweights with smooth surfaces, this paperweight has a rough surface formed by ammonite-like spiral patterns protruding from the surface. Robin Lehman, as a glass artist, has used a variety of historical and modern techniques in crafting his paperweights. He has even used 3D technology and 3D printing in creating some of his paperweights.

Technological advances have affected the entire world, even space exploration since World War II. The era of rapid technological advancement began as a result of the war. As an engineer, my father was part of this advancement. His prior education as an engineer may have saved his life. Instead of being sent to North Africa where most of his army unit was wiped out on the battlefield, he was assigned to MIT to study the new technical field of radar. After his training, my father was stationed in Hawaii manning a radar station as part of the effort to prevent attacks such as the earlier one on Pearl Harbor. The war ended in 1945, the year that I was born. My father continued to serve in the army for several months after the war's end and did not see me until I was almost a year old.

Our family moved to a small town in Mississippi where Daddy was employed as an engineer. Throughout my life, I was influenced by my father's engineering perspective. As children, my brother and I would play "war," not with guns, but by playing in a pretend radar station in the garage. We set up the station with a desk nameplate engraved with Daddy's name, "Capt. Neil Craig," an old black shortwave radio, and a book for identifying airplane silhouettes as seen from the ground. Later on, we played mathematical games usually initiated by our father. In one such game, Daddy gave us complicated simultaneous equations to solve. We finally got the solution! It spelled MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Modern technology has impacted my everyday life in countless ways from cell phones and computers to household security and kitchen appliances. Technology, however, does not replace the beauty of a well-worded line of poetry or the tender love of a mother breastfeeding her newborn child. My two paperweights, very different in their appearance, remind me of two very different aspects of life. Each day both beauty and technology enrich my life and bring back memories of both my mother and father.

You have to learn how to read your work; I don't mean enjoy it because you wrote it. I mean…read it as though it is the first time you've ever seen it. Critique it that way. Don't get all involved in your thrilling sentences and all that….

– Toni Morrison, *Women Writers at Work*

Falling in Love

Debbie Cunningham

Dear Chip,

Today is February 14, 2022, Valentine's Day, a day to honor the ones we love. Sometimes that love feeling happens at a first touch or glance; sometimes that feeling simmers over time and experiences.

I fell in love with your dad the day he barrel-kicked me from under my ribs before his birth! Standing near the playground's horizontal ladder, I lost my breath and immediately grabbed the pole to stay afoot. It was a startling and definite sign that he would demand attention, on his own terms, and with sly and mischievous timing. That was the first clue that Cole would be born a player and the first clue that I would need to schedule his life with a barrage of experiences. His desire to play led him to concoct scenarios with Lego blocks, Hot Wheels, various balls, and eventually living things (as in humans, dogs, and trees). That, in fact, necessitated my patience and support. He continues to surprise me; he continues to take my breath away; I continue to fall in love with him every day.

I fell in love with your mom the day she swam from the lake pier to the end of the cove. Standing on the hillside, I gasped at her independence, self-determination, athletic prowess, and graceful rhythm. She took my breath away; I touched my heart and understood our common respect for nature and, especially, water. That was the first clue that Lisa so appreciated outdoor activities and opportunities, and the first clue for me that she will lovingly provide nature and nurture for you. Her meticulous planning and organizing skills, her goal-oriented focus, and her devotion to family serve as foundations for great parenting. That, in fact, necessitates my support. She continues to surprise me; she continues to take my breath away; I continue to fall in love with her every day.

I am falling in love with you every day. You are well-protected in a soft womb, immersed in liquid, grown to about the size of a head of cauliflower. I am watching your parents select your name, organize your bedding, and practice with your dog, Ranger. Though you have not celebrated your birth day yet, I read your name aloud several times a day from the large handmade sign on the refrigerator. I expect you to be your own person, to respect your being, to appreciate your talents, and to positively feed your soul. You hopefully will assume many of your parents' ideals and virtues, and I promise my support. You will surprise me; you will take my breath away; I will continue to fall in love with you every day.

Happy Valentine's Day!

Love,

Granna

Backed in a Corner

Debbie Cunningham

My paternal grandmother was raised in Gallatin, Tennessee, on Main Street, the thoroughfare of the county. Her mother was commonly known as Lizzie but affectionately known as Great-grandmother. Visits to the Main Street home were scheduled because Great-grandmother served as a caregiver for her other daughter, Allie Mai, a passionate oil painter. Preparations were necessary for visitors while Allie Mai fought a losing battle with cancer...teachable moments.

Though the Victorian house seemed to be quiet, solemn, and sad, Great-grandmother's hugs were loving and reassuring. The flow of the house took us through the dining room (passing the impressively loaded corner cupboard) to exit the patio door. Her hand-held tours through her grand gardens and ponds took us to a magical place far from reality. She always reserved a small cup of food for me to feed her goldfish as we sat on rock pads. What seemed like fantasy was indeed well-tended, heartfelt, and authentic...teachable moments.

As the outdoor tour ended, we always shared teatime using handpainted china displayed in the sturdy corner cupboard. My drink was water mixed with fresh lemon while Great-grandmother's was tea, probably mixed with bourbon. With our pinkies gracefully extended, we always shared freshly baked tea cakes with absolutely no leftover crumbs. Conversations seemed to be ongoing about my past week and her stories of different items around the house, especially the dining room. At appropriate times, we gathered, washed, dried, and replaced the dishes...teachable moments.

The cupboard and dishes eventually moved to my mother and father’s house. For forty years, I visited that cupboard, and each time those loving, reassuring, magical, strong, and responsible feelings resurfaced. When my mother died, she left instructions for my sister and me to flip a coin: one would get the mink coat, and the other would get the corner cupboard. I was the lucky one. When moving to Auburn, we only considered houses with a large corner, and once again I was lucky.

That nicked, scratched, and renailed corner cupboard stands strong in our home office and only substantial corner! She is not only functional but magically powered to offer deep senses of real appreciation, moral ethics, and true fantasy. I am extremely fortunate for daily reminders of those teachable moments. My responsibility is to keep the corner cupboard intact; my honor is to relay her story.

This Too Shall Pass

Dennis Drake

My childhood memories are anchored in the long, golden days of summer. As if those golden days were not gift enough, the night sky bloomed with the magic gold of shooting stars and the blinking gold flashes of lightning bugs. I lived on a farm in rural East Central Alabama, between Daviston and Wadley, Alabama. The farm was about five miles as the crow flies from the Tallapoosa River and upriver from Horseshoe Bend. This sequestered location hosted endless adventures in a Tom Sawyer world of boundless freedom.

Of course, there were farm chores for me, but youth and energy were mine in those salad days of summer. One particular job required all my energy reserves. That challenge was digging post holes for pasture fences. A very sharp post-hole digger was my weapon to battle the cement-hard red clay. My father never bought an auger for the stubborn old Farmall tractor. An auger could have easily dug a hole to China. He valued the manual method that he explained, "This job will build character and muscles." I learned early that character-building experiences often come with a measure of pain. I did get a new pair of White Mule work gloves each summer to prevent aching blisters.

Now, I remember rewards on the farm more than chores. As I grow older, I grow fonder of edited memories. Some memories like fishing in the Tallapoosa River remain vividly alive. My father and uncles were seasoned captains of wooden flat-bottom boats. They navigated my cousins and me to the prized fishing spots, and they knew how to avoid dangerous river shoals. The pungent, muddy water of the Tallapoosa spawned a carnival of river life: giant catfish, snapping turtles, bellowing bullfrogs, and the Satan of this watery Garden of Eden—water moccasins. "We don't fish at night," my father explained in his high school principal voice, "because water moccasins are night hunters." Those demon snakes were known to slither into the boats of unwary night fishermen, especially if they used flashlights.

When I fished with a cousin and his grandfather, I felt safe and insulated from all snakes. His grandfather's massive dog, Jack, always patrolled the territory ahead of us. Jack was a champion snake hunter and powerful swimmer. He was bitten only once. Jack survived the deadly rattlesnake bite and became determined to avenge the attack. *Wild Kingdom* should have filmed him. Jack had mastered the skill of biting the snake behind its head and crushing all its bones by flinging it in careful thrusts like a whip.

All of these adventures required energy. My youthful energy was fortified with abundant garden-fresh vegetables and fruits along with farm-raised beef. Our garden was rich in its production of Purple Hull Crowder peas, Bonnie Better Boy tomatoes, Pioneer yellow corn, Rattlesnake green beans, Cowhorn okra, and Fordhook butter beans. I plundered our apple and pear orchards and relished the sweet elixir of Elberta peaches, juicy

apricots, Rocky Ford cantaloupe, and Crimson Sweet watermelons.

Although my parents were public school teachers, my father maintained a herd of Black Angus beef cattle. Each spring one cow was chosen to be slaughtered for our beef consumption. My rewards for constant cattle chores were my mother's luscious pot roast and her savory meatloaf. Was it the addition of a Coca-Cola to her pot roast ingredients that made it so special?

My mother's culinary and canning skills were renowned. I remember running for cover when her churning old pressure cooker whistled and rat-tat-tatted like a machine gun exploding in the sweltering kitchen. The crown jewels of her culinary skills were fried chicken, custard ice cream, and fresh lemon-cheese layer cake. She grated fresh lemons as one of the ingredients for this special cake. After sleuthing through the archives of *Southern Living* magazine to find a recipe for this cake, a good friend baked a lemon-cheese layer cake for me. When she gave me the cake, she said, "No wonder only your mother baked this cake. It requires a two-day effort." No bought cake mix or shortcuts ever appeared in my mother's kitchen.

My father might have been the master of the farm, but my mother reigned unchallenged in the kitchen. Sunday dinner was always a feast resplendent with her delectable fried chicken, generous bowls of fresh vegetables, scrumptious hot biscuits, cornbread, and extra sweet Lipton tea. My mother welcomed drop-in guests along with my invited guests. Invariably the guests remarked that the golden brown crisp and spicy crust of her fried chicken was better than the meat. Friends and cousins still grill me for her fried chicken recipe. Since I don't cook and have no need for recipes, I am useless to them in their quest. I do remember my mother soaking the chicken in a concoction of buttermilk and numerous ingredients. It absorbed this flavorful bath overnight in the crowded refrigerator. If only I had her recipe, I could give the Colonel some competition.

Those golden, idyllic summer months did have interruptions. In my barefoot ramblings, I always managed to step on a rusty nail. My father was a self-trained veterinarian who doctored his cattle. He did major in chemistry and physics in college. I never thought of his veterinary practice as unusual. It seemed in character for my father. He utilized his veterinary/medical skills to extract each rusty nail from my aching feet. His worn and scarred bone handle pocketknife was his scalpel for surgery. First, he sterilized his knife in rubbing alcohol. Then he asked my mother for a clean white handkerchief. There was no need to worry about bacteria because any white material we owned had been drowned in a hot wash of Clorox. My mother was a firm advocate of Clorox and Pine Sol. Their fumes often permeated our house in a cloud of purification.

When an army of red bugs marched silently to the private trenches of my body where they declared war, my mother came to the rescue. She adhered to the school of gentle human touch for healing. My father was not a graduate of that school. My mother created a poultice of butter, salt, and vinegar to soothe the irritating red welts. Later, she generously applied the dominant cure-all in her arsenal of home remedies, Rawleigh

medicated ointment. Rawleigh ointment might not ensure a miracle cure, but its exotic aroma of camphor, menthol, eucalyptus, and cocoa butter signaled relief. Rawleigh ointment was invented in 1889 and is still produced. It must have some healing properties—I don't care if it is a placebo. A shiny gold and blue tin of Rawleigh ointment stands front and center in my medicine chest today. I still use this magic salve for colds, congestion, minor cuts, burns, and of course—red bug bites.

But even Rawleigh ointment could not assuage the pain of the dreaded typhoid fever vaccination. Since I lived deep in the rural countryside, typhoid fever was always suspect. The first vaccination was a shock. It punished me with a high fever and several days of near-death illness. I was determined to escape a second shock of the poison! I was not afraid of the needles. After seeing pictures of polio victims encased in iron lungs, I welcomed the polio vaccination. I eagerly saved my dimes to fill the March of Dimes cards. But the typhoid fever vaccination made me very ill.

When I saw the county health nurse's rumbling station wagon pull into our driveway, I raced toward my sanctuary chinaberry tree. Maybe that typhoid shot did increase my running skill: I won second place in the county 4-H Club 50-yard dash. When I reached the chinaberry tree, I climbed to the highest branch with the speed of a circus monkey. Then I heard my father call to me, "Don't make me have to ask you a second time to climb down from that tree. Miss Sybil has a full schedule." My escape was hopeless. Slowly I climbed down. As I rolled up my sleeve, I asked why I had to take a shot that made me so sick. "Why can't I just take my chances that I won't get typhoid?" I pleaded. My father said nothing, but he gave me a look that required no verbal interpretation. Nurse Sybil responded, "This too will pass. You don't want to get real typhoid fever." The reaction fever did pass. How was I to know that those childhood vaccinations and interruptions were just preludes to a future where vaccinations are ubiquitous?

I take a flu shot each fall. I have taken the shingles vaccination and its booster. I have updated my tetanus shot, which also protects against pertussis. I scored two pneumonia vaccinations, and recently I received the new Prevnar 20 pneumonia shot.

The current pandemic is not science fiction. It is a stark reality. To combat its dark presence, I survived three Moderna vaccines. My second Moderna shot cursed me with a high fever, teeth-shattering chills, dehydration, and three days with a vacation in hell. As my brain clouded over, I heard nurse Sybil announce in her calm voice, "This too shall pass." In my Moderna stupor, I kept hoping she was right. My third Moderna vaccine was not quite as alarming. My chills were less pronounced, but I did have a fever and a pounding headache.

I have procrastinated taking my fourth vaccine. During this waiting period, I pondered the phrase "This too shall pass." Some scholars attribute it to an ancient Persian philosopher. Other scholars argue that King Solomon was the author. He even had those four words inscribed in a golden ring. Wise King Solomon recognized the double meaning of "This Too Shall Pass." He advised us all to remember that if bad occurrences pass so will good experiences pass. I have lived

long enough to know that life does not move in a straight line. Life offers interruptions as well as gifts…defeats as well as victories.

Robert Frost wrote in his poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay,"

Nature's first green is gold.
Her hardest hue to hold…
So dawn goes down to day,
Nothing gold can stay.

Will the pandemic pass? I can't answer that question, but I am resolved to not become its prisoner. I will take that fourth vaccine. I will heed the advice of nurse Sybil and King Solomon with hope. I will celebrate the passing golden experiences of life that offset the dark interludes. After all, isn't hope the essence of "This Too Shall Pass"?

When you reflect on the infinite number of happenstances that coalesced to produce you, then you understand how unique, how precious, how sacred you really are. Your task is to cultivate that precious, sacred nature and help it to flower.

– Robert Aitken, *Encouraging Words*

Begin with the End in Mind:
Taking Our Happy Ash Home

Jane M. Fullum

At the age of 54, I finally found Mr. Right. I had previously found Mr. Wrong and his brother from another mother, Mr. More Wrong. Yet, after three decades of navigating my choices, I had three amazing children ages twenty-nine, thirteen, and eleven. The Wrong brothers ultimately became better co-parents than husbands and my unique blended family was able to thrive.

Paul was 61, widowed after 37 years of marriage. With two grown children and two grandchildren, we were in different seasons of life. We had dated for about a year when he gave me his Salmon River High School class ring and asked me to "go steady." I proudly wore that ring for three years when Paul replaced it with an engagement ring that was and still is the most beautiful piece of jewelry I have ever owned.

Paul and I entered our engagement knowing that combining our lives would take intentional thoughtfulness for ourselves and our families. There were children, grandchildren, pets, family photos, furniture, finances, literally decades of possessions, memories, and emotions to reconcile. At our age, we did not worry about invitations, place settings, or social etiquette. We were committed to respectfully and lovingly combining our assets and lives. There were prenups, wills, advanced directives, powers of attorney, and health care proxy decisions to be sorted and assigned to everyone's satisfaction. Moving through the emotions of these processes was tempering to our relationship and reassured me that we were doing the right thing.

In the months before our wedding, Paul and I did the most difficult of things, combined our physical homes. We completed an extensive remodel to accommodate three dogs, two cats, and two school-age children who would join us. Finally, the day came when Two Men and a Truck brought over some of my things and exited with some of Paul's. This final task proved to require patience, empathy, collaboration, respect, and compromise.

Paul and I had talked through the big things like beds, sofas, and Paul's space in my new closet. Those items were insignificant compared to smaller items that held years of memories. We worked tirelessly to empty and fill the trucks. As the sun began to set on a long day, we collapsed in exhaustion onto the couch to sort through what remained. We sorted through multiple frames of family portraits and photos, carefully considering what emotions they evoked in daily life, holidays, and family gatherings. We talked into the night as we shared stories, cried, and came to a consensus on the appropriate and thoughtful place for each.

When it seemed we could not possibly have anything left, Paul took my hand. Through tear strained eyes he said, "I have one more thing we need to talk about."

After the day we had, I could not imagine anything more difficulted to negotiate. I could think of nothing that would shake my confidence in our future together.

"I have Linda's ashes." Paul sobbed big tears down his chest. "We need to talk about that."

Linda was Paul's first wife. She had been diagnosed with metastatic thyroid cancer just as they retired and moved to Auburn to be with their children. Linda would have a short two-week battle for her life, a time when they would struggle to find closure and to solidify the future of a 37-year life built together, a future he would carry forward with honor and respect.

"Linda and I agreed that I would hold her ashes. When I pass, we will be spread together in Lake Martin at a place where we enjoyed many sunsets together."

I was speechless. I could find no words to express the emotions I felt. I knew there was a sacred place in his heart I would never be able to share. These ashes would always be in my home as a reminder. As tears flooded my face I said, "I respect that." With a loss for more words, I simply held him in my arms as we cried.

"I have been thinking a lot about how to do this," Paul said. "I bought a safe today to put her ashes in. I also put $1000 in there in case you ever have to come to get me out of jail." Paul was doing pro bono law for the Domestic Violence Center at the time. He had a reputation for pushing some judges to the edge of their gavel and had no fear of the repercussions.

"I thought it would be best if they were put somewhere that they will be safe. I will let my children know where they are. They know Linda's request," Paul continued. "I will give you the combination, but otherwise they will stay locked in there until they are needed. I never realized what a big responsibility it is to hold someone's ashes. In hindsight, I may have approached this differently, but for now, the best thing is to have them locked away safely."

"Well," I started slowly. "I am honored that you felt you could tell me about Linda's ashes." I continued through softening tears. "I agree with you that a safe is probably the best way to keep her ashes safe. It's a lot to think about. We are about to bring two teenagers into this house, and I would hate to come home one afternoon and find out they had rolled Linda up and smoked her."

After a pregnant pause, Paul folded in laughter. There it was. We had worked through what I am sure would be our most difficult conversation.

"Jane, it's important to know what each of us wants. We have not talked about what you want if something should happen to you."

"Paul, I have never really thought hard about it, but it would probably be easier on everyone to just know my preferences. I don't want any concern over what I would want stressing my family if something like that happened to me."

For the first time in my life, I put my wishes out there. I shared them with Paul and later with my children. If something should happen to me, or when something happened to me, I want to be cremated. I have a lovely pair of ceramic ruby red slippers that would make the perfect vessel for my ashes. I would like for all of my children, grandchildren,

remaining close friends and family that choose to attend to rent a house on the beach. After sunset, I want all my loved ones to grab a big paint bucket and crab nets. Give all of the little ones a flashlight, or better yet a headlamp. Walk along the edge of the ocean and catch as many sand crabs in that paint bucket as you can muster. Chase them into the water. Chase them up to the sea oats. Laugh, giggle, splash, run. When the bucket is filled and everyone is approaching the return to the house, gather in a circle to remember me and say goodbye. Dump the crabs out of the bucket and as they scramble back to the water and while the kids squeal and laugh, toss my ashes into that magnificent ocean. Let the waves carry me out and let life and love go on in that memory.

As I completed my story, Paul again had tears in his eyes and said, "I want to go too. Can I go?"

"Well, I don't know if you will be there, but of course, I would want you to come," I said. "But, I don't know how to do that if you go first."

"I want you to have half of my ashes" Paul spoke in a serious voice. "I want to be with you."

No man has ever let me know so well that he loved me. It may be a huge responsibility to keep someone's ashes, but if Paul goes first, I will be sure it is done according to his wishes. I will handle them with care, probably lock them in a safe, and be sure he makes it to the party. With all of my love, I will be sure to take his happy ash home.

Being a writer is a very peculiar sort of a job: it's always you versus a blank sheet of paper (or a blank screen), and quite often the blank piece of paper wins.

– Neil Gaiman

Green Bough: My First Visit

Sandy Halperin

"Green Bough is like a Jesuit retreat house that's been decorated by your grandmother," described Brian, an Emory professor on sabbatical, as he and Dennis, my friend who had brought me, showed me around the retreat campus. Indeed, from the furnishings in the ancient sharecroppers' cabin welcoming center to the larger modern retreat center, the ambiance does exhibit a bit of grandma's flair—comfy, well-used, and welcoming. But more striking to me was the peaceful, contemplative silent Energy that saturated not just the buildings, but the entire milieu of the Green Bough grounds. For me, it had what the Jesuits offered in spades!

It was a sunny March Friday. A warm breeze rustled the trees. After my tour, I met Fay and Steve and others on retreat for a silent picnic lunch under a large pecan tree whose green shoots were just beginning to sprout. Steve served delicious homemade hummus, tabouli, sliced fruit, pita bread, and chips, and ended the meal with a variety of chocolates. "We always need a little bit of chocolate to remember how sweet God is!" Fay volunteered with a chuckle. Steve then read a story about the witness of the day from a book on the Saints.

I volunteered to help Fay clean up after lunch. We slowly got to know each other as she washed the dishes and I dried them. She asked how long I had known Dennis. I explained that Michael and I had known him for years and that he was like a brother to us. She responded, "He is to us, also."

Dennis then met with Fay, and I was free to explore Green Bough. I wandered around, soaking in the beauty of the woods that surround the center, stopping as on a pilgrimage at various sites for prayer: the statue of Mary, a series of small rough crosses, a statue of Buddha, a birdbath, a stone bench, a relaxing chair.

Before I knew it, Dennis called me out of my silence to visit with Fay. As we sat around her grandmother's old oak kitchen table, she told me the story of Green Bough's founding. She spoke of a sense of being called many years before to establish a place of prayer and contemplation open to all. Her mother, wishing to support Fay's calling, left Fay her grandfather's land after she died. That was the beginning of the incarnation of inspiration! I remember feeling enraptured by the story, how carefully and prayerfully Fay and Steve had listened to discern God's will every step of the way, and how everything unfolded so providentially! I felt I was being welcomed into a holy story.

Fay then mentioned her father's recent death. I asked how old he was. Eighty-five, she replied. I impulsively blurted out, "How sad. He was so young!" They both stared at me. In what world is 85 young!? I realized what a stupid thing I had just said. So, I quickly added, "Of course, I mean he must've been young at heart!" To this day, I do not know what possessed me. It was not the way I had hoped to end my first day at Green Bough. Making a

fool of myself! But it did not matter. Fay in her gracious, Southern way, quickly saved me from humiliation by adding "Perhaps he was." At which point all three of us were laughing!

Finally, it was time for us to leave. I knew I would be back. I didn't know when. But I knew that what Green Bough offered I could no longer live without. For many years, now, I continue to enjoy and be nurtured by what Green Bough promised on my first visit: a place where all are welcome; a place of peace, silence, and contemplation; a place of deep connection with God supported by a community of love.

The research for what you are writing is your whole life—I mean, there is one world expert on it: you….For what you're writing there is no other authority.

– William Stafford

It Wasn't Scary Until It Was, and Then It Wasn't

Sandy Halperin

100, 99, 98…90. The last thing I heard was "Take a deep breath." The last things that I remember were the cold steel table beneath my body and his sky-blue eyes glowing in the blinding light. Then I was slowly falling into a dark tunnel.

The next thing I remember was the nurse wiping the vomit from my mouth and face. I was woozy and felt yucky. I was eight years old. What did I know? Only that the nurse was kind and assuring to me, "It's over now, Dear. Your parents will be with you in just a minute." She gave me a Canada Dry to sip on. How did she know that Canada Dry was my favorite soda?

"How are you, Honey? Are you okay?" asked my mother as she removed the hospital gown and proceeded to dress me. I nodded yes, still a bit drowsy. As I jumped from the bed and onto the floor to put my shoes on, Mom was reassuring me again, "Everything is okay. We're going home now." I hadn't realized that there was any reason why things wouldn't be okay.

Now, if you are thinking, "What's wrong with her? She was at a hospital and having surgery. Something was **not** OK. But I don't remember feeling scared except for…

Wait, these are the facts as I remember them: Dr. Young, the doctor my mother worked for as a nurse, removed a small growth from my lower back on Wednesday. On Friday, Mom picked me up at school and talked with Mrs. Mayer, my third-grade teacher. This had never happened before. On Saturday, Mom woke me at six o'clock before the sun came up and told me to wash and get dressed, "We are going to the hospital," she said. That didn't bother me either. I had been to the hospital before to visit old people. I wasn't afraid of that. But what got my attention was that when we entered the hospital lab and a tech wanted to take my blood! Now that really scared me! Mom gently held me and comforted me while the tech did her business.

Then someone led us to a room. As I crawled onto the bed after my clothes had been exchanged for a hospital gown, Mom said again, "You are going to be all right. Everything's going to be okay." My only worry was whether I was going to have to face another needle. Mom assured me that that would not be the case. She explained they were going to put me to sleep. Well, that was fine with me, as long as I didn't have to deal with another shot! I guess you know by now that I was terrified of shots and needles.

I must have slept the entire weekend because I have no memory of it at all. The next thing I do remember is that Monday morning, instead of going to school, I got to go to my grandmother Mama's, house. What a treat to stay with her during the week. I was tickled pink!

Mama made my favorite lunch, Campbell's tomato soup with toasted cheese sandwiches, and we watched TV shows. *The Guiding Light* and *Queen for A Day* were among my favorites. One afternoon, I was able to watch the 1938 version of *Robin Hood*! I loved Friar Tuck! My Uncle Bob, who joined us for lunch one day, brought me a giant bag of brown peanut M&Ms! They had just come onto the market, and I was crazy about them. And a whole bag was mine! The only things that seemed strange to me was why I wasn't going to school and, occasionally, why Mama asked me if my back hurt. I remember there was a large bandage that needed to be changed periodically, but it didn't hurt.

Years passed and I never thought much about those days until I was in a biology class during my sophomore year of high school. We were studying cancer. And it was only during Sr. Barbara's lecture on skin cancer that I learned that moles can be a sign of melanoma. For the first time, it dawned on me what might have been what was wrong with me when I was eight and it was **not** okay. My lackadaisical attitude toward all of that suddenly turned into something like alarm. I went from not being scared until I was scared. Was it melanoma? Was it benign? Did they get it all? Will it come back?

After the dinner dishes were done that night, I asked Mom if what I had was melanoma. She answered: "Yes, it was. But Dr. Shapiro said the margins were clear, which means they got it all. We were very worried because it was fast-growing. When Dr. Shapiro came out to talk to us, before you came into the room, he said you had about two months left before the tumor would have gotten to your kidneys and you would have died."

I said, "You know, I wasn't afraid. I didn't realize. And you seemed so calm."

"Yes, I seemed that way, but I was terrified. I didn't want to frighten you."

"Do I need to be afraid it will come back in the future?" I asked as my heart was tattooing in my chest.

She responded smiling, "No, but I do want you to pay attention to any moles or growths that you might have in the future and make sure you go directly to a doctor." My heart slowed down and my body relaxed. No need to be scared.

I've learned as an adult, from various dermatologists, that once you've had a melanoma, the chances of getting another one are statistically higher. So, I am faithful in applying sunscreen, wearing hats outside, and making my six-month dermatology appointments. I have gone from blissful ignorance to frightened alarm to watchful caution. My gratitude to my mother, who spotted the growth, and to the doctors and nurses who treated me is beyond words. I oversee my own health care now. And I'm not even afraid of needles anymore. I am just so blessed to be alive!

My Mud-Covered Brother

Sandy Halperin

He stood before her like a little eight-year-old golem boy. “Oh my God, what happened to you? Are you all right?” asked our mother as she reached for him. He was a statue of mud! Sheepishly he looked away from her. He knew he was in trouble. He wore his guilt and mud like a chocolate-covered Easter bunny with only his eyes to identify him as her son, my brother, Johnny.

He confessed that he and his friends were playing at a building site two doors down. The carpenter crew had neglected to turn the water off completely so a large pool of water and mud collected in the back of the newly framed house. A playful fight ensued among the three boys, which included rolling around in the mud, like piglets!

As he literally spit out the story, Mom grabbed the hose, turned on the water, and began to spray him from top to bottom. As the mud slowly melted, my brother began to emerge from the curtain of water and dirt. But by then all three of us were laughing so hard that any trouble Johnny might have been in had already disappeared along with the mud.

I remember after he was clean enough to go into the house Mom made a bubble bath for him. She was sitting on the edge of the tub scrubbing him down with soap and a washcloth. As I went back downstairs, I think I remember her saying to him, “Oh my goodness, boy, you have mud in places I didn’t know you had! “

What a Week!

Gerald Johnson

"What a week," escaped the lips of my seven-years-older brother as we hugged.

"Yes, what a week. I'm so sorry for your loss of Marlene after seventy years. You two had a great journey. You know, I was your first paper boy. We all will miss her so much."

"Don't know what I will do. I haven't even left the house in over two years. Just taking care of her. Karen has done all the shopping for whatever we needed."

"I know, George, but I don't know, not quite yet. Nadine is under palliative care now, the next stage to Hospice. I haven't experienced what you have. We are always a freshman. Here we are at 82 and 89 and still a freshman."

"I hope she's not suffering, Marlene didn't until the last few days."

"No, she's not discontent or unhappy. She smiles, recognizes me, gigs me, smiles—a lot. I'm blessed. She's no longer ambulatory and can't feed herself. Even so, when I ask her how her day is going or how she feels, she always says, 'I'm fine,' and smiles."

"Have you heard anything about Bonnie today?"

"Yes, just didn't want to tell you the first thing with all you have on your plate getting ready for Marlene's funeral. Bonnie died this morning. Kim called me just before I came down. She was quite upset about losing her mom, of course, but also about us two being the only ones left. Tried to console her with my own honest but fumbling feelings. I truly believe there is a time for everything; my hope and prayer are that this was the right and good time for Marlene and Bonnie. And, will be for Nadine. And for you, George. For all the family. Boy, I sound like a minister. Just how I feel."

"I know. I know. But I really don't know what I will do without her. I agree with Kim. Hard to believe, Betty, Pete, Wallace, Randall, and Bonnie are now all gone, it's just the two of us."

"Yeah. Nadine, I suppose, will be next. It's been a strange Easter week. So many death-related things. Earlier this week I made the final arrangements to donate Nadine's brain to the Alzheimer's Disease Center and her body to the Anatomical Center. Plus, I drafted a copy of her obituary and sent it to the children for their comments. Then Marlene and now Bonnie. I have long since given up on trying to know what's chance, what's free will, and what is providence."

"Wished I had done some of those things rather than waiting until the last minute. What a week."

In a Pickle with Mom and Dad

Charlotte LaRoux

My parents rarely argued, so I was surprised when they told me that they had had a huge fight. Dad was stubborn and refused to admit he needed hearing aids. He could not hear well and drove us mad with his inability to keep up with conversations. Mom always brought issues out in the open, but if she lost an argument, she muttered over and over for hours at a time. In any argument, they were both annoying in the extreme.

So, when Mom heard a persistent high pitch beeping noise, she was certain it was the Radio Frequency Meter in Dad's workshop downstairs. He checked. The device was turned off. To make sure, he unplugged it. She kept hearing the beep and insisted it came from one of the electronic gizmos piled on his workbench. He refused to go look again, and so, the arguing and muttering began. Throughout the afternoon Mom accused Dad of needing hearing aids, and Dad accused Mom of needing to have her head examined.

While stewing over the noise, Mom prepared dinner. She was angry and distracted, and she burned the roast and the potatoes. The meal was ruined. My parents ate in sullen silence. On the way to bed, Mom realized the squealing came from the smoke detector. The batteries were dying. Dad could not hear that, but he was happy to change the batteries to pacify her. The argument had been so acrimonious that they slept in separate bedrooms that night.

Dad always made breakfast while Mom showered. The morning after the argument, Dad collected the *Baltimore Sun* from the curb, and as usual, he read the funnies first. He saw his chance to make up when a timely bit of humor in the *Pickles* comic strip caught his attention. Dad clipped it from the paper and set it on the plate next to Mom's bacon and eggs. In the comics, Earl was speaking to his wife, Opal.

"I always know when dinner is done," Earl said.

"How is that?" asked Pearl.

Earl wryly observed, "The smoke detector goes off."

Dad had earned his redemption. Mom and Dad both laughed loud enough for even Dad to hear. Then they kissed and made up.

Letters to Our Grandpas

Charlotte LaRoux

Neither of our grandfathers was called Grandpa, and they could not have been more different. One was a Yankee, and the other was a scion of the Confederacy. One we called Grandfather, and the other we called Pop.

Grandfather Smith, our maternal grandfather, was a formal man, dressed in a fedora, a suit, a vest, and a tie. He was tall enough to be out of reach for his three granddaughters, and he was out of reach emotionally also. Perhaps he just seemed tall. We referred to him as Grandfather, but I never remember speaking to him directly, nor him to me. Following graduation from high school in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Grandfather went to business school to learn bookkeeping. Then, he did a stint in the U.S. Navy, before he settled down in Arlington, Virginia, to begin a tedious career in the Congressional Budget Office in Washington, D.C. Grandfather Smith was a stickler for propriety, insisting, for example, that his children eat their fried chicken with a fork and knife. He spoke the formal king's English, careful to instruct his family on matters of correct pronunciation and grammar. These lessons in propriety stuck with his four children. So did his emotional coolness. His children disdained him.

Barbara, my oldest sister, does not remember why she wrote a letter to Grandfather Smith. Whatever the reason, he answered her letter with the gift of a dictionary. Barbara was a ten-year-old child. Our mother taught us to write thank-you notes, and Barbara complied. Shortly after, Grandfather returned her letter with circled corrections to spelling and grammar errors marked in red. At the top margin of her letter, he penned, "Obviously, you did not use the gift I sent you."

Mom was apoplectic. "Damn him!" she snarled. We knew it was bad since Mom never cursed. Perhaps his hurtful insult motivated my sister. Barbara went on to be an award-winning middle school language arts and drama teacher, a gifted educator who taught writing and grammar with charity and love.

Pop Hunt was our Texas paternal grandfather. He was short. He wore work pants and cheap cotton shirts with buttons that strained at his protruding belly. Pop dipped snuff, and brown stains trailed from each nostril toward his upper lip. He was a drunk, but when we visited, he laid off the sauce, so his hands trembled with the DT's. Pop attended school to the sixth grade, when he dropped out to help his father at the sawmill on Whiskey Chitter Creek near Alexandria, Louisiana. He spoke in a casual southern vernacular. Pop and Mom Hunt vied for our affections, a boon to three little girls. We were treated to baby dolls, Yoo-hoos, and shiny new silver dollars that Pop joked were Texas nickels.

One day, as we dug through the freezer at his hardware store, to find the biggest steaks for dinner, he summoned us. "Y'all come here. I wanna show y'all somethin'." He shuffled to his corner office. His old wooden desk and ancient office chair with its squeaky casters were there, along with a cast iron safe. He kept his treasure in that safe, his cash on hand, we assumed. Pop dialed the secret numbers, turned the handle, swung open the reinforced door, and pulled out a stack of letters. We recognized the lined paper, the tall orange cartoon giraffe along one border. We recognized our handwriting. These were the letters we had written to him over the years. "I keep y'alls letters in here," he chuckled.

Our letters were Pop Hunt's treasure. The memory of that moment is our treasure now. We three sisters tear up when we recall that day because we know that Pop Hunt loved us. Every child deserves such a grandpa.

A Senior's Revenge

Charlotte LaRoux

During my first year of teaching in Florissant, Missouri, I taught a senior whose last name was Shadrack. "That's a biblical name," I told him. "I know," he sneered. "But only old people tell me that."

I was 27 years old at the time.

Shadrack was nine years younger than I. In 2022, he would be 66 years old, the operative word being ***OLD***.

A Close Call

Charlotte LaRoux

It happened when I felt a drop of ice water hit my scalp.

Len and I spent the summers of 1981 through 1983 cutting, splitting, and stacking heaps of hardwood to be used during winters to heat our home. We lived in Dormansville, New York, a tiny town established shortly after the American Revolution in the Helderberg mountains south of Albany. At that northern latitude, summers were serene. The oblique rays of the sun cast wan light on our yard, and we labored in temperatures that rarely reached 80 degrees. Days were long there, with twilight lingering until after 9:00 p.m. But winter was severe. One Christmas day, for example, the temperature registered 20 degrees below zero. Thus, preparing cords of wood in the summer months meant a cozy winter in our 1836 stone house.

The work was seasonal. In the summer, Len ordered the stacks of hardwood, mostly bark scraps left over from millwork. The stacks stood tall, over Len's head, and he attacked the piles with his chainsaw, cutting lengths of wood down to two feet. The work was dangerous. The huge piles of wood shifted suddenly from time to time, catching Len off guard. He had a roaring chainsaw in his hands, after all.

Chips flew as he sawed. The pungent smell of fresh-cut wood pleased us. Len threw the lengths into a second heap and later split chunky pieces with his wedges and his maul. When he tossed the splits, I stacked them in tidy rows five feet high in our ramshackle red barn. I built the stacks parallel to the sides of the barn where doors opened on either side, which allowed summer's breezes to dry the wood. Orange-bellied barn swallows twittered in protest, protective of their chicks in their mud nests. Our lovely gray tabby lazed on the stone fence watching us with half-closed green eyes. We worked most of those summer days. For lunch, I prepared chocolate milkshakes. The calories we burned always exceeded the calories we consumed. We prepared up to fifteen cords of wood this way each summer.

In the winter, beginning in late November, we had a weekly Saturday ritual. We worked in tandem, hauling the dried wood into the root cellar behind our dining room. Chunks of wood bark and splinters stuck to our woolen scarfs and leather gloves. We were cautious. We wore heavy boots as a precaution against injury from a dropped log. The work was laborious, and we stopped frequently to catch our breath. Len's cheeks flushed pink from the effort.

One January day, we awoke to a brilliant cerulean sky. It had snowed the day before, and eight or ten inches of crystallized snow sparkled on the ground. The snow was

festooned with tiny diamonds. It is ironic that on days like that with temperatures in the 20s, brilliant sunlight melted ice. We began our circuits, hauling wood from the barn to the house. We followed the drip line below the eaves where tiny drops of water had etched a sunken path. It was as if it had been shoveled for us. We walked this way, back and forth for half an hour before we paused to rest. I looked up at the icicles hanging from three stories above. They were massive, as large around in diameter as Len's thigh and a full story long—eight feet and more. The beautiful stalactites of ice tapered in perfect form and sweated a sheen of water. In silence, we listened to the tick-tick of ice as it warmed and contracted along the seams of our metal roof. I removed my woolen cap to wipe the sweat off my forehead when a single drop of ice water fell on my scalp. I looked up. All the icicles along the eaves were quietly dripping. I did not want to get wet.

"We should move," I told Len. "The icicles are beginning to drip." We stepped back a few feet into the virgin snow behind us. In that instant a slipping sound, a roar, and a catastrophic vortex of wind, icy water, and shards of ice assaulted us. When the tumult ended, Len was mid-thigh deep in a pile of broken icicles. I had fallen in a heap of ice and Len was fixed in place by the cementing action of the debris. It took us some time to dig out. The ice was heavy, and when we were clear, we were done for the day. Our only injuries were small cuts to our faces where ice had nicked us. The effort of moving the ice and the fright of our close call spent us and left us in awe. It also made us wonder about the name of the angel who had graced us with the warning sign of a single drop of ice water to my sweating brow.

I wrote stories from the time I was a little girl, but I didn't want to be a writer. I wanted to be an actress. I didn't realize then that it's the same impulse. It's make-believe. It's performance.

– Joan Didion

Important Questions

Linda Lee

Why didn't I check the weather report? I always check the weather report. Why did I forget to do it today of all days? How foolish of me!

The storm came up so quickly. When I left the airport, it was clear, not a cloud in the sky. I'm glad that we were told to put a survival kit in the car, something that a Southern girl found laughable.

As the blinding snow covers the road, there is nothing but white. Should I pull over or keep going? How long have I been driving? It seems like forever.

Why have I never noticed how desolate this road is? I haven't seen a single house. How far can it be to town?

Am I going to die out here alone, only minutes from home? What is the temperature outside? The heater in my 1950 Ford Fairlane is barely keeping the car warm.

Where is the road? I can't see it. What am I supposed to do if the car gets stuck in the snow? Am I supposed to turn off the heater or leave it on? Am I supposed to stay in the car or try to find help? Oh, dear, I can't remember!

Is that a person on the side of the road? It's a young man hitchhiking into town. Do I stop and pick him up? What if he is a serial killer?

The nice young man climbs into the car with his heavy duffle bag. He is so grateful that I stopped to pick him up. He is covered with ice and half frozen.

Are you a soldier from the base? Of course, you are. What a stupid question! What are you doing out in this storm? Do you think that this storm will pass soon? How far are we from town? Should we keep going? I can't see the road.

Wait. Is the storm lifting? Are those buildings that I see? He confirms that he sees them, too. This one-horse town never looked so good!

Where can I drop you? As he leaves the car, he thanks me again. I let him know that having him to talk to was really helpful.

As I pull away, I realize that I never asked him his name. Where was he from? Who were his people? It just didn't seem important.

Now, should I go straight home or stop at the grocery store? What am I going to cook for dinner, beef, or chicken?

Goodnight, Irene

Bill Lee

I'm embarrassed to tell you that for the last eight years I've had an affair with Irene. Really, she is my mistress. My wife, Linda, knows about Irene. Sometimes Linda is jealous of the time I spend with Irene. And now, Irene has a serious illness.

On August 10, 2022, I noticed something wasn't right with Irene. On August 11, I took her to Dr. Amed. He promptly admitted her into the hospital. I've been overwhelmed to try to function without Irene. My anxiety grew as I waited for a report from Dr. Amed. I worried about the worst-case scenario. I'm usually a confident person, but I became very anxious over the thought of losing Irene. I tried to be hopeful, but I feared the worst.

After 48 hours, on August 13, Dr. Amed told me Irene only had a short time to live. I got a second opinion from Dr. Greg Hickman. He urged me to get her to a clinic in Cleveland and recommended an overnight air ambulance.

On August 15, Irene was in Cleveland to undergo experimental treatment under the care of Dr. Chris Morrissey. After ten days, on August 25, Dr. Morrissey told me he did everything he could, but Irene didn't make it. The funeral service and burial were in Cleveland.

I'm ashamed, but my fear motivated me to look for a replacement for Irene, even before I knew whether she would live. I feel simply awful about this, but I was really missing Irene. So, I went online, took one look at Lucille, and fell in love. Maybe I'm on the rebound, but I now have a new mistress, and I'm hopeful it will be a long-lasting relationship.

The only thing I have to remember Irene by is a small metal stick-like object that I received from Dr. Morrissey. I'll grieve Irene's death, but I must regroup and be thankful for what may be salvageable to remember the good memories we made together.

Irene was a gorgeous 2014 hp Sleekbook laptop computer with a 14" screen, an i5 processor, a 512 hard drive, and 6 gigabytes of memory. Amed works at uBreakiFix next to Panera Bread in Auburn. Greg Hickman owns a computer repair company. Chris Morrissey works for Salvage Data Recovery, the world's best hard drive recovery company. However, I think Salvage Data Recovery is really a former CIA Black Ops site run by former Russian hackers.

Lucille is a 2022 hp laptop computer with a 15.6" screen, an i3-1125G4 processor, with a 512 Solid State Drive, and 16 gigabytes of memory. She has Irene's looks and is even smarter.

The small metal object from Chris Morrissey is a 256 gigabyte USB stick with all of Irene's Word documents, Excel spreadsheets, and photos from the last twenty years of my life. I'm in the process of downloading the items to Lucille, and I'm working on a better backup system. During the last thirty days, I have felt stress, anxiety, worry, dread, fear, discouragement, anguish, hopelessness, despair, sadness, and grief, but I'm more hopeful now.

My Addiction

Bill Lee

In 1948 in Greenville, Alabama, my birth weight was 8 pounds, 0 ounces.

My earliest recollection of eating at a fast-food restaurant was when I was about ten years old when my family ate at the Dog and Suds at the corner of Highway 31 and Highway 80 in Montgomery, after bowling.

In 1965, as a high school senior, I played center on offense and end on defense for the Lowndes County High School Red Devils football team in Fort Deposit. I weighed 165 pounds.

In 1970, when I graduated from Auburn University, I weighed 185 pounds. The weight gain can be traced directly to the cooking team of Big Mary and Miss Lillie. They dished up delicious Southern-style meals at the Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity house at Auburn University.

In 1974, at age 26, I weighed 195 pounds when I completed my Air Force ROTC commitment and was discharged from Ellsworth Air Force Base in Rapid City, South Dakota.

It was only thirty days later that things took a turn for the worst. I took a job as a night manager at a Burger King restaurant on Hammond Drive in Sandy Springs, Georgia.

It started innocently enough, just a Whopper sandwich, fries, and a coke for lunch. Then a vanilla shake took the place of the coke. Later a slice of apple pie was added to my lunch routine. Before long my eating habits could be summed up by the following phrase: "If a Double Whopper sandwich with cheese, add bacon, is wrong, then I don't want to be right."

Slowly, day after day, month after month, in 2004, after working for Burger King for thirty years, I weighed 235 pounds.

That's when I walked into LA Fitness in Marietta, Georgia. I explained to the manager that I was 56 years old and wanted to work with a trainer to lose weight and get in shape. The manager introduced me to Corina. She seemed nice enough when I met her. However, I overheard some of the members refer to her as "The Devil Woman."

After two sessions, I was sure she was trained by Nazi Gestapo agents. I thought she was trying to kill me—push-ups, sit-ups, treadmills, running the stairs while I carried a heavy weight, and suicide runs in the gym. I think she called it boot camp on steroids. However, two years later when I weighed in at 205, I had lost 30 pounds and was in pretty good shape.

It's now 2021 and after 15 years of retirement, I weigh 229 pounds. I'd like to get back to 205, but every time I get close, my addiction prevents me.

I find myself drawn to go see Doris at Burger King on South College Street for a Whopper with Cheese sandwich minus onions, cut in half, with French fries and a Coca-Cola. At least there's no vanilla shake or apple pie on my tray.

The Goat Man is Here!

Bill Lee

As his old wagon, pulled by a dozen big goats, rolled down Mt. Willing Road, the pots and pans attached to all sides of the wagon made clanking noises that were almost musical. The Goat Man walked alongside the wagon and a whole bunch of small goats followed him.

His long gray and white hair, pulled back with a red paisley bandana, matched his beard. He smelled like the goats with a hint of smoke, probably from his campfire. He was barefooted, dressed in faded blue overalls. A white t-shirt covered the top of his red long johns.

"The Goat Man is here, and Dad gave him permission to camp in our pasture." The excited voice on the phone was that of my friend, Mark Coleman. It was in the spring of 1960 when I was eleven years old that the Goat Man rolled into my hometown of Fort Deposit, Ala.

I called my friends Ronnie and Joel, and we rode our bicycles down Rogers Street, past the post office, across the railroad tracks, and past Norman's Dry Goods to Mark's house. The four of us walked across the street to the pasture and approached the Goat Man with caution.

Ronnie asked him, "On cold winter nights, how do you stay warm?"

He replied, "The colder it gets, the more goats I cover up with." He sold postcards with a photo of himself and his goats, twenty-five cents each or three for a dollar.

Mark asked, "Do you ever take a bath or change your clothes?"

He replied, "Nope, and the goats don't seem to mind."

I asked, "Do you have a real name?"

"My name is Charles McCartney. At age fourteen I ran away from my family's farm in Iowa and went to New York. I met and married a Spanish knife-thrower who was ten years older than me. I became part of her act, serving as her near-miss target."

I asked, "How close did the knives come to your head?"

"Pretty darn close. We split up, and I returned to my family's farm. But the Great Depression of 1929 took our farm."

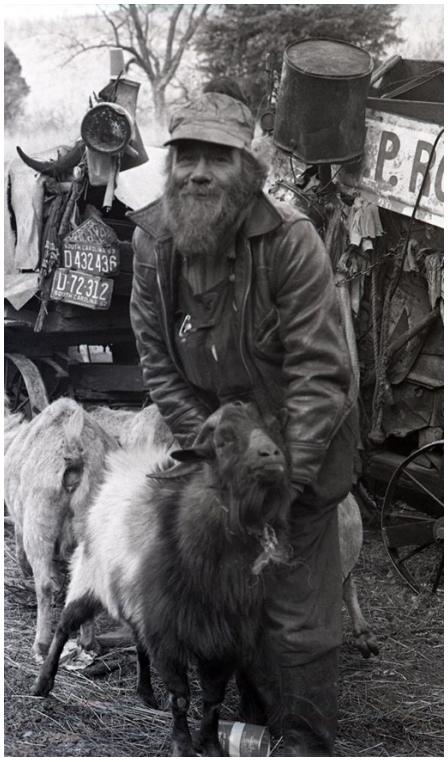
Mark asked, "Well, what did you do after that?"

"I went to work cutting timber for the WPA. In 1935, I was pinned to the ground for hours when a tree fell on me. When the search party arrived, they thought I was dead and took me to the local funeral home. But when the undertaker stuck an embalming needle into my arm, I woke up."

Joel asked, "Then how did you get to be the Goat Man?"

"I got a cart and a team of goats and hit the road as a preacher. I travel with two books, *Robinson Crusoe* and the Bible. I've been traveling with my goats for years. I average almost ten miles a day."

His arrival in towns from Iowa to Georgia was a huge event. Children lined the roads when word spread that the Goat Man was coming to their town. He became a folk hero that people just wanted to meet. He eventually retired from the road, sold his goats, and settled in Jeffersonville, Ga., where he lived in an abandoned school bus. He died in 1998. His tombstone dates his age at 97. But, legends have a life of their own, and some claim he lived to be 120.



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

Why I Write

Bill Lee

Why do I write when I could be playing golf or watching a movie?

Well, English classes at Lowndes County High School and Auburn University were not my favorite ones, nor was I very good at writing. However, during the last seven years, I've taken a writing class each week, and I've become a better writer.

My writing classes, homework, drafts, and editing have resulted in over 150 short stories or essays and a 175-page genealogical family history book. My grandchildren enjoy most of my stories, and they're some of my best critics.

It's nice to have one of my works published, but I'm not in it for the money. When I write, I reflect on my life. I recall people, places, and events—sometimes from over fifty years ago. Other times I write about something that happened fifty minutes ago. When I'm able to capture a memory in my writing, I'm able to laugh, wonder, and sometimes experience feelings of sadness. When I write, edit, and read my writing out loud, my outlook on life is more positive and hopeful.

When I write about relatives, I see them as characters who shaped my life. I typically avoid the criticism, contempt, and/or bitterness that may have been a part of my past. When I write about my misfortunes, I rob them of their power over me. When I write about something painful, I'm better able to "box" the pain, sort out the confusion, understand, and accept.

Part of the pleasure of writing is processing my feelings. Sometimes I write about the eighteen years I spent growing up as a white child in an obscure small town in the heart of the rural, racist, Alabama Black Belt and facing my white privilege. Other times, I write about what I learned in the 32 years I spent in and out of grease-filled Burger King Restaurant kitchens and how those years shaped my character.

Since I became a writer seven years ago, I notice more about people, places, and things. I notice scenes, dialogue, narration, reflective voice, and the "so what" of the tale. I write to figure things out, then share what I have written with others who might gain something from reading what I wrote.

Busted!

Terry C. Ley

The engine of the mammoth truck idles noisily, sending dark smoke skyward. Two men stand between the truck and the curb, beside the blue recycling cart at the bottom of my driveway.

"Let's see what this guy doesn't want anymore," says Mike.

Joe nods, lifts the lid.

Both men begin rummaging through the contents of the cart. Because it is very full, their hasty action sends several items to the street around them—a crumpled Kleenex box, Sunday's funnies, last week's Kroger insert.

"This guy must either give a lot to charity—or not enough!" Joe observes. "And he must be a Democrat, from the looks of it. Every left-wing Democrat politician in Alabama and Georgia wants his money."

Because he has longer arms than Joe, Mike dives for the bottom of the cart, lifting otherwise unseen artifacts so they can be inventoried.

"Look at that!" gasps Joe, his face alight, his finger pointing to forbidden artifacts. "Bingo!"

"Yeah," Mike shouts with delight. "Bingo!"

When the city announced its single-stream recycling program in 2017, I rejoiced. We would no longer have to sort the items we wanted to recyle—paper or plastic. We would put every candidate for recycling into blue rolling bins that the city would provide for each householder. Now I could imagine my recycled plastic milk cartons becoming new CDs by Michael Buble, my discarded newspapers morphing into copies of the great American novel that I intend to write. I became a committed recycling fan! I filled our cart with devotion and risked wheeling it, full and heavy, to the bottom of our steep driveway, for Mike's and Joe's attention.

Others in Auburn embraced the program, too. Nationally, 34% of residents participate in curbside recycling, under 20% in Alabama; in Auburn, nearly 85%. In 2018, the city recycled over 900 tons more than they recycled the year before, a 69% increase, thus reducing the amount of refuse taken to landfills. I was proud to contribute to the salvation of the universe!

But what Joe and Mike found in my blue cart resulted in the letter I received a few weeks later from Julie Hoff, representing the city's Environmental Services Department. Ms. Hoff wrote, "Our biggest hurdle in keeping our program going strong is the wrong material being put in the blue cart. Our recycler rejects whole truckloads of good recycling when the wrong things get put in the single-stream cart. To help educate our customers and prevent this from happening, we regularly spot-check carts throughout the city."

Ah, so Joe and Mike are also educators!

She continues, "We're reaching out for your help. We noticed you had something in your blue cart at 739 Wild Ginger Lane that's not accepted in our recycling program." What follows is a list of recycling no-no's, beginning with the charge against me: "There were plastic bags, packaging or wraps in your cart. These clog up the sorting machines, so they should go in your green garbage cart." The litany of forbidden goods includes glass, Styrofoam, wire cords, textiles, and (oh, yes!) yard debris.

Busted, I pleaded guilty and vowed to turn my life around. We accumulate a lot of plastic bags from the three grocery stores where we do business. During pre-pandemic times, Mari took all of them to the Community Market, where clients recycled them by taking their groceries home in them. Chastised, I put the plastic bags in the garbage headed for the green cart, where they keep company with empty soup cans, dead candles, and bottles once filled with cheap white wine. Now that the Community Market is using empty plastic bags again, post-pandemic, Mari removes them from temptation, smooths them, and takes them to the Market

On parole, I consult the list of no-no's from time to time and try to walk the straight and narrow path to avoid Joe's and Mike's righteous indignation and, perhaps, public censure.

Holiday Chapters

Terry C. Ley

It has taken me more than forty years to write my memoir, one chapter every year, in early December, when I write our annual holiday letter to friends and family. That my audience is quite diverse presents a challenge, of course. What events in my life—and Mari's—this year are likely to interest cousins, colleagues, former classmates and students, and friends we made while touring France or Nova Scotia? Last December, my youngest addressee was eight; the oldest, 93. A 60-cent stamp will carry our letters to most of my readers, but (amazingly) a few cents more will carry them to England, Switzerland, and Canada.

I usually lead off by revealing Mari's current home décor theme, the theme that will be reflected throughout our house during the holidays, in recent years, "Cozy," "50 Shades of Golden" (the year of our fiftieth wedding anniversary), "Frozen," and "Just Desserts." What follows that revelation falls into four categories: a progress report about Mari, a progress report about me, an account of our travels, and a summary of our favorite fine arts and literature experiences. For many years, I included a mock Christmas list, too, in case a reader wished to send us a gift, one very expensive item from that year's Hammacher Schlemmer catalog that each of us longed for, but I left that out last year because I was running out of space.

Telling all of that requires lots of words, words, words, of course. Fitting them all, in single-spaced lines, on the front and back of a single sheet of paper has required a king-sized share of the composing, revising, and editing skills that I possessed—and reading those words undoubtedly tested the patience of even our most devoted friends. Maybe, in some cases, reading our letters required a two-day marathon! But our kindest friends told us they looked forward to our next holiday letters and, by Halloween, a few began asking what Mari's holiday décor theme would be. "Can't tell you!" I'd say. "Wait until December!"

That our collected letters resemble a memoir became evident when, to celebrate our Golden Anniversary, we read the letters aloud, from the first one, sent in 1973, to the most recent. In those letters we read about my graduation; our decision to move to Auburn; Mari's being voted Witch of the Year twice at Opelika High School; our illnesses and recoveries; my travels throughout the state and to professional conferences to tout secondary reading and young adult literature; trips international and domestic; exchanges of fifty-cent Christmas gifts with our bridge club; the loss of parents and friends; our retirements and finding ways, through volunteering, to spend our free time wisely; and the books and movies that we most enjoyed each year.

As with our lives together, there was room for sadness in those letters, but joy has prevailed.

The One I Feared the Most

Becca Little

I recently hosted a murder suspect over the weekend, alone in my condo. It was fun, a girls' sleepover, a slumber party for two. We shared stories, we giggled, and we wept. Yes, I knew she was a murder suspect beforehand, and I confess to experiencing some anxiety as I turned in for the night, yet a deep, uncanny connection conquered anxiety.

It all began fifty years ago, in 1972, when Catrina and I were in junior high together. I didn't know her. I didn't know why she chose me to threaten. Was my vulnerability so obvious?

She was my size, but more muscular. She dressed like a boy, in boots, jeans, and plaid flannel shirts. Her striking green eyes with dark circles beneath were set in a pale, noble face of handsome features. Her shoulder-length hair was dyed dark, too dark for her, evidencing significant damage, a weathered young beauty.

She walked up to me with her friends after school, close enough for me to smell that she smoked, and publicly announced: "I'm going to cut you!"

She didn't provide a reason, but rather provided proof that she had the means to do so.

"I don't even know you. What have I ever done to you?" I replied, cringing at the sound of my voice breaking. She did not respond except to glare at me even harder and step closer. I noted her empty hand clenching into a fist.

I hoped my friends would back me up, but the only backing up they did was step back. Thus began my daily sprints to the bus. I discovered I was capable of more speed than I knew, but it was of little consolation. I feared for my life. I only went to the restroom if I was with my friends. If they weren't going to intervene, they could go for help.

I couldn't tell my parents or teachers. If I reported her, I suspected she'd be even more dangerous. It didn't matter if she got in trouble if I was dead. We were studying Don McLean's song "American Pie" in music class, and the refrain "This will be the day that I die" haunted me. When I wasn't hearing it in music class, I was hearing it on the radio.

Desperate, I did what one does when desperate, I prayed. I was inspired to make Catrina brownies. I delivered the full platter of them to her just before the start of first-period music class. I walked past the rows of students at their desks to the very back of the room by the windows where she sat with her friends. I placed the large plastic platter on her desk without a word. I was expecting to be humiliated for publicly acknowledging she was the Alpha dog. Instead, I saw shock and confusion fill her face; then I heard a voice I'd never heard before, the voice of a child.

"No one has ever made me brownies before."

She never bothered me again.

I stumbled across her on Classmates.com over forty years later. Was this the same Catrina, the one whom I had feared the most? I had to know. I wasn't spiteful or ugly; I was brief and direct. "Is this the same Catrina who threatened me with a knife, and I had made brownies for?"

Her quick response confessed it was.

"Your note made me feel so terrible. I'm so sorry," she said. "I don't know if I remember you, but I remember the brownies. There is no excuse for my treatment of you then. I could tell you my brother was raping me on a regular basis (beginning at age 5)." She continued, "My Mom and Dad were both major drunks and beat the hell out of me. Neither one of them wanted to keep me and kept sending me back to the other one. I thank you again for the brownies. I'm sure you are probably one of the few people to give me a second thought out of kindness. After years of therapy, I'm not the same person that I was."

She also wrote an open letter to everyone we went to school with, on Classmates:
"To all the people I ever threatened and/or assaulted, please forgive me! I feel so terrible about how abusive I was. I had a horrific home life. I thought of myself as a victim for so long, I'd forgotten or repressed that I had been an abuser myself once."

I confess that at the time, I made the brownies more out of survival mode than altruism, yet a part of me recognized that kindness was needed. We've been in touch for years now, first via email and then talking on the phone. We often talk about our childhoods and experiences in the decades since we've seen each other. We've had many conversations that lasted for an hour or more. She's confessed she was one of the murder suspects in a cold case from forty years ago but assured me she's innocent. Catrina has a Master's in Fine Art, specializing in sculpture and jewelry. She also has an online degree in Theology. She's particularly interested in Native American traditions and has participated in their ceremonies.

Catrina and I finally reunited recently. I was waiting for her alone in my driveway. She drove over seven hours to see me. We had not seen each other since junior high. Our eyes and grins greeted each other in silence during the golden hour late in the autumn afternoon. She walked up to me, apologized again, and wrapped her arms around me, and I reassured her of my forgiveness. Both felt even more powerful in person. Both of us wearing blends of patchouli and still the same height, our first hug ever was one of those rare fits, easy, comfortable, and genuine. Ironically, she looks healthier than she did fifty years ago, and she is. She stopped smoking. No longer an angry youth, she's evolved into an artist, a writer, a wise and gracious grandmother. The striking green eyes are warm and gentle now.

Catrina wanted to see photos of me from the time when we were in school together since she remembered the brownies more than me. The photos helped her place me. I wanted to see photos of her of that age, but she was never in any of the yearbook photos. She explained: "The only photos of me at that age are mug shots related to reform school, which is why I had to leave our junior high. I don't want you to feel sorry

for me because of my history. My experiences have made me strong. I'm no longer broken, and I like who I'm becoming."

I planned to take Catrina hiking at Chewacla State Park the next day, but she had forgotten to bring appropriate shoes. Our feet appeared to be the same size, so I had her try on an extra pair of tennis shoes I had. They fit her perfectly. I showed her some of my favorite places to meditate and write at Chewacla. Then we hiked down to the Falls and back, which we realized to our delight allowed her to literally walk a mile in my shoes!

After a steak dinner at the cabin with Jimmy, my husband, Catrina and I headed into town for some girl time alone at our condo where Catrina was staying. We shared stories we'd never told each other over the phone. We laughed at length, and then we both teared up when she shared the rest of her story. In a fine blend of aged memories, we discovered we'd been smitten with the same teacher and the same boy. We discovered our mutual affinity for the same authors.

The next morning, we slept in, waking refreshed, and returned to the cabin. To complete our healing, Catrina and I made brownies together this time, Ghirardelli with nuts. The aroma of brownies filled our cabin. We ate a couple of brownies together and then divided the rest equally between us before she left. Ironically, I'm not in contact with any of those I was closest to during junior high, yet now I feel so close to the one I feared the most.

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

– E. B. White

A Young Boy's Visits

Gail McCullers

It is 2008 and Nate, our grandson, is five years old. He is visiting with his grandparents and will stay for a few days.

G'anny: "Nate, you have broken one of G'anny's rules. You left the house without telling me. That makes me very upset."

Nate: "I just went out in the backyard to see where the little rabbit was going to hide. That big dog next door was really barking at him."

G'anny: "I want you to think about why I got upset. You can choose to sit on the time-out bench in the dining room or go to your bedroom and close the door. I will come and get you in about fifteen minutes."

Nate: "G'anny, you can't send me to that bedroom by myself and have the door closed. I will get claustrophobia!"

(He chose the time-out bench for fifteen minutes. His Paw Paw and I are amazed at his vocabulary at five years of age, as well as how his little mind works.)

Another day, another visit.

G'anny: "Nate, let's make some cookies today."

Nate: "Let's put chocolate chips and some coconut in them."

(We get out the cookie sheet, chips, sugar, coconut, and flour. We mix everything in a big bowl.)

Nate: "G'anny, I can tell when you are the one that has made the cookies at your house."

G'anny: "Oh, how's that, Nate?"

Nate: "They are never uniform!"

In May, he graduated from high school and has been awarded a full, four-year scholarship to the college he has chosen.

Do not wait for an idea. Start writing something and the ideas will come. You have to turn the faucet on before the water starts to flow.

– Louis L'Amour

Meeting Sal

Diane Miller

We sat on battered metal folding chairs, afraid to breathe, five pubescent girls. We'd been told that if we made a sound, we'd be escorted from the studio. It was Atlanta in 1957, and the studio set was no match for the sophistication of later years. A partial partition, a table with spindly metal legs fronting a cheap modern sofa, an ashtray on the table, badly hung prints above the sofa, and higher still, the beams and curtains of the larger filming space. At one end of the sofa sat the hostess in a demure shirtwaist dress, ready to begin the interview. And just entering from behind the partition was my teen idol, Sal Mineo.

After the release of *Rebel Without a Cause*, most of my friends sighed over James Dean. But I was smitten by those liquid brown eyes and that lush curly hair framing Sal's sensitive young face. When my friend Linda wheedled her father until he promised to ask permission for her to watch the interview, she proved her loyalty by asking me to come too. I don't know how those other girls got in—Linda's lighting technician father couldn't say. I just remember staring daggers at them for stealing some of the mystique.

I don't remember much about the interview, only trying to keep from sneezing from the dust or creaking in the dilapidated chairs. It was hot, too, from those murderous lights. I could see beads of perspiration forming on the face of the interviewer, and Sal's curls were beginning to drip. At last, the interview ended, the lights were turned off, and Sal's agent told us that we could come and meet Sal.

With one motion, we five leaped from our chairs and rushed toward the set. These were the days, of course, when Elvis and Jerry Lee and their followers had rapidly changed the face of fandom. No longer politely waiting in line for an autograph, a surging mass of screaming girls created actual danger. I suspect that phenomenon carried over into the movies, and Sal must have encountered it. For whatever reason, a look of terror came over his face, and he cowered behind his agent. From the threat of five girls!

Like a Guardian of the Universe, the pudgy agent assumed his role. Feet apart, knees locked, arms overhead and spread, he barred access to his charge. No faith-healing preacher could have been more effective in that pose. "Ladies, ladies!" he shouted. "Let's remember we're ladies."

Chastened, we meekly lined up to request our autographs. I got mine in due time. I don't remember what Sal and I said to each other. I was haunted for years, though, by the look on his face when the girls came toward him.

He was only seventeen, a teenager just like we were. Unlike us, he'd been acting since childhood. There were experiences and scars that we would never know. In his life later he encountered much turmoil—fading popularity, illegal acts, substance abuse, coming out, and finally, murder by a dagger to the heart. On the day I met him, though, he was frightened and innocent, with liquid brown eyes and a sensitive soul.

She Wore Blue Velvet

Gail McCullers

Several years ago, Bobby Vinton and Tony Bennet made "Blue Velvet" very popular and romantic. When I hear this song, which I did on PBS last week, I find my memory takes me back to East Elementary School in Cullman, Alabama. I am standing at the door to the school auditorium. I am sixteen. Christy, my younger sister, and I are usherettes for Cullman's cultural and civic events. Fees are charged for membership, but to the two of us, as usherettes, they are free.

Our responsibility is to hand out programs, welcome guests, and usher people to available seats. They have come to hear a piano concert, perhaps a small orchestra or a lecture by a famous person. Christy and I thought one of the best programs had been the family of five with each one playing a different instrument.

Our mother had made us matching outfits to wear as usherettes at these events. We thought we looked sophisticated and grand in our new navy blue heels and our new dresses and jackets. The dress was made of taffeta with colors of rose and navy blue. They had a plaid design.

Our mother could sew anything, frequently making her patterns. The taffeta dresses fit perfectly, but the best part of the new outfit was the jacket. It was blue velvet. I thought then that this was the most beautiful thing I would ever own. I will keep it always! Mom had really created something special. The first night we wore our new outfits we had many compliments from the members who came to the concert.

Now, if I hear the song, "She Wore Blue Velvet," I am sixteen years old again!

Little OS

Diane Miller

My husband was a computer scientist. He worked for Big Blue when the large third-generation mainframe computer was produced, the awesome 360 with its big operating system—Big OS. That's about the time we acquired an operating system of our own, a pound puppy we dubbed Little OS. Our OS was a handsome dog, though a bit short. All German dog, he was half Dachshund and half Shepherd. He had the long body and short legs of his mother, the coloring and sturdy build of his sire. He had his father's ears, though they tended to flop softly instead of standing erect. From his father, he also inherited his pride and joy—his magnificent German Shepherd tail. Unfortunately, he was too low to the ground to carry it properly, and so he held it aloft, gently curled over his back. It gave him an air of perpetual jauntiness.

OS was an escape artist. There was no way he could jump a fence, but he employed his ancestral hound skills to dig under, repeatedly. We tried driving stakes into the ground at his favorite exit site. We tried pouring concrete there. We tried spraying pepper sauce into the dirt in the area. Nothing worked. He didn't go far; all he wanted was to be wherever the children were playing. The simplest solution was to encourage the children to play in our backyard. That worked well, in the daytime. But OS didn't know he was short, he thought he was an alpha German Shepherd, and he had tasted freedom. He began to roam at night.

That was when milk delivery to the doorstep was still the norm. Emptied glass bottles would be washed and set out by the back door. Just before breakfast twice a week, the milkman would collect the bottles and leave a couple of new ones, filled with pasteurized milk that was not necessarily homogenized. The bottles were capped with a simple round of cardboard, much like the caps on single-serve ice cream cups. Those cardboard caps, complete with handy pull tabs, were easily removed by a clever dog. The thick cream at the top of the bottle was a special treat following an early morning jaunt.

I overheard the children talking about trying to keep OS out of trouble by replacing the cardboard caps before anyone found out. I had wondered why the bottles seemed short-filled. As realization dawned, I also figured that ours was not the only delivery so compromised. Sure enough, the children from next door confessed that their milk was not immune from danger. Face blazing, I went next door and apologized profusely. My neighbor calmly reassured me, "Oh, don't worry about it. He doesn't drink much."

Needless to say, we began to buy our milk at the grocery store. And OS slept in the house.

My Bedroom

Lili Muljadi

We live in a three-bedroom house in Surabaya, Indonesia. The room closest to the street is a guest room. My bedroom is in the middle, and my parents' bedroom is next to mine. All the doors and windows leading to the outdoors have screens. The door to enter my bedroom is through the dining room. My bedroom has two doors, a screen door, and a wooden door. My bed is made of iron pipes painted white and has a mosquito net on it. (Indonesia is a tropical and humid place, very well known for malaria.) I sleep in my crib from the time I was born until I am eight years old. It is a huge crib with white bedding. I love my bed. I think it is very beautiful, like a wedding gown. Perpendicular to my bed is a single adult bed. It also has a mosquito net on it. When I was a baby, my parents hired a nanny to take care of me. The nanny sleeps in that bed.

I start going to school when I turn four. School is from 7:00 to 11:00 a.m. At noon, my father comes home from the office, so we have lunch together as a family. After lunch, my father goes back to his office, and my mother prepares me for an afternoon nap. She washes my feet, hands, and face, dresses me in pajamas, and helps me into my crib. My mother lies in the adult bed next to the crib. Most of the time, I am not tired or sleepy, but my mother forces me to sleep. After a while, she checks: "Lili, are you asleep?" I stupidly answer, "No, I cannot sleep." My mother is a very impatient person. She gets upset and spanks me. I end up falling asleep in tears and wake up with swollen eyes. But I find that if I do not answer her, she will think I am asleep and leave the room. I also learn that if I lie still with my eyes closed, eventually I will fall asleep. Survival.

At four in the afternoon, my mother wakes me up and bathes me. My father is home, and we have tea. Dinner is at seven, and, around eight, my mother prepares me to go to bed. Again, she will lie down in the bed next to the crib. I will pretend to sleep until she leaves the room.

I love, love riding a swing. I cannot get enough of it. I also like jumping rope. I have several ropes. I hide my jumping ropes in my bed before I go to bed at night. After my mother leaves the room, I fashion my jumping ropes on the mosquito net frame into a swing and swing until I am tired. My mother never finds out.

The adult bed is my grandmothers' bed whenever she comes to visit—both grandmothers, my mother's mother and my father's mother. I like sleeping with my grandmothers. They stay in the bed all night, and it gives me peace of mind.

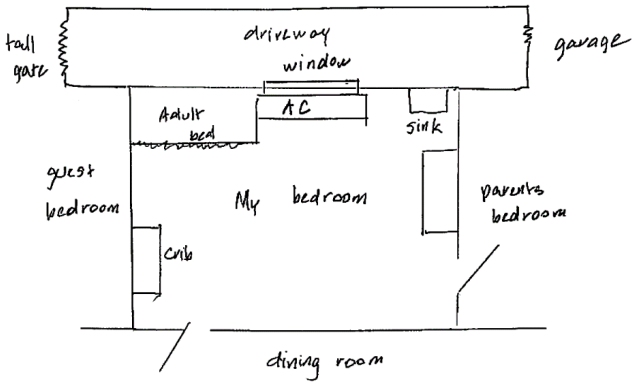
Next to the adult bed is a window. The morning sun shines directly through the window. Under the window is an air-conditioning unit. My father is an electrical engineer working at a utility company, overseeing the islands of Java and Bali. Because of his position, we get free electricity.

The window overlooks the driveway, from the street to the garage and the neighbor's house. Between the street and the garage, there is a tall gate that is closed and locked at night. This window is behind that tall gate. One night, a thief decides to break the lock. I hear the soft banging sound. I scream for my parents and the thief leaves. Our dog somehow does not bark that night. After that, I become a light sleeper.

Next to the window is a sink where my mother washes my hands and face and brushes my teeth.

On the wall perpendicular to the window is a drawer with a changing table on top of it. My mother keeps my clothes and toys in this drawer. Next to the drawer is a door that connects my room to my parents' room.

After several miscarriages, my mother finally was able to carry a baby to full-term, my brother. Sadly, I must give up my beautiful crib. It also became too small for me. Before my brother was born, my mother repaints the crib. She notices that the mosquito net frame is slightly bent. She asks me what happened. I never confess what I did until now.



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

Saturday Night Escapade

Nancy Penaskovic

Saturday night we would don our best blue jeans and find a bright top to dress for our special evening. Saturday night was dance night at Sullivans, the hall with the best jukebox that played nonstop. Sullivans was the grocery store for needed pickup items and the gathering place for rookie teenagers attending a vacation week or weeks at camps around Glen Lake in upstate New York.

It was the ideal spot for summer romance and for testing the newest dance craze. My best friend, Kay, and I never missed Saturday night activities. We spent the first half hour surveying the crowd and picking out our targets for the evening dance. Jitterbugs were the favorite activity, and we learned new steps every week.

Kay always migrated toward Jimmy Shaw, who would be her partner for most of the summer dances and afternoon boat rides. I was more introverted and often ended up with Billy Shaw, Jimmy's older brother, who also was shy.

Summer romance always seemed to be temporary but could span more than one summer. Billy lasted only two summers, but we had fun and enjoyed good company. As the evening wore on, so did the pace of the dance. We genuinely parted ways as we traveled up the path around the lake to all camps. However, one evening Kay and I decided to go to the Shaws' camp with the boys. It was after 11:00 p.m., and we continued to share stories at their camp. Suddenly, there was a loud knock on the front door.

When Jimmy opened the door, two angry-looking men entered and told us to gather our belongings and head for home. It was my Uncle Jack and my father. They had been looking for us for over an hour and were not happy with our choices that evening.

My mother was frantic, and I received a stern slap in the face and a lecture about letting her know where I was going after dark and after the dance. Kay received a similar greeting from her mom in the camp next door. We learned our lesson and never forgot it.

The strangest part of the Saturday night venue was what occurred Sunday morning. The hall was converted to a church for Sunday morning Mass. Kay and I were properly admonished and sat with penitent postures throughout the morning service.

Now that I am an adult with children of my own, I appreciate the seriousness of my mother's frantic state of mind. Kay and I learned a valuable lesson about responsibility that evening. We were free to roam as long as our parents knew where we were and who we were with. We needed to be home by 10:00 p.m. unless special permission was granted. Safety was their major concern. When my own children ventured out in their teenage years, I was very specific about the ground rules, including time limits. Sometimes you learn the most important lessons the hard way, but you never forget them.

The Utility Action Storage Shed

Nancy Penaskovic

"Are you sure you have the right address?" my social worker, Lynn, gently chided me. "We have driven up and down this street four times!" We found houses 410 and 414 but failed to find 412. The only thing between those two houses was a utility action storage shed. We decided to go up to the door of the shack and knock. To our surprise, an older man opened the door.

"Can I help you?" he said.

"We are looking for Mr. Lewis."

"That's what they call me,'' he answered.

"We are from hospice and wanted to see if we could offer you some help."

"Come on in," he said. We noticed that he had a feeding tube that was hooked up with a hanger to a beam in the storage shed ceiling. "Sorry I only have one extra chair, he said," but you are welcome to sit down." Lynn was recovering from observing the obvious lack of sufficient resources—no kitchen area, no bathroom, and a simple day bed in the middle of the space. Mr. Lewis had metastatic gastric cancer.

After talking to him for a while, we found he was worried about getting his medications and tube feedings since he didn't have a car. We assured him we could easily bring him his medications and feedings.

As we were about to leave, Lynn turned to Mr. Lewis and said softly, "Mr. Lewis, we could look into finding you a comfortable room in an assisted living residence or a nursing home." Mr. Lewis gently chided Lynn and said, "Ma'am, I was born in the country, I've lived my life in the country, and I certainly would like to die in the country."

Mr. Lewis taught me an essential lesson for hospice workers: Meet patients where they are in life and let them tell you what they need. Do not assume you know what they need. In the following weeks, Lynn convinced Mr. Lewis that she could have a group of our volunteers install a toilet in his shed. She had recruited a group of volunteers with a plumber and gathered the materials they needed. She told me she felt like Cecil B. DeMille with a cast of a thousand to perform the task. It took two weeks to dig the necessary hole and install the plumbing and toilet. Mr. Lewis was excited and thanked each individual involved. He said," I didn't think this was possible."

We cared for Mr. Lewis for two months. Three days before he died, he called me and said, "Ma'am, it's time for me to go to the hospital. I can't stay here any longer." We arranged for him to go to EAMC, and after a day, he lapsed into a coma and passed away quietly two days later. He was buried in his favorite "country," Beauregard, Alabama.

Mr. Lewis taught us all an important lesson. The patient needs to feel in charge. Our motto was to always "Proceed gently without judgment."

Age's Winnowing Wisdom

Nancy Penaskovic

Slow, unsteady gait
Has it come to slow me down
to accept imperfections and
realign priorities?

Easily bruised hands and arms
Am I supposed to stop and
inject caution into my clumsy
hurry-up and get through the
day's agenda?

Imperfect vision
Am I required to
look and survey carefully?

Aches and joint pains
Have I forgotten
past lessons of impatience and
lack of forbearance?

Is aging like painting a portrait &
viewing to see reality and
unimaginable perfection?

Life wears us down like
the Velveteen rabbit.
Have we been loved until
our velvet is completely worn?

Our wrinkles are the roadmap
of our days traversed and
supremely well lived.

Fall Apogee

Charlene Redick

Yellow
Scarlet
Orange
Skies of cobalt blue
A hymn of praise to things
That fall away.
Grey
Cold rain
Wood smoke
Slate tint and hue.
A hymn to the demarcated and the rule of nature,
To Orion rising,
To hooting owls in the night.

The closing season, I call it:
Leaves falling, deer slaughtered and hung.
Quail and turkey laid out in a line,
Their heads bloody stumps
On bodies that are gory palettes of plumage.

And you, a woods aficionado of dusk and dawn,
In camouflage in tree stands before the sun rises,
With bow and arrow, decoys, mating horns,
Rye beds, deer piss scent,
Rattle bags simulating antlers,

Entrapping these beautiful creatures
That, ruled by nature,
With no predators but man,
Follow the scent of the doe
Into death.

It is out of the dailiness of life that one is
driven into the deepest recesses of the self.

--Poet Stanley Kunitz

Requiem at the Meat Counter at the Publix in Auburn

Charlene Redick

In the bright light of the high-end Publix grocery store in this college town,
A woman in a blue fitted dress, who looks to be about forty, with hair to her waist,
turns the corner of the coffee aisle and is confronted
by the appraising glance of the young meat cutter—college-aged, beefy, and sensual—
at the butcher's window at the back of the store.

Not one to encourage complications, she smiles cautiously.
He nods, mesmerized, connected motionless with wonder, unable to stop looking at her.

This is not unusual. Men have lined up at her door all her life.
She is a combination of disarming purity and chasteness with an overlay of wisdom
that telegraphs that she has seen it all and can speak about it eloquently.
These polarities in her nature generate enthrallment in others.
She nods, standing at the sugar and spice aisle, aware of his enrapture.

The daughter of a vain and vainglorious actress and equestrian,
she abstained from the bold, brash, rash, reckless impetuosities of life
and gave herself to poetry.
She is a healer, and a noticer, but lives the life of an introvert.
This respect for her investigation into the traumas, recoveries, and lingering residues
of dysfunction in people's lives has bestowed upon her a discernment
that earns her respect from the world.

Today, however, this look between them is about the rules of attraction,
The act of graceful vanquishment,
the longing of one generation for another, across the gender gap,
and the witnessing, with awe, of the advancing of life and the closing down of an era,
for she limps, and without her glasses, in contacts, she squints.

His look says: *Not bad. You've kept yourself up beautifully. Tell me how you did that when it is all over you that you have suffered yet prevailed.*

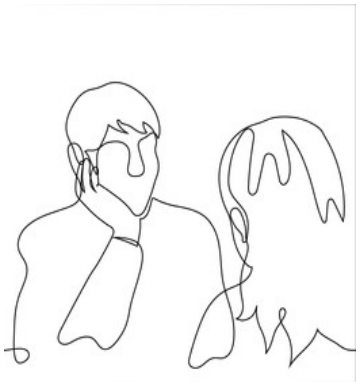
She smiles. Her look says: *A lot you know. There were days of such despair that I asked God in the middle of the hell I was going through: How am I surviving this? Why am I still alive?*

*But I went home and wrote about the ordeal, and revised the poem into the evening,
then made broth soup, sat down at my dressing table, cleansed my skin, brushed my hair, buffed my lips with lip stain, and planned what I would wear the following day into battle.*

In time, I retired most of my delusions, improved my self-regulation, and, from the anguish,
I made a storm-resistant parka to protect my heart as I hoarded possibility,
became a stranger to the need for sympathy,
and managed the heartache of betrayal and perdition.

His look appraises her true-blue confidence. *Your elegance and refinement, your courteous goodwill, and the way you honor others are compelling.*

She returns his look as she turns down the aisle:
Your day is coming, darling,
When you, less beefy, bored, and struggling with urges,
in this hefty job in this stagey store filled with students, marrieds, and cagey retirees
Will remember how a woman three times your age
moved you to reflect on the challenges you risked your life for,
and the heartache you thought you were free of forever,
As memories line up on the sidelines of your life,
still posing questions that went unheeded that you now want to revisit
In the hope that the answers will renew your strength and provide inspiration
At the closing down your life.



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

What Not to Do After Your Wife's Surgery

Jim Rose

He grew up in Belwood, Alabama. I'm serious. In case you don't know where Belwood is, it is a suburb of Clayhatchee. Now you know. He can smell a bream bed from forty yards away, and if you give him a few worms, he will put most of those bream in the boat. They will be cleaned and on ice by 5:30 p.m. Typically, there will be a backyard fish fry for friends and family the next night. He has been a homebuilder for most of his life. We attended Sunday School together and played softball and basketball together. We decided a long time ago that he needed my engineering background, and I needed his contractor input. So the friendship has endured for a lifetime.

I brought up "James Tyson" on the iPhone and punched in his telephone number; we used to dial numbers, but that was long ago.

He picked up on the first ring, "Hey."

"Hey."

That's all the identification that was needed. Friends of fifty years require no other greeting.

"What do you want?"

"Not much. Just wanted to hear from Joyce."

Joyce, his wife of a lifetime, had fallen two months ago and broken her pelvis in two places and fractured her shoulder. Though living a hundred miles apart from them now, I knew it had been a tough time for them both.

"Well as can be expected, I guess. She is getting therapy right now out here in the backyard. I am sitting under a shade tree waiting for them to finish."

It was a beautiful spring day, and I could well imagine the benefits of both absorbing some south Alabama fresh air in late April.

We spent several minutes talking, as old men do, about how the world is going to hell in a handbasket. He asked me how we were doing, and I told him Glenda was likely going to be off her feet for eight weeks from additional foot surgery. He listened intently. His voice became quite concerned.

With great gravitas, he replied, "I can't tell you what to do. But I can tell you what **not** to do."

I was greatly interested. Apparently, through all the troubles he and Joyce had endured, he had discovered something very important.

"Okay, so what do I not need to do?"

"Do **not**, under any circumstances, give her a bell!"

The sip of coffee I had just taken exploded into a cloud of mist around me as I struggled to breathe through the laughter. Before I could get my composure back, he exclaimed,

"I got to go! They have finished Joyce's therapy. Ten more seconds and she will be ringing the damn bell."

I quickly put the phone down and stared out the window for a moment at the newly blooming azaleas. A broad smile remained in place. The memory of that phone call would be with me throughout the day. Just like always, talking to him had made the sunshine a little brighter, the pains a little less noticeable, and my outlook more optimistic.

There is no tonic more potent than the good humor of an old friend.

My first notebook was a Big Five tablet, given to me by my mother with the sensible suggestion that I stop whining and learn to amuse myself by writing down my thoughts.

– Joan Didion

Summer's Lease

Mary Ann Rygiel

Summer's lap wears an apron full of bounty—fruits like cherries, summer pies of strawberry-rhubarb or peach with crumble topping, colors like turquoise and raspberry and lime, flowers like peonies with the fattest black ants you've ever seen, Knock-out roses, fragrant lilacs, vegetables such as heritage striped tomatoes, cloth of seersucker, dotted Swiss, and linen, outfits with white jeans and pink sandals, sand that is yellow or sugary white if you're lucky, carnival rides, airy cotton candy, and Kewpie dolls after tossing three balls, hotdogs with all the trimmings. Summer school for extras like typing and driver's ed, summer typing jobs, or un-air-conditioned warehouse jobs for high school students tasting a little independence and money-making. Summer also brings yards with weeds that need frequent mowing, and, in late summer, shopping for new fall navy blue uniforms, white blouses with Peter Pan collars, and Buster Brown tie shoes.

Eating ice cream after going to each day of the nine days of the St. Anne's novena, occurring in mid-July and culminating on July 26 with the good saint's feast, was a way my family felt the grace and bounty of summer. Our elderly Italian neighbor, Mrs. Capua, needed a ride and often went with us. Her husband's first name was Lorenzo. He would walk up and down on the buckled sidewalk in front of their small, hedged house, with his hands clasped behind his back, making a soft, susurrating sound. She would say his name—"Lorenzo, Lorenzo!"—in an inexpressible tone of criticism and annoyance since he remained at home. She was short, squat, sighing in a black dress that was not the chic cocktail dress, but instead the pervasive color of ongoing Mediterranean mourning. She and her husband were immigrants who spoke Italian at home and kept a shed in the backyard for distilling and aging a strong dandelion wine. She made her own pasta sauces and kept garlic in a corner of the kitchen counter for flavoring the sauce, and then Starlight individually wrapped peppermints to counteract the garlic. Their daughter, Helen, was married to a man named Carl Tacori. They were modern. They lived in Chicago. Carl invented things like improved hand-held metal can openers. Mrs. Capua did not like to get ice cream after the novena, so we dropped her off first. Secretly I was glad, wanting it to just be us in our green Studebaker.

At the Dairy Queen, my dad liked a banana split, which had three scoops of ice cream, a split banana nestling on each side, whipped cream, and a cherry on top. He didn't get this very often; his usual treat was a 10-cent soft cone that he and my mother shared. I liked to get the soft vanilla cone with the chocolate coating. A lesser but still good alternative if the machine that made the coating wasn't working was a vanilla cone with chocolate sprinkles on it. Sometimes my mother fixed my dad a root beer float at home instead of making the trip to Dairy Queen. He would laugh as he talked to us, relishing the foam and ice cream.

This experience had many lessons in it. One was how to be a good neighbor. Another was to think less of self and more of someone else's need. Yet another was the importance of the "cloud of witnesses" spoken of by Hebrews. When we went to church, which was the purpose of this summer evening outing, we called on St. Anne to act as our intercessor in hymn and prayer. The words of the hymn are still in my ears: "O good St. Anne, we call on thy name,/Thy favors loud, thy goodness we proclaim."

Everything lay before me then. High school, college, marriage, my husband and two sons, a wide waiting world, eager to meet and embrace me. I did not know then what I know now—that summer has a short lease. The landlord does not extend your terms, announcing with accompanying documents, "Stop wearing white jeans now! Put away berries; eat potatoes and fall and winter squashes." The hints were there: work, weeds, worthless gifts like kewpie dolls for questionable skills, shopping for school clothes, garlic across all that sweet bounty. It ends, beloved lives end, and we are left with the gift of memories of ice cream on a summer night, and the consolation of the hymns we sang to the cloud of witnesses. Like the universe, the cloud is ever expanding, and our memories shrink to a distillation of dried flowers, collected in the pages of the past.

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

– John Braine, *Writing a Novel*

End-of-Summer Party, Viewed Several Ways

Mary Ann Rygiel

Yesterday I went to an end-of-summer party on impulse, without even having seen the email invitation to people in the Terrace Acres Drive and Terrace Acres Circle neighborhoods. For those curious about how somebody as much of a planner and list maker as I am, even lists of conversation topics, would on a whim go to an outdoor block party, here is how it came about. I was walking my puppy, trying to coax him to do something productive on the grass. We both heard the delicate voices and laughter of young girls through the screen of trees and vines. We listened. We waited. A woman emerged on the edge of the street with two elementary school-age girls and a baby in a stroller. She explained she was helping the children's mother, a single mother of four, by taking three of the four children to a party. They had received an invitation to an ice cream end-of-summer party at a home in the neighborhood. The younger boy in the home is autistic and loves dogs. The parents of the boy wanted him to have a happy experience just before returning to school, so they sent an open invitation to neighbors and their dogs to attend.

For people for whom our local doctors are important, here's what I learned about one of our bright young doctors from his sister, at the party. He earned a degree in electrical engineering from Texas A&M. He worked for a computer company in Texas after graduation, but didn't like it. He wanted something more social, not something where he was doing numbers all day. He gave up a well-paying job to go back to school and is now a family medicine doctor in Auburn. What this doctor did was a gratifying change to me, the listener.

For those who love dogs, here are some of the breeds my puppy and I saw: a black and white poodle, or was he a doodle of some sort? A King Charles Cavalier Spaniel wearing a cone-shaped party hat fastened with elastic under his chin. A miniature Collie. A spotted mixed breed dog with a lofty manner and unflappable temperament. A curly-haired dog off a leash who rolled around in the grass. My own Pomeranian, who was declared fluffy and pretty by various people. I said to the owner of the King Charles dog that I had applied to a breeder outside of Atlanta but was daunted by the detailed questionnaire and statements written in an accusatory tone: Why do you want this type of dog? Do you have any experience with it? Are you equipped to take care of this dog? If you ask to get the dog as a Christmas gift for a child, you will automatically be disqualified as a recipient. There was a $400 nonrefundable deposit. The King Charles owner readily agreed that breeders of this dog are highly discriminating as to who is qualified to own such a dog. I was not qualified.

For readers far away in age and sensitivity from young Romeo and Juliet, and near to Lord Capulet in thinking that jokes about dancing with corns on the feet make for clever party talk, consider the animated topic of one conversation—colonoscopy and the prep involved. Several people in this conversation had lively recollections of their most recent

encounter with this procedure, including one woman who said a woman behind the next curtain had eaten some ham, "just a little piece," after midnight and another who swore that her gastroenterologist was handsome and that that made the procedure go better. They were appalled and disbelieving to consider my rejoinder: "The insurance companies require the doctor to grade the patient on prep—excellent, good, fair, poor." One speaker recounted her feelings of weakness from the prep, and explained the three ice cream treats she was taking home to her husband by saying, "He has a colonoscopy on Wednesday." I love listening to people talk, relishing, with Whitman, "what the talkers are talking."

For those who love differently abled children, I have this to report. The boy's older brother petted my dog and said they loved Pomeranians but had to get rid of theirs because he kept using the house for his elimination. When I asked about the boy in whose honor the party was being held, his brother said he had gone inside. He had retreated from conversation and dogs.

Later on, in talking to my Pomeranian, whose name is Mr. Darcy, about the party, I said, "Did a nice boy pet you? Did you see a lot of dogs?" Although he could not give me the look across the room between Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle as they sat looking at each other in my favorite film version of *Pride and Prejudice*, I felt he understood.

For as mundane as this little party seems in recounting, it makes me think of an entry for August 8 in Martha Whitmore Hickman's *Healing After Grief*: "If we have ever wondered about the limits of our strength and our ability to endure, our experience of loss will tell us much. Our life is shaken to the foundation. But we survive. And out of this terrible, rarefied self-knowledge comes, if we are fortunate, a kind of empathy with all of creation—a sense of the wonder at the suffering and the beauty, of the world."

The final psalms sing with joy at God's creation and how much it celebrates Him as maker and sustainer. The little girls with their hair ribbons, childish voices, innocence, and new shoes for school are part of the beauty. So is their helpful neighbor, wanting to do something for the single mother, and who plans to meet the younger girl after school every day so she gets home safely. So is the doctor, who wanted to serve people and not numbers on a computer. So were the various dogs, exclusive breeds with soulful eyes and ordinary mutts with a dignified air. So were all the neighbors, who brought their dogs for the boy to see, and talked to each other as friends, not enemies across a political divide. So is the boy who loves dogs and who sees the world differently. So are all the doctors who look at our humbler parts to keep us healthy. So is ice cream, originally brought to America in a vanilla recipe by Thomas Jefferson from a trip to France. So is the beginning of school and the appearance of yellow school buses on the streets of Auburn. So is the Tennessee Red, the red cedar pencil that you can get a 12-pack of for $13, and which merited a mention in an article from *Businessweek* called "Don't Forget to Write!" A full moon is coming on Friday, and it praises God, too. I was thinking of Gerard Manley Hopkins' plea to God in one of his sonnets: "Birds build—but not I build: no, but strain,/ Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes./Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain." It did not rain for the end-of-summer party yesterday, but as I write this now, it is raining.

The Red Album

William Tolliver Squires

One day my grandfather walked into the office of his hometown newspaper, The *Lamar Missouri Democrat*, and placed the following classified ad: *There comes a time in every man's life when he must shout Uncle! No more repair work, please.* In fewer than twenty words, Elza Smith announced his retirement. The year was 1985, and he was 88 years old.

Curious about the older man's concise message, the newspaper's editor invited him to sit for a conversation. As their talk began, my granddad explained, "I retired for the first time in 1961, at least I thought I did…. No one else knew it. I retired at age 65; this retirement is my second!" Elza's talk with the news editor became a feature article in the *Lamar Democrat*.

When Granddad retired, people kept calling him about their broken appliances and electrical service, so he kept working. Elza Smith became an electrician in the mid-thirties during the Great Depression. At that time, electrification for the state of Missouri's rural communities was new. A self-taught *Mr. Wizard*, Elza Smith, electrified houses, barns, and businesses and repaired almost any broken appliance native to planet earth, including Barton County and the little town of Lamar.

For his lifetime Elza retained a comprehensive knowledge of local history and progress. In addition to being an electrician, he was a volunteer fireman, a church deacon, and a fifty-year member of the County Historical Society.

I received a copy of Granddad's published interview in '85. Christmastime approached, and I found myself thinking of Granddad, so I wrote him a long letter. I sent the letter with a package that contained a large, red leather photo album stocked with half a hundred double-sided archival pages. In my letter, I made a request: "Granddad…you probably have a photo album or two lying around. However, I have something different in mind for this. It might not only contain photos but could include other things of importance to you, such as poems, clippings, writings, thoughts, records of events, little-known family facts, anecdotes, or anything you like. Such an album is something all of us would value."

Two years passed when Granddad died at age 91. My mother was with her father when he passed, and the red album lay at his bedside. After his funeral, the album traveled around the Midwest, from Missouri to Iowa and Ohio, then to California and Florida. It made its way to every living stem and branch of the Smith family tree, and the album finally came to me.

Each page engages and invites conversation. There are photographs, some dating from the 1890s. In addition, there are genealogical records and carefully typed personal narratives by Granddad.

On one page is a "Bus Operators' Award" issued by the State of Missouri in June 1942. Elza stands next to his school bus in a photograph. Neatly dressed in his bus driver's uniform, he looks very professional. A laudatory article recalls children and their bus rides with Granddad during the war years between '42 and '44.

On other pages is a state motor vehicle registration for a 1947 Hudson automobile and expired driver's licenses dating from 1942-1986.

Clipped from newspapers and magazines are poems, humorous and sentimental favorites clipped from newspapers and magazines. Granddad even typed up a few of his attempts at poetizing.

A *Los Angeles Times* news article and photo from 1979 described my aunt Ellen and uncle Floyd Smith's narrow escape from Iran when terrorists stormed the US Embassy in Tehran and hostages were taken.

Official citations from the Governor of Missouri, John Ashcroft and President Ronald Reagan and Nancy congratulate Grandma and Grandpa on seventy years of marriage.

Several pages of telegrams, postcards, and notes announce marriages and the births of children and grandchildren between the '40s and the '80s.

A colorful tourist pamphlet features Harry S. Truman's birthplace. President Truman was born in Lamar in 1884 in a neat, white wooden house. Granddad maintained the Truman house's electrical wiring and lights for half a century. One day, after a thunderstorm, I helped repair a downed service line to the house. As we worked, Granddad delivered a respectful history lesson on the house and the life of the 33rd President.

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*

Egypt Diary

William Tolliver Squires

-June, Luxor, Egypt-

I am laid up in a hotel room. Last night the green salad and "Nile Carp" was irresistible. Today, I'm gut-punched, sick with Pharaoh's Revenge. I ignored warnings but couldn't resist the salads and fish.

My wife shopped this morning and returned describing a stone sculpture she found at a street vendor's stall. According to the peddler, the carving is old, authentic, and came from an archaeological site. If that's true, it is illegal to possess, own, or sell. Undeterred by law or the likelihood of being scammed, *my darling* wants the stone and wants me to crawl out of bed right away and see the thing.

-Later-

I dragged myself out into Luxor's blinding heat and misery. Without much effort, we found the young vendor and his makeshift stand. He showed furtiveness as he reached behind a curtain and withdrew the carving wrapped in yellowed newsprint. The stone is about an inch thick and the size of a dinner plate. It bears the profile (in relief) of a pharaoh and the partial features of one other figure. The fragment appears to have been part of a horizontal register which presumably would have included a pharaoh's entire entourage. The scale and quality of the carving seem authentic. However, the imagery is simple, generic in form, and could be the work of any moderately skilled forger. I would be more impressed if the stone were alabaster, not the tan local sandstone. Nevertheless, I told *the wife* to buy the thing if she liked it. At best, it is real and illegal; at worst, it is a plausible fake. As a forgery, it could have been made a thousand years ago or yesterday.

Wifey dear decided that the vendor should bring her prize to our hotel room later for a cash exchange. She is excited by the manufactured theater of making a private trade with a street merchant. For her, it's all very Agatha Christie. The carving is indulgent, and I must carry the thing in my luggage to the Cairo airport. Whatever ensues, my drama queen will have her story to tell and embellish.

-6 PM-

I've been looking out a window from my bed, sketching the only thing I have a view of, the rooftop of a shuttered, white masonry church surmounted by a shabby cross. The other day, I walked to an ancient temple site to see a controversial wall of hieroglyphs. The carved reliefs featured the goddess Isis and nubile female attendants. Offended Medieval Christian image-breakers struck at the images with iron tools, gouging deep Xs across the glyphs.

During my walk, several small children tagged along, chattering in Arabic. One smiling child gestured for my attention by tapping the open palm of one hand with the forefinger of her other hand. At first, I thought she might be begging, but she and her little band seemed too happy and well-fed. They followed me until I stopped a local who spoke some English and asked what the kids wanted from me. She explained that the little ones were fascinated with the sketchbook and pencil I carried. You are in a different world when an American's pad and wooden pencil capture the fancy of children. What a favor it would be if I brought a packet of pencils and paper to dispense.

-Cairo airport-

I fly back to New York from here in a couple of hours. *My spouse* is flying off on her own to Athens, Greece, where she'll do as she damned well pleases. I have a prediction about the stone relic I'm carrying. Away from Luxor's aridity, it won't last. Even if the sculpture makes it through screening here and through U.S. customs, given the humidity in Georgia, heat, and cold, her prize will soon be a featureless slab. Even now, it's fading away like sand through an hourglass.

-Denouement-

My bride's relic made it through customs in New York but succumbed to the deep south's heat and humidity in less than ten years. As for our marriage, that ended after twenty years or of drought and famine. It all reminds me in some way of the biblical tale of Jezebel, Ahab, and the prophet Elijah. I'm no evil king, but, like Elijah, I get by on wit, humor, and a little fancy footwork.

A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies. The man who never reads lives only one.

– George R. R. Martin

Tiger, King of Scott Road

Stacey Patton Wallace

In the winter of 1971, when I was eight years old, Mother Mac, my maternal grandmother, brought me a surprise: a tiny Siamese kitten with light, smoky fur, gray feet and face (which later darkened), and intense, beautiful blue eyes.

Now, Mother Mac, being a tad sneaky, came over to our house in Alexander City ("Eleck" City to the locals) on Scott Road when Daddy, her son-in-law, wasn't home. Daddy didn't much care for cats, which was understandable since he was allergic to them. However, Mother Mac didn't make a clean getaway before Daddy returned home because Jim and Mike, my two much older brothers, hid her car keys. Escape thwarted.

I'm sure that Daddy was less than thrilled to be the owner of a kitten, even though this one was adorable and tiny enough to stand in Mama's petite hand. Since I am now allergic to cats myself, I have to admire him for putting up with all the itching and sneezing he must have endured for us. To paraphrase Donald Davis, my favorite storyteller, that's what Daddies do.

My new kitten was named Tiger, and as he grew, he always kept us entertained. And although Daddy would never admit it, Tiger eventually won him over, too.

However, Tiger certainly tried Daddy's patience on countless occasions. For example, Daddy loved to take off his shoes and be in his sock feet when he sat in his chair in our den. When he popped his toes, Tiger would pounce on Daddy's feet, biting and clawing. Once when he was in the kitchen washing dishes, Tiger attacked his feet from behind. In frustration, Daddy yelled, "Would somebody come and get this damn cat?"

Poor Daddy. Tiger seemed to look for ways to annoy him. For instance, Tiger would climb our screen door with his sharp claws. In addition, he would slide on his back, going back and forth along the bottom of our sofa to sharpen his weapons. Also, Tiger would jump up on our kitchen counter to peer at us in the den. Our fabulous feline's talent at climbing and jumping made Daddy ruefully remark, "Tiger's one-third cat, one-third squirrel, and one-third monkey."

Perhaps the most irritated Daddy ever got with our furry feline had to do with the litter box. Tiger refused to do his business outdoors; instead, he'd come to the kitchen door, yowling to be let in to use his litter box, several times a day. Mama, who worked full time and had supper to cook, wanted Tiger to go outside so that he wasn't always interrupting her work. Somehow, Daddy "trained" Tiger to go into the great outdoors.

However, one cold winter day when the ground outside was hard, Tiger couldn't dig his own latrine. Therefore, Daddy got his digger for his garden to help out. I remember Daddy muttering, "If somebody had told me I'd be digging a

hole for a cat to s--- in, I'd have said he was crazy."

By this time, Tiger was the undisputed King of Scott Road, and we were merely his lowly subjects. He relaxed wherever and whenever he pleased. After working for eight hours and cooking supper, Mama would stretch out on the couch in the den to rest. Tiger would leap gracefully onto her stomach and curl up for a very much undeserved nap. Also, after working his eight-hour-day (not to mention sometimes half days on Saturdays) and washing dishes, Daddy would finally sit in his chair to read *The Alexander City Outlook* and *The Birmingham News*. Tiger would take a break from attacking Daddy's stocking feet. Instead, his majesty would jump into Daddy's lap, inserting himself between his subject and the newspaper. Then he'd walk around until he found just the right spot and curl up in Daddy's lap, finally stealing his heart, too.

Also, Tiger relished surprising his subjects whenever he could. Often, he would hide behind my brothers' bedroom door, waiting to attack a family member walking down the hall. Once, I peered around the door, and I observed him quivering with anticipation at grabbing and biting his prey's legs.

In addition, Tiger terrorized my brother Mike, who loved to play with his Hot Wheels cars and racetrack in our living room. I guess Tiger thought that the cars were fast, metallic mice. When a car came around the curve, Tiger would deftly swat it off the track with his paw. Sometimes, determined to catch the "mouse," he would reach into the little house (supercharger), where rubber wheels would make the car shoot out faster.

Finally, Mike had to depose the king by carrying him out of the living room and closing both doors. He could then play with his cars in peace.

In addition, Tiger was the smartest cat I've ever seen, and he had his secrets. He would wander off most days, in good shape. However, sometimes, at the end of the day, he would come home from a literal catfight, ears torn and bloody from the skirmish. I wondered how the other cat looked. For several days, he would convalesce in front of our refrigerator, an old-fashioned one with a vent at the bottom that blew out warm air; this appliance soothed, comforted, and healed our mighty feline warrior.

Once Tiger healed, he'd go back into battle. One day, Mama and I, curious about Tiger's adventures, decided to watch him leave the yard. We stood outside our house on the sidewalk, watching Tiger start to go into the woods next door.

Suddenly, Tiger stopped, turned around, and began to "meow" at us very insistently. We quickly got the message. He told us, "Where I go is NONE of your business. Now, beat it!" He refused to go any farther until we went inside the house.

Mama and I promptly went indoors, but we did peek out of my brothers' bedroom window. Satisfied that the two spies were gone, Tiger, the King of Scott Road, went on his way into the woods to fight another day.

Miss Stacey

Stacey Patton Wallace

Being a 59-year-old Southern woman raised in Alexander City ("Eleck" City to the locals), I have been well-trained in Southern etiquette and traditions by my parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. For instance, I ALWAYS: 1. Say "Yes, Sir," and "No, Sir," "Yes, Ma'am" and "No, Ma'am," "Please," "Thank you," and "You're welcome." 2. Hold the door open for other people, especially those older than I. 3. Stop my car when a funeral procession comes by until all cars with their headlights on go by. I once witnessed this happen on Highway 280 in Opelika; I was proud that even on a busy highway, we did as we were taught. Please note: Only ambulance drivers don't have to follow this Southern tradition. Anyone else who doesn't stop has obviously had no home training, or they aren't from the South and don't understand this important custom of my people. 4. Call older people "Miss" or "Mr." Whoever.

However, I'm struggling with that last bit of Southern training now that I'm 59 and on the receiving end of being called "Miss Stacey." I don't feel old enough to be called that. After all, I still feel as though I'm middle-aged. However, I understand that the chances of me living to be 118 years of age are quite remote. But I don't think I'm a senior citizen quite yet. However, I gladly accept the free sweet tea from Veggies to Go for being 55+. I welcome any freebie. Also, my attitude about aging has changed drastically in the last ten years or so. For example, back when we lived in LaGrange, the ticket taker at the local movie house made a dangerous mistake. She innocently asked me if I qualified for the senior citizen discount, and I was still in my forties. Poor woman. I almost pulled her through the hole in the window. Also, still furious at her well-meant remark, I said to my husband Mike, "Boy, I didn't realize I'd had that rough a day at school!"

These days, I aggressively ask if Mike or I qualify for the senior discount. However, don't think I'm aging gracefully. Never! I just make a lot less money since I'm retired.

About eight or nine years ago, while Mike and I were still teaching at Long Cane Middle School, two sweet, young first-year teachers went to eat with us and the rest of the gang on our first professional learning day. Traviera, now Dr. Sewell, called me "Miss Stacey." I chuckled and gently told her to call me "Stacey." In fact, I told her best friend, Frannie Newman, the same thing. It never happened. From that day on, I was forever, "Mrs. Wallace" to them, no matter how earnestly I asked them to call me by my first name. They just couldn't do it. However, I understand completely. Dr. Ley was my major professor and advisor while I was working on my M.Ed. at Auburn University over 30 years ago. To this day, I cannot call him by his first name either.

Now, years later, I have noticed a disturbing trend. People in their 30s and 40s are calling me "Miss Stacey," too. So, I've asked myself, "At what age is it appropriate to be called "Mr." or "Miss" Whoever?" To me, 65 sounds about right, but that's only six years away, the Good Lord willing. Johnny Carson once said, "Old is fifteen years older than you are." That would make 74 the "Miss Stacey" stage of life. That sounds better.

If Daddy can see me from Heaven, I know he is having a hearty laugh. When I was an obnoxious, young know-it-all in my teens or early twenties, I went with Daddy and Mama to a fundraising event that Russell Mills, Inc., the former textile mill giant, was having for a young friend and coworker of Daddy's. I noticed that all of Daddy's friends and coworkers called him, you guessed it, "Mr. Tom." Laughing hard, I said, "Daddy, they call you 'Mr. Tom' because you're OLD!" Now it's not that funny.

Well, I've finally decided when anyone of any age calls me "Miss Stacey," I'll do what I used to tell my students when they had to do something that they didn't like: I'll "Suck it up, Buttercup" and just be glad that those people are carrying on Southern etiquette and traditions.

I'm certainly glad that my great nephews Patton (Auburn class of 2030) and his younger brother Thomas (Auburn class of 2036, the Good Lord willing) are being raised to be courteous, respectful young Southern men. But I'm happy to report that they simply call me "Stacey," bless their hearts. Oh, I forgot one.

My Mom as a Child

Char Warren

Mama, born in 1909, was reared on a farm in southwest Louisiana. Her parents worked on the farm from sun up to sun down. The kids used to collect the eggs, pick fresh vegetables from the garden, feed the animals, and help keep the yard raked, or swept. "You kids go outside and rake the yard before you start playing. Stay out of the house so that your Dad and I can take a nap, as we have been working in the fields since before sun up." I have always wondered if those "naps" were why they had ten kids!

Mama was the seventh of nine girls. They had one brother, Allen, who was born the year before Mama, but he died of diphtheria when he was three, as there were no medications then to deal with many diseases. I will always believe that when he looked around the room and realized he would have to answer to ten women, including his mother, he decided to give up the ghost and said, "See y'all later!"

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

Jeannine

Char Warren

In high school in the 1960s, my first boyfriend was Randy. He attended AIC, the local Catholic high school, and I attended the public school, Opelousas High School. There was this rich, privileged, very attractive girl who was a great ballerina, who was constantly flirting with Randy, asking him to go to her recitals and the Friday night dances after the high school games. She was a cheerleader, and Randy was a football player. He never took her up on her offers, and she despised me! One of her brothers, Tony, was a close friend of Randy's, and Tony died in his junior year of high school, from cancer, I think. Their dad was Tony Chachere, who invented Tony Chachere's Cajun Seasoning, which just about all Cajuns use today to season everything from gumbo to ice cream!

Years later, after Toby and I had been married many years and had three kids, we went back to visit our families in Baton Rouge and Opelousas, La. My sister Carolyn was filling me in on our old classmates, and she asked me if I had heard about Jeannine. I told her that I had heard that she had finally gotten married. Carolyn said, "That's old news!" She told me that Jeannine was crippled and was in a wheelchair. She had asked about me and had said she would like to see me the next time we got home for a visit. I asked Carolyn if she thought she meant that, and she said she was pretty sure that she did. We decided to call her to see if it was convenient to drop by, and she said to please come. That tall, lithe, pretty girl, whose long legs almost reached from the ground to Heaven, looked pitiful! I would never have recognized her if she had rung our doorbell!

The doctors had been doing many tests and had decided that she had ALS, Lou Gehrig's Disease. (My sister-in-law, Tracey, was diagnosed with that when fifty years old, and she died after three years of suffering. One of our best friends, Connie, also died of it, about five years ago.) That disease is one of the hardest to diagnose and has no cure. What a terrible crippling disease! We had a warm visit with Jeannine, and she was so glad that we had come to see her! She married Jim Wallace, and they had five kids and six grandkids. She died in 2020, and her husband died a year or so ago. I'll bet she is dancing and twirling in Heaven right now!

When I think back to our high school days, seeing each other at dances, checking our makeup in the restroom mirror, I always remember her wearing **a lot** of eye makeup—so much that we called her Cleopatra! Do you know what's funny? I hadn't thought of Jeannine in years, and now, every day when I put on eye makeup, I say a prayer for her and tell her how sorry I am that I was not nice to her when we were young. Maybe one day we will meet again in another life. Who knows, maybe we will become friends in Eternity!

Scaredy Cat

Char Warren

Three or four years ago, I was leaving home, turning left out of our driveway, heading to the Soup Kitchen in Opelika to volunteer, which I had been doing for about thirteen years. I looked both ways, and after the car to my left passed our drive, headed toward Auburn. I didn't see anyone coming from the right on East Glenn. As I carefully and slowly came out of our drive to cross to the other side of the boulevard, I heard this terrible crash and glass breaking. I said to myself, "That is going to ruin someone's day today!" All of a sudden, I said, "That's our house! That's our house! That's our house!" The next thing I knew, my car was thrown up on the curb across the street at the entrance to the Woods Subdivision, facing Auburn, not Opelika! (I never did have a good sense of direction!)

A lady in a small beige car was coming down the hill in the street in front of our home and changed lanes into the lane I was turning into. The large plants in the center median completely hid her car from my sight I was a nervous wreck, as Toby had just kissed me goodbye. When he heard the crash, he knew it had to be me. He started yelling and crying, "Not my Char!" He had decided to sweep the porch while he was outside, so he heard it all. He ran across both lanes of traffic, in all of the broken glass—and was barefooted! My sweet angel!

I couldn't open my door, as it had been hit in one of the three turns the car had made from the impact. He didn't even feel the broken shards of glass in his feet! I tried to open my window to tell him to be careful, and that I was all right, but he managed to pull the door open when he got to the car and almost ripped the door off, as he was so concerned. We just held each other, crying, and thanked our Lord that nobody had been hurt.

To this day, I am a terrible backseat driver always telling Toby to watch out for cars coming up on the passenger side or to slow down. He hates to travel with me as much as I hate to travel anymore. He swears that he is going to put me in the back seat, under the floor mat, with duct tape over my mouth and eyes, until we arrive at our destination!

We are going to the beach for our niece's wedding soon, and just the thought of driving there is giving me the creeps. We also plan to go to Louisiana to spend time with our family, as I have not been able to travel in three years or so.

Please pray for safe travels and no divorce!

I guess Toby had better stock up on duct tape! Right.

Ciotogach—Lefty

Bill Wilson

Imagine being 24 and unable to write—not illiterate, but unable to write. My dad could read. He couldn't write. Dad had been changed from left- (*ciotogach,* in Gaelic) to right-handed. In nineteenth-century Ireland, as in many European cultures, students were taught right-handed penmanship. Superstition? Cultural bias? Answers are elusive. What I know was that Dad was switched, a pedagogical travesty that haunted my father for life.

Like many Irish immigrants, Dad joined the New York City Police Department after being honorably discharged from the U.S. Navy at the end of the First World War. His veteran's status and the fact that he was dating the daughter of an NYPD sergeant probably gave him a leg up, or as they say in the NYPD, Dad had a *rabbi*. This had nothing to do with the city's burgeoning Jewish population. The term was cop slang for a mentor.

For Dad, any hope for a fast track didn't exist. The road not taken turned out to be a left turn. A century and a quarter ago, education for local Irish children was legally prohibited. Clandestine schools hidden in hedgerows were run by schoolmasters who risked imprisonment. The poorly trained teachers were not much better educated than their pupils. So the hedge schools also required students to master right-handed penmanship.

The world was right-handed, so lefties had to make the switch, Dad among them. With a sixth-grade education and scarcely legible writing, my father joined the NYPD, eventually achieving the status of Homicide Detective Second Grade, the highest rank one could earn on merit. All other promotions required a written exam. Dad's issue with test-taking was not a lack of knowledge. Although he seldom complained, he once told me that he had successfully coached other cops for the sergeants' and lieutenants' civil service tests. He knew the answers, but whenever he tried to write anything longer than a few sentences, his right hand would cramp and he would be unable to continue.

I can't imagine how much frustration and pain my father's handicap caused him. At Dad's insistence, I benefited from his shortcoming. When my parents enrolled me in first grade at St. Barnabas School in Bellmore, Long Island, a nun whose name escapes me observed that I would be taught right-handed penmanship. I was too young to remember Dad's vigorous objection, but I am certain it went something like this:

"Left-handed he is and left-handed he will remain." That was probably the only time in the history of the small parochial school that a Catholic sister backed down in a confrontation with an angry parent. Thanks to a father's painful experience, I was spared the misery of a right-handed education. My schooling may have had lacunae. Wrong-handedness was not one of them.

Frank and Henry

Bill Wilson

In an earlier incarnation, I played golf—sort of. At least I called myself a golfer, although I did so on very slender evidence. I used to tell friends, "If golf were a crime, there wouldn't be enough evidence to convict me." I found in golf companionship and a relatively healthy form of recreation. Occasionally, I found a golf ball I had shanked into the woods. For me, golf was about friendship, male bonding, and fresh air.

I moved to my new home at The Woods retirement community for a chance to play more golf. Henry Collins and Frank Felice became new friends and golfing buddies. Frank was more than ten years older than I, and Henry was ten years older than Frank. Both were better golfers. I was soon to learn that both my new pals could talk the ears off a brass monkey. Frank and I came to know each other through church. Henry instantly became my new BFF when he learned that we both had roots on Long Island.

Henry considered himself a raconteur, which he was at a minor league level. His mantra during a round of golf was, "Tell me if you've heard this before." We told him. Henry powered on regardless.

Frank had no desire to be a teller of tales. He just liked to talk. For Frank, the bridge of friendship was built of words—lots of words. Frank talked as he walked from his cart to the tee box. He talked as he stuck his wooden peg in the ground. He talked as he took two or three practice swings. He even talked as he hit his drive. Frank never missed a beat in his narrative. Nor did he ever miss his golf ball.

Our men's Thursday golf league paired players randomly. Shortly after moving to my new community, I had the dubious pleasure of being put in a foursome with Henry and Frank. On the first tee, as he stuck his wooden peg in the still damp grass, Frank regaled us with a narrative of how he had out-foxed U.S. Steel by living long enough to outlast the giant corporation's actuaries. "I'm still giving those guys fits," he grunted as he smacked his drive 200 yards straight down the fairway.

Henry stuck his two-inch tee into the rocky West Virginia soil. I guess he felt that elevating his golf ball an inch higher than everyone else somehow compensated for his 89 years on this planet. "Did I tell you I saw Lucky Lindberg take off from Roosevelt Field in 1929? You remember Roosevelt Field, don't you, Bill? Now it's the Roosevelt Field Mall. Stop me if you've heard this before." We tried. Henry kept going until Lindy was safely in the air headed East.

Eighteen holes of golf can be exhausting. My first round on a new course with new golfing buddies was traumatic. It evoked memories of a teething nine-month-old daughter or a new collie puppy the first time she was separated from her mother. This was ordeal by golf, easily surpassing anything the Spanish Inquisition could cook up.

We finished our round, posted our scores, and headed to the snack bar for much-needed refreshments. As I paid for my coke, my friend Rodney asked with a knowing smile, "How'd you enjoy your first round with Frank and Henry?"

As I sank wearily into a chair next to him, I mumbled, "My ears were bleeding by the time we finished."

Happiness is a Warm Towel

Bill Lee

I'm grateful for a washer, a dryer, and a laundry room.

I like

- the swishing sound the washer makes and
- the hum of the dryer and
- the "end of cycle" music and
- feeling a warm towel and its fresh smell and
- folding the towels and stacking them neatly on the granite countertop and
- cleaning the dryer vent for the next load and
- putting the towels away in the linen closet and
- checking off "wash towels" on my "to-do" list.

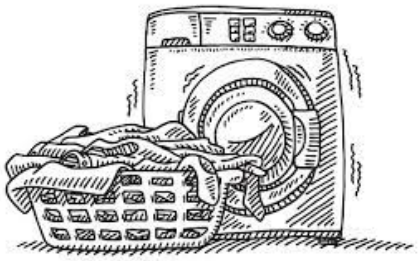
I like clean, organized, and sense of accomplishment.

It's okay to call me obsessive-compulsive.

Linus said, "Happiness is a warm blanket."

John Denver sang, "Sunshine on my shoulders makes me happy."

I'm content to say, "Warm towels make me happy."



Golfing Ireland with Annie

Bill Wilson

Describing my late wife, Annie, as obsessive is like describing Attila the Hun as impatient. Nowhere was this more evident than during our golfing in Ireland in 1996. We spent a fortnight in the land of our ancestors, playing nine golf courses in ten days, a record Jack Nicklaus has probably never beaten. All were tough, championship courses.

Many courses in the British Isles are links format, a throwback to when early courses were sheep pastures. What the natives call fairways are mostly unmown. The grass is short and seldom watered, so the fairways rarely need even a light trim, as my barber used to say. The rough is mostly fescue, a dense grass that makes a Brillo pad seem like angora. To add even more challenge, the rough-on-links courses also sport a short, gnarly evergreen known as gorse. In his book *Golf in the Kingdom*, Michael Murphy writes of gorse, "It is said by some to grow as well in the fields of hell." The rough is never cut or watered.

Links courses mostly follow a coastline. The land is so marginal (pun intended) that only an Irishman or a Scot could conceive of using such land for golf. Many layouts are along the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, the Irish or North Seas, or the many firths that punctuate the islands' coastline like bites of earth chomped out by a Celtic Godzilla. The proximity of the oceans and firths guarantees that wind, rain, sleet, and an occasional snowfall will enrich your golfing experience.

As a good golfer, Annie had always wanted to tee it up in Erin. I am what is euphemistically called a hacker or duffer—synonyms for "really bad golfer." My game was about hours spent with Annie and the $5 lost to my golfing pals every Saturday at our home course. (I once offered to give the guys the five bucks, provided I could skip the four-plus hours of golf and go home. They turned me down.)

When we arrived in Ireland, our native land was experiencing a rare heat wave. Turtlenecks, long-sleeved shirts, and heavy corduroy pants stayed in our luggage. We spent day one in a dry goods store buying golfing shirts and khaki shorts. To simplify gallivanting around Ireland's West Coast, we rented a car. Being cagier than I, Annie made certain the rental agreement was in my name. As the only designated driver, I inherited the challenge of mastering right-handed controls and driving on the wrong side of the road.

Our daily routine meant rising shortly after dawn, wolfing down a breakfast fit for the prisoner of Zenda, hopping into the tiny Mazda we had rented, and spending two or three terrifying hours trying to decode Irish road maps on roads not quite wide enough for two European-sized cars. The trip was Annie's adventure. My trip left me a nervous wreck with badly frazzled nerves. By the time we arrived at that day's course around noon, I could scarcely swing a club, let alone hit the ball.

Calm from her drive through the beautiful countryside, Annie played good golf. I experienced something like Chinese water torture administered by a rookie fresh out of executioner's school and played accordingly.

Golf is tough. For me, golfing in Ireland bordered on the catastrophic. My handicap was 28. The rules allowed me 28 more strokes to complete 18 holes than someone who could actually play the game. Annie's handicap was slightly higher, but she had two major advantages. The women's tees on any course are always much closer to the green. So is the landing area for the ladies' tee shots. For Annie, this meant that her shots bypassed most of the gorse, water, and sand traps awaiting men golfers.

Another difference between Annie's game and mine was her ability to hit the ball straight. My shots routinely go left or right, seldom straight. Links course fairways are hard-packed and almost bald. A straight tee shot tends to roll relentlessly toward the green. When one slices or hooks, as I did with great regularity, the ball also rolls relentlessly, but not toward the green.

Fescue, sand traps, and gorse bushes swallowed my tee shots as greedily as a Great White feasting on chum. On one particularly hard course, I hit three balls into the rough on a par three hole. The gorse was so thick I couldn't find any of my errant shots. What should have been an easy par cost me three Titlists and three penalty strokes for seven (that's when I pocketed the ball).

Annie won our Irish nine-course tourney hands down. I did have one major victory. As designated driver, I controlled our itinerary. Annie wanted to play two famous and very tough courses—Lahinch and Royal Portrush. Lahinch is near the northern border. Royal Portrush is in Northern Ireland. I had always tried during our 43 years together never to refuse Annie any reasonable request. Ireland was an exception.

"We will go to any course you want in the Republic of Ireland. But I refuse to play Lahinch or Royal Portrush. They shoot people in the North.

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

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