

Westland Writes 2024

A Collection of Local Writing

Katelin Smith

Editor



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Poems

Jan Branton

Memories

A cross on a beach was what I saw
When we were just visitors there.
What had happened, we'll never know
But we'll treat the place with care.

"Just out for a ride," she said to her dad.
"I'll be back before you miss me."
She ventured out on her little boat
For all the sky to see.

The flow of the ocean was like a song
That played in her head for days.
She couldn't wait to get out there
And lift her heavy haze.

She loves this place where she grew up
Playing in the waves so tall.
And when she paddled out in them
She felt so very small.

Her family was truly the best ever,
They love her so very much.
And when Jack died after the accident
They became her steady crutch.

Some things she just could not explain
She needed to let them be.
"It was what he wanted," she told herself,
"As hard as it is on me."

Home is where the heart is
That's what they always say.
But her heart was broken for sure that day
Her joy just slipped away.

Jack was always her everything
Her life was most complete.
Folks watched them as they sparkled and shined,
Right after that first meet.

They enjoyed their time together
In this place that made them smile.
But when she looks back and thinks of him,
She misses him with every mile.

Rowing out here helps clear her head,
Her thoughts are so confusing.
So much has happened in three short years,
It was not of her choosing.

The ebbs and flows of life demand
That we row with the tide.
But she will always know in her life,
She has God and family on her side.

So she carefully handled the little urn
And prayed before she began.
And left Jack in the water they loved
That was the ultimate plan.

She doesn't know what life now holds,
It will certainly be a change.
But sometimes things happen that we don't expect
And we just have to rearrange.

None of us know what life has planned

For if we did, we may fear.
God watches over us all the time
In that we can always hold dear.

So on the way back home she rowed
And thought about what she will do.
"Hi, dad," she said as she came back in,
"It's now just me and you."

Passport to Heaven

My passport to Heaven will never expire.
He's accepted my life, which was His desire.

The things that I've done that never were right,
He's wiped away forever and said, "Give up the fight."

With Him there is love that no man can understand,
Until he's wrapped in the arms of God, the best place to land.

When I'm sad and it feels like I can't last another day
I remember what He said, "Come to Me and you'll stay."

That promise is forever and will never be taken back.
Be strong in the faith and discover what you lack.

For with God there is nothing that can't be erased.
You are His always and that can never be replaced.

Ruth Duncan Dale

Memories of My Big Brother, Calvin

He was one of my big brothers,
son number four of Mama and Dad.
He was an important part of my life
support and love he always had.

With a greeting of "howdy"
he answered my calls on the phone.
We shared laughter and memories
from times back at home.

When ask what he was doing
he answered always the same.
"Settin" came the reply
for that was his game.

Remembering his grin, his quiet kind of love,
he must be grinning down on me now from Heaven up above.

Always a place he shares within my heart.
In my life he has always been a part.

"I thought he walked on water."

(by his baby sister, Ruth)

Nature at Fundy

It all happened on a Monday as I was looking at the Bay of Fundy.
An unexpected movement caught my eye,
something miniature had passed me by.

Not too far that I could not see,
it was slightly larger than a bumble bee.

It had a green back and a beak quite long,
the beat of its wings made the hum of a song.

Drinking nectar from the flowers was its game,
a ruby-throated hummingbird was its name.

Canada Vacation, 1974

Laura Elliott

Leap

There is the moment just before
-of sweat and fear-
And then I've let go and
I'm falling.

The wind is rushing past, roaring, screaming
and then laughing
My back arcs, my hands reaching, fingers stretching
I feel it, the wind, palm
pressing into the small of my back

And then-
I'm flying

In, amongst, between, the currents
I dip and dive, the wind
cheering
I'm smothered in kisses from the sun
Embraced by the coy tendrils of clouds

My body is brimming with my aliveness
Soaked in adrenaline, splashing in it
Sparking electrical nerve endings
Leaping heart, every fiber of every muscle vibrating
with the exhilaration

I am bursting with heartbreaking joy
Not a shattering, but an
explosion
Life too large for this collection of atoms

I will fly forever

I will fall forever

I wonder why I ever doubted

that this was not the ecstatic, extraordinary way to die.

The Difference is an Inch

The difference is an inch,
but it might as well be a chasm,
for I can hear the troll growling the price to cross
and it is too high.

The price is scuffed knees
and clasped hands,
the gold of dripping mercies
and delicate apologies like
violets on lips.

No, my muscles seize and the chasm deepens.
No. My side is grassy and the wind
tousles my hair affectionately,
laughing as it burbles by.
Yes, this will do nicely.
Yes. I will shore up and sharpen
and wait for the white flag.

Barbara Glover

Mama Oak

Open arms, your branches embrace me,
As I hide and seek some solace.
Strands of moss hang down you
like hair-- your motherly mane.
I'm protected by your boughs
from the relentless sun.

I need time to think and dwell in darkened places
where solitude reigns,
Contemplating my life's next steps.
Somewhere safe to pause and rest, like the wildlife does--
tucked safely amid your wooded arms.

I rejuvenate here in Mother Nature's bosom,
a giant old oak.
I only step out again into the relentless sunshine,
once refreshed and renewed.

It's good to know my sanctuary is here for me
when contemplation whispers in my ear and I must
heed her call again.
Far from maddening crowds and spaces, your arms
will open again and unfurl this wooden fortress--
where calmness and peace reign supreme.
My soul rejoices to welcome
your embrace again Mama Oak.

Jim Jeziorowski

Rock 'N' Roll

Rock 'N' Roll goes to the depths of the soul
Music that's alive and will never grow old
In the middle fifties this sound was born and was
Met with a hefty amount of scorn from those who did
Not understand what was missing all across our land

Rock 'N' Roll brought us together for reasons that are right—
Both for black and for white
There was Elvis Presley, Little Richard and Chuck Berry, too
All the greats that we loved and knew

Rock 'N' Roll—they said it wouldn't last
That it would be, one day, just part of our past

It grew from gospel, rhythm & blues and even country
The perfect blend to come out of the last century

The music has changed through the years
Some of which are happy and some filled with tears

There is a Hall of Fame for these superstars where their
Music can be heard in our homes, offices and cars

They said it wouldn't last—how could they be so wrong?
Rock 'N' Roll is here to stay and be forever strong.

Ukraine

Such a sad time for Ukraine—it used to be filled
With sunshine and warmth—now it is only cold and rain
Another country bullied its way through
Terrifying its citizens along with me and you

Ukraine broke from Russia years ago now
Russia continues to bomb and fight—at least that's what
They vow

Russia wants that territory returned even when they pillage and burn
Ukraine is strong, not weak
It is freedom and peace that they yearn and seek
The world watches—what's to be done to be rid of the gun

Who is going to stop the dyin' and all the innocent children from
cryin'?

This country's Congress is doing nothin' to assist. I'm so angry I want
to
Bring out my fist for those who insist no funding for Ukraine
To let them soak in their never ending pain

The House Speaker must bring a vote to the floor if we want to stop
This crazy war and have no more

Ukraine must have the best air defense
That, my friend, only makes common sense

The Russian leader, Vladimir, continues talking nonsense and idiocy,
I fear
Oh, God, is that another missile strike I hear?

Written on March 22, 2024

Erin Knape

Make Peace in the Dark

on the drive home
it's snowing, gently
onto window sills
powdered sugar dusted
a blissful peace among evergreens
a delicate lift in the cold
and you trust
everything is as it should be
and shall be soon
on this next stretch of road
and the next
you are safe
to wake in the morning
to a feeling such as this

Thoughts Before the End

My exam is in two days, and I'd rather pitch my head through a wall
but I trekked to Walgreens for toothpaste instead, so I must be an
adult now
living somewhere with more voices than air
(you wouldn't believe what I heard in the elevator)
What if I moved to Canada next autumn?
I'm tired of discovering myself to be more complicated
than yesterday's inbox
I'll sift through it
sometime (not soon)
I'm headed to the party
but the whole world's on fire
wondering what she said to her
that made her leave
Can I walk with you
I'm so tired
Could you promise me
that everything will be okay in the end?

Manny Lee

The Promenade Mile

She sat everyday on the bench near the creek.
 Waiting... Oh waiting... so passionately.
 Every day at noon, she sat all dressed up.
 Her lips lined in red and her hair all pinned up.
 She's been told by her elders, what men want from their women is
 silence and poise.
 So she continued each day, sitting upon her bench, straight as an
 arrow, not making a noise.
 With her hair tied ribbons, and her dress made of lace.
 Waiting for the Man of Her dreams to greet her with a smile, and
 grace.
 But sadly enough no Man ever came, to take her from her everyday
 place.
 She waited and waited all dressed to the tens.
 As the other girls passed her by laughing, and pointing saying she'll
 never be nothing more than an old lonely hen.
 It was then, only then that she decided to leave that bleak bench.
 She shouted "I'm taking charge of my life! I will be a wife!"
 She saw friend after foe leaving with smiles, as
 They walked with their true loves around that Promenade Mile.
 "I want what they have, I deserve it! It shall be so." she shouted.
 She walked that Promenade Mile All On Her Own!
 Half way around, almost directly across, she noticed a Man staggered
 and lost.
 She stopped by his side, asking "what was wrong?"
 He says" I've come each day, for the Promenade Mile, to find me a
 wife with grace and smiles."
 He stood there distressed with his suit and his tie, a bundle of
 flowers, that looked just about to die.
 Let's go for a walk. Tell me what happened? I'll listen to you.
 Oh sweet Sir do I have a story too!

They walked and they talked, their stories the same.

They came to her spot and She said "This here is my bench, where I used to sit, and wait, and wait just like you, you see."

He held her hand and said "You won't be sitting there today, Will you accompany me the rest of the way?"

Her eyes filled with tears, and her cheeks became blush.

"Yes! Oh Yes! I'd Love that So much!"

He extended his hand, just like she imagined, they locked fingers and smiled.

And together forever they walked that Promenade Mile.

Debra Madonna

Thoughts About a Stroke

Excerpt from: *a stroke. one teeny, broken blood vessel*

a stroke is a brain injury,
a dark light
resulting in brain damage.

just Words
"disabling"

just Words
"bruised and wounded"

just Words
"weak and slow and clumsy"

just Words
"fear"

just Words
are not just words

I prefer helpful words
I prefer hopeful words
"not forever"
"slowly improving"
"healing"
"moving"
"mobile"

A handicapped parking tag
and special assistance means

I have places to go,
every day places,
the places I dream of.

I will move through the day with ease and grace.
These are the Words that I like.

Just Words

"all by myself"

"I am myself again"

Thoughts After a Stroke

Excerpt from: *a stroke. one teeny, broken blood vessel*

After I survived an accident in my brain
and it was time to go home,
I was a bit lost.
Would I recognize my house?
The real test of what I remember would be confirmed
when I walked through the back door.

Months before I had a stroke, I was determined,
obsessed to put my neglected
pictures and frames on all of the walls,
which all had been abandoned
and kept in a room in the back of the house.

I gathered all the pictures and my hammer.
The “tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-“
signaled another picture had found their spot on the wall.
“tap-tap-tap-tap-darn-tap-tap-darn-darn”
never discouraged me.
There was no stopping until every picture was in its very own place.
Finally, all the walls were covered
with photographs and embroidery artworks.
Everything in the house was where it was supposed to be.

It would be more than another two weeks
before I could go up the stairs,
to the second floor,
to the walls that held my children’s pictures,
embracing all the faces I loved.
I would never be lonely or afraid again.

*p.s. If you have a chance to see “The Wall of Boys”
and crooked pictures make you nervous,*

step away, go away.

Nothing and no one are perfect.

Cheryl Martin, M.A.

Sunflowers

Field of yellow dreams
Sunshine filled with Sunflower
A Monarch's quiet view



Tulips and Irises

Tulips and Irises rise during early spring,
After the wondrous Daffodils dot the landscape,
With colors of cream and yellow,
The breeze carries them in synchronization near the lake,
Across the way, in yards, near and far, as it's usually the first sign
Of Spring's awakening, from the dark winter where dusty leaves
Still flutter by here and there, others lay as compost for new flowers,
And gardens amongst Perennials who re-appear or stay almost
green;
As strawberries do even when winter's heavy glove drops so much
snow,
The reminder that Spring will never truly disappear as the hardy
grounded
Strawberry is a marker with its resilience which can withstand the
temperature.
A deep frost multiplied many times throughout the fall, winter and
Yet again, in Spring, the blossoms are one to follow after the Daffodils
timely visits
Showcasing and sharing their glory for a short while, then
transitioning in the wind when
other spring melodies of flowers, like the Grape Hyacinth;
Vegetation like Rhubarb, Onions and the like were rooted and
shooting
For the sky, readying for an earlier harvest in April instead of May,
With the colorful Tulips as part of the trio in the perennial spots;
Adding delightful flowering surprises between the various fruit
trees,
Birds planting their own seeds, bringing pine trees into
That same mix of newness this Spring.
Last year's Tulips nearby were a deep violet hue; a pastel like Renoir's
colorings
In his artistic paintings,
This year, the brightest orange Tulips expanded with March, April,
and May Palettes,

As the Irises are an early riser even with winter's chill still clinging to
branches, the taste of
frost quickly quells softly formed buds,
As darkness hung on the branches instead of the purple splendor, the
musicality
Of its beauty was silenced last year.
Its green leaves healthy but no flowers, as the silence of their growth
became
A sad twist of Fate for the birds, butterflies, and humans awaiting the
splendor and the perfume,
Of late all of mother nature's creatures were wondering its new
future of possible nurture,
And pondering what would be next if it was two years in a row of no
cheer,
Hues with baby buds quickly growing in earnest this spring,
breathing, exhaling
Surviving the odds,
Tallying up the science, some early spring days, warmer
temperatures, spurring
It and the Rhubarb and Strawberries to make an even earlier entrance
before the hard
Frosts were cascading across the country sides and city scape with
multiple flowering
Trees and plants, holding out hope, that maybe too, the Pears might
stand a fighting chance
To survive this recent cascading of severe cold and frost,
Standing the test of time, gathering up the courage to stay strong, and
keep the purple;
Study it and inhale its magic fragrance,
Just like the North Carolina Mint root;
The frost, which hit for three days in a row, boom, boom, boom, were
probably a death
Knell to some plant life here, there, and everywhere,
As in Rhode Island, Charlestown, specifically, there are no buds, no
leaves, no nothing,
Late in April 2024, as the cold, and bitter winds have silenced early

spring;
With its revival and newness arriving in the morrow back home near
the sea, the
Memories of those windy days, are a reflection of a distant past,
As the splendor before me and others now, view the sights and the
colors as the trees are
Dipping from whiteness, pink, purple into green
With the Lilacs extravagant scent and scrumptious flowers perfectly
fitted on the
branches reflect their longevity in the story
Of a countryside from a century ago
Perhaps two, where ground cover flavored green
With natural elements of dandelion, plants, wildflowers, vegetation
and perennials
Were essential to everyday living and preservation for the darker
months,
The roots and trees were there for necessity more than beauty,
Yet, seeing a century old Lilac and one about a third of its age,
Spread its love, is a wonder for all to enjoy;
Just as the Tulips smile with its open flower showcasing its beautiful
Black and yellow pistil, staying around for a little while.

Nicholas Andrew Miner

HOW TO FIX A SHRINKING HEART

I remember the first time my heart shrank.

I was just a little kid playing
on the playground.

Then this mean kid pushed me
down and stuck out his tongue!

When I got home my mom helped
me put a Band-Aid on my knee.
Later on she told me the real reason
I was feeling so sad.

She said that when someone does something, that hurts you or makes
you feel bad, it feels like your heart
is actually shrinking.

Shrinking smaller and smaller just like in the story, The Grinch Who
Stole Christmas.

That hurt she told me can be on
the outside where others can see.

Just like when someone pushes
you down leaving a bump or a
scrape.

Or you can get your feelings hurt
on the inside where no one else
can see.

Just like when somebody sticks out their tongue at you.

You can pretend mean words or
sticks and stones don't hurt
but they do!

Since then there have been other times that I have felt my heart
shrinking.

One time I had five shrinkings
in one day! I thought my heart
must look so small that you'd
need a microscope to see it.

That was awful!

Another time I shrunk my best friend's heart. I told him he wasn't
my best friend anymore! So then he told me I wasn't his best friend
either.

That's when my mom told us that
we had shrunk each other's hearts. So we hugged and do you know
what?

Well, I'll tell you if you haven't guessed, we both could feel our
shrinking hearts puff right back
up and we were best friends again.

Mom told us that anyone can cause a heart to shrink. It can be
somebody big or somebody small.

One time I interrupted my grandma one too many times. She called
me
a **BRAT!**

Now that really shrunk my heart!

I remember feeling sad and mad
and ran to my room and slammed
the door ... BANG!
Pretty soon I heard a knock.
It was Grandma.

I told her about my shrinking heart. She was sad and wanted to know
how to help fix it.

I told her that she had to do something good to take away
the hurt. A good thing like giving
a hug or saying something like,
you are very, very, very sorry.

Then I told her about the shrinking
I'd done to my little sisters and how
I fixed them.

I sang, ♪♪ Go away and stay
away and find someplace else
to play. ♪♪

Now that was a big shrinking for Natalie and Sarah. They even cried!

Right away I figured out that I
was being mean. I had shrunk
their hearts just like the playground
bully had shrunk mine.

That's when I promised them I would play with them later.

But, just to be sure I wasn't just teasing them, I gave them both
one humongous hug.

Grandma must have thought about what I told her because she said
she
was so sorry and should have said, 'Please don't interrupt.'

That's when she bent down and
gave me a hug so tight I thought she'd never let go.

Then she told me, just to make sure that all the shrinking in my heart
was gone, that she was going to make my favorite treat!

And just in case you haven't guessed that was an awesome way to fix
a shrinking heart!!!

Melinda Bacol Montilla

Family Photo

Photo frayed, yellowed
In black and white,
Children were seated
Left foot crossed over right,
My sister and I bookended
Our youngest brother.

I was seven, my brother four,
My sister ten - we wore
Bob socks, shiny black shoes.
My hair was just permed,
Didn't have the chance
To comb the curls out.

My sister and I
Were dressed like twins,
Same material, same style,
Maybe to save money?
My cousin's wife
Sewed our dresses.

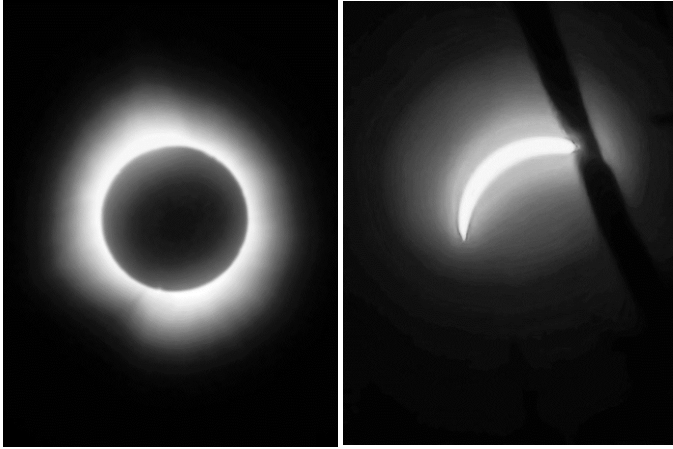
Our parents were standing
Behind the children,
Father's receding hairline
Marked their age difference.
When someone asked mother
If he was her father,

She would be amused,
Father, not so....
Family was startled to see me

Peeking in through
The window of time,
Ache and longing

Painted on my face
For what was lost –
Passing of innocence,
Smell of Ma's roses, Pa's cigar,
Their loving gaze beckoning
From the window of Heaven.

Now, I Just Listen to My Body



It used to be,
My body listened to me,
Up we went in pursuit
Of exciting things to do.

My church went on pilgrimage
To Carey, Ohio,
My petitions to our Lady
Appeared to be heard.

I saw the sun disappear gradually,
Lost its luster,
The moon swallowed carefully,
As if not to hurt him.

The sun completely gone
It was suddenly night,
The moon made a face,
Spat him out with all her might.

The sun was back

Cheerful as ever,
Exuding warmth
Painting colors everywhere.

The following day
My body complained:
'My bones are weary,
My knees are achy.'

I was persuaded,
I agreed
To stay in bed
A while longer.

Katherine Billings Palmer

Friday Nights

More than 40 years ago,
I looked forward to every Friday evening
Lying on the bed
In my parents' spare room

The house was quiet
After they left for the racetrack
And I gathered my tools
Last week's NYT Sunday crossword

My favorite ballpoint pen
A can of Pepsi
And climbed clumsily into the bed
My belly swollen with you

Maybe a month to go
Until we'd finally meet

I looked forward to this end of week luxury
Off work from my cashier's job
Ankles swollen from standing behind the counter all day
Dinner digesting

I'd lie on my side,
Puzzling and solving
Solving and puzzling
Until I was sated

Then I'd turn, my shoulders propped on pillows
And stroke you
Touch you delicately

Over the layers of skin between us

And we'd talk for hours, you and I
Although you didn't have a voice yet

I already loved you then,
My unborn accident
The unplanned life interruption
That would transform my Friday nights

And my life
Forever

Only months before that,
I would have been
Squeezing into tight pants
And stiletto heels

Ready to dance at the bar until closing
But now,

I wore sweatpants
And bulky nighties
Slipper socks or bare feet
And lying in that bed

I'd tell you my dreams for you
How I'd keep you safe
And build our new life together
While trying to solve the real-life puzzle

Of how to make those dreams come true

Lost in Translation

If love languages are a real thing
Then my father and I
Were from different countries
He was from the land of

You have a roof over your head
And food on the table
And want for nothing
While I work overtime to pay for it

On my one day off, I cut the lawn
Before cooking the Sunday dinner
And when you're older, and your son has no dad,
I'll fill that role, too

But I was from a different land
Starved for affirmation
Aware of every criticism
Longing for words he rarely said

I needed to hear
"I love you"
And now, I understand
That's exactly what he was saying

Sharla Supplee

A Final Lullaby

I hope Death is a mother
when She comes to me,
tiptoes in at the end of the day,
sings me a lullaby,
whispers a favorite story,
kisses my forehead,
says a prayer.

Time to rest.

I hope Death is a mother
while She waits for me
as I wander off, exploring
my own quiet places.

I blow wishing flowers,
hear the cardinals sing,
visit those I love,
and breathe secrets
into their ears.

I laugh or cry or both
as I soak in this one life
that is gone.

Time to go.

I hope Death is a mother
when She guides me home.

I won't want to leave
when it is time.

I'll be mad, scared, sad,
a child when it comes to death,
throwing myself
down at the mercy of Her power.

But She listens to me,
holds my hand or carries me,
or both,
whatever I will need.
Time to let go,
a final lullaby.

Wild Honey

This hair, thick and wild, has waves—honey
flows over and through the hills, heavy

with the hoard of her lifework. She traps
all the treasures of her world—

wonder, wisdom, and weird—
among the locking turns and fierce slopes

that make me work, drag my pinky through
when I braid it. This hair is what I

imagine a storybook princess
has, but a feral one, who lives in

the extremes, cackles
with the crows, whispers
to her bees, and laughs
so freely that it
bounces off the sky,

a princess who never takes but gives
to all, snarls justice, feeds those

who need her wonder, wisdom, and weird,
whose subjects need her wildness and

bow at the ends of her honey waves.
I burrow into the sticky knots

to finish my lifework—me,
a subject who is in awe of her.

Shari Welch

Alluring Attraction

This tall handsome man in the room across the
way
Approaching him slowly thinking of just the right words
to say
We could get together for a nice intriguing timeless
rendezvous
Champagne on ice—romance—music—just me and
you
With pleasant greetings and a careful approach
Entranced long lasting looks and a sensual aura of
delight
Saying all of the right words—complimenting for
more
Of the soft—sweet—attractions that we all long
for
This could lead to a long relationship or just a short
time
Either way—I must say—the pleasure has been all
mine

The Outsider

Looking in the window at the happy people having
fun
Unwelcome, not belonging and on the outside looking
in
Wondering when will my time come to have fun and
interblend
But that's fine --- I'm not in this particular
mix
There are some needed duties to complete and
fix
Before leaving this earth and calling it a long
day
I eventually will click with someone special and refuse
to give way
To the negative attitude that can mode and shape us
just so
An ego can be lifted for the wrong reasons don't you
know
But that's all right and it will be
ok
Cause us outsiders always triumph in life somewhere
along the way

Tammy White

Choose Wisely

When you're young, attraction is EVERYTHING
He's handsome, she's so fine
Intimacy is insane
Live life together harmoniously
Venue is set, vows exchanged
Life is happening non stop
She's getting older, he is too
Their interest towards each other begins to lack
Sexual desires are nonexistent now
No common ground
No more date nights, no more communication
Bodies grow weaker, medications increase
No concern for each other's' happiness or livelihood
Existing in a loveless, careless marriage
Health becomes terminal and decisions should be made
"Pull the plug already!" is yelled out
Request is followed through
Family ask "How could you be so cold?"
"Caring for them in that condition is simply not an option"
Lesson learned, choose wisely who you marry
Their decisions for you will literally kill you

My First Love

You appeared out of nowhere
While bored in class
My mind began to wonder
Far and in between, reminiscing about recent events
With pen in hand, you were created
My thoughts flowed onto the page
You allowed me to be myself without judgment or criticism
My words to follow entertained me, amused me even
Recollecting the jokes that were told on the way to school
Laughing hysterically in my mind
Even recalled seeing a cute boy in the hallway
Expressing his cuteness and how I felt in that moment
It was like breathing for the first time
Freedom of expression overwhelmed me
Captivated me and enticed me
My writing journey began
Journaling, short stories, poems
I fell for you, hook, line and sinker
My first love, you will always be

Imelda Zamora

I Don't Know How

I don't know how to love you
The way that you love me
I don't know how to say the words
That smoothly pass your lips
I don't know how to hold your hands
The way yours warm mine
I don't know how to look into your eyes
The way your eyes melt in mine

I don't know how to do these things
That come to you so easily
And yet...but yet...and still...
You smile when I speak low
You squeeze my hand that I offer you
And when I look up at your face
You say that love is not what we do
But what we give of ourselves to another.

Macaroni and Cheese

Does Macaroni need Cheese?
Where's Ben without Jerry?
How about Peanut Butter?
Did it want some Jelly?
Is there Corn on the Cob?
Or some Corn to Pop?
Does some Chocolate have Chips?
For Cookies to top?
Don't forget the Meatballs,
To go with Spaghetti,
Or Ice Cream with Sprinkles,
That looked like confetti.
There's Fish and Chips, too
And Burgers and Fries
But the best pair of all
Is...YOU and I!

Stories &
Essays

Helaine Binstock

Quotes

I find easy-to-understand quotes especially engaging, many dozens credited to Mark Twain. He sounds like someone with whom it would have been fun to pass time – a real close buddy who could make you laugh and think simultaneously. He could have mentioned to you his remarks made while he was discussing gambling with an associate. He cleverly stated, “There are two times in a man’s life when he should not speculate: When he can’t afford it and when he can.” This quote was printed in Pudd’nhead Wilson’s Calendar in addition to many of Twain’s often-quoted comments. An exciting undertaking might be to locate that old calendar to read in its entirety. It might possibly be found in select libraries but, alas, I admit I’m too lazy and too old to begin the project at 87.

It may seem peculiar that I love visiting gardens yet, unmistakably, detest gardening myself. I have always found ornamental plants, flowers and trees beautiful to view but impossible to design and implement. Admittedly, there are few summer activities I am able to accomplish, least of which is gardening. Simply put, I’m unable to tolerate temperatures above 72, especially when accompanied with high humidity. I am forced to acknowledge that while peering in a mirror I see a very average person yet, unfortunately, all insects apparently find me particularly attractive. While friends strolling alongside remain free of bugs and are enjoying sun and warmth of summer, hordes of annoying gnats and mosquitoes are circling my head, deflecting those pests from contented friends. It makes me wonder if one of these so-called walking buddies could be a joker who has hidden fly paper to my body and secretly relishes my suffering. Poet Dorothy Gurney, who clearly revered gardens, wrote in her poem GOD’S GARDEN, “The kiss of the sun for pardon, the song of the birds for mirth, One is nearer God’s heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth.” Unfortunately, despite its beautiful designs and patterns, its aromas filling the air, itching, sneezing and general discomfort in gardens make me feel about as far

from God's heart as anyone can get.

The brain, an extraordinary part of the nervous system, is an amazing, complex organ. It is encased in our craniums and is the center of our thoughts, understanding and intellect. A limited amount of folks whose IQ's on psychological tests measure above 140 are labeled and referred to as geniuses. This very limited group of the entire world's population are especially creative in accomplishing original works in science, art, music, etc. Yet, so many so-called geniuses are known to be absent-minded. They may be able to invent miraculous objects of purpose, design programs, recite dates, recall historical facts and understand equations calculated by other geniuses yet still may have trouble figuring a 15 per cent tip on their restaurant tab. Brilliant in knowledge and recall, they are known to have searched for their glasses they rested atop their heads earlier. Thomas Edison, considered a genius in his time, was asked to describe what he considered genius. He replied, "Genius is one per cent inspiration and ninety-nine per cent PERSPIRATION." Edison's quick-witted reply is one of many of his often quoted statements.

My mother, an extremely progressive woman for the early nineteen hundreds, was one of few females to rise the ranks, becoming a newspaper editor. She recommended books I should read, one humorous, enjoyable Dorothy Parker novel. Parker, the Erma Bombeck/Norah Ephrom of early 20th century female humorists, was credited at saying something still quoted often to this day. "Men seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses." Dang, if that still ain't the truth.

The film 1776 is a most enjoyable way to learn details relating to the founding fathers composing, completing and signing the Declaration of Independence. The film contains a bevy of Ben Franklin's famous quotes from which I choose a most powerful favorite. Fearful the British might consider the document itself and those involved in its creation guilty of treason, Ben Franklin demanded and pronounced facetiously to the Continental Congress, the document complete -- yet not fully signed by each representative present: "We must all hang together; else we should all hang separately." If Ben Franklin's quick-witted quote were applied to today's politics, our world would certainly be a better place in which to exist.

As long as deep thinkers keep popping up in this world, we will have quotes that inspire, amuse and teach us. You might agree with some, while disagreeing with others. But whether you agree or disagree, quotes are nourishment that feed our thinking process.

Larry Binstock

A Vision of Anger

I hate to be angry. It's just a waste of time and energy, and a blip on life's radar screen. Sure, I encounter frustrations and disappointments, but I just chalk them up to the old philosophy, "that's life." If you ask my family, friends, work colleagues, they'll tell you I'm the easiest going guy in the world, then why, on that one evening, was I engaged in a fit of temper in an optometrist shop? What caused such an aberration?

The steps leading to that tantrum began several weeks beforehand. It started with my diminished ability as a ball player. I was a good ball player, especially a good outfielder. Even at age 38, I could catch up with all fly balls hit anywhere in my vicinity. And once I was under it, that ball was certain to end up in my sure-handed grasp. But something strange was beginning to happen. I began to miss those fly balls, mainly because I couldn't see them until they were almost on me. It was all I could do to keep them from landing on my head.

My wife, who joined several other players' wives to attend these weekly games, noticed this phenomenon, and decided to mention it to me.

"You're starting to miss fly balls," she said. "You think your eyesight might be getting worse?"

"Are you kidding," I responded, "I can tell if a fly is male or female from a block away."

A few weeks later, my wife broached the subject yet again. "You're still missing fly balls," she said.

"Well, it's getting darker earlier," I replied. "I'm probably losing the ball in the twilight."

"I also notice," she continued, "that you're squinting a lot when you're driving, like you're not seeing well. Maybe you should check it out."

"Oh, come on," I exclaimed, "whenever I take those tests, the people are always amazed at how well I do and I'm only 38 now, my eyes shouldn't be deteriorating."

She pushed on. "There's an optometrist office in Golf Mill," she said, referring to a large outdoor shopping center a short distance from our house. "I think they give free eyes exams. Maybe you should take advantage of it."

"Those guys are in business to sell glasses," I countered. "However you come out on their test, they're going to say your eyesight is going bad."

"Okay, have it your way," my wife said. "But you might be putting our family in danger."

That last statement hit the mark. It got me worried. Thus, a few nights later, when my wife and I were running some errands at Golf Mill and passed the aforementioned optometrist shop, I relented when she suggested we stop in to make an appointment for a free eye examination. "Okay. I said, I'll do it if it makes you feel better."

The salesman greeted us warmly and said we were in luck because the eye doctor was free at the moment and could conduct the exam immediately. I was led into a room with an eye chart and the ominous looking machine with which the eyes are tested. When the test was over, I was told to go back into the shop and the test results would be provided to the sales person in a few minutes. I was certain that the test would show my eyesight to be so incredibly good that the salesman wouldn't dare do any pretending in an attempt to sell eyeglasses. But when he looked at the results, the salesman said, "You must squint a lot."

Squint! There was that word again. And it sparked the unfamiliar seeds of anger in me. "I don't squint," I said brusquely.

"Well, according to your test results, you don't see very well in the distance."

Then it happened! Like a sudden volcanic eruption, I heard an unchecked angry voice emerge from my mouth. Turning to my wife, I almost shouted, "See, I told you they would tell me I couldn't see well just to sell me a pair of glasses. Let's get out of here."

My wife was taken aback, not only because of the unfamiliar tone of my angry voice, but because I voiced my emotions in front of the salesman—the object of my anger—rather than prudently venting after we left.

I looked at the salesman, expecting to see some agitation or indignation. But he was expressionless, as if he were accustomed to hearing people deny the prospect of having their eyesight diminished.

"Before you leave," he said calmly, "do me a favor." He reached into a drawer and extracted two lenses and a mock-up of a pair of glasses. "Go outside and try these on. If they have no effect, we'll forget about the whole thing."

My initial inclination was to tell him what he could do with those lenses. But, on second thought, I figured this was a good way to finally alleviate my wife's fears. I took this testing tool, and walked out of the store. I stood amid the shops of Golf Mill, put on the mock-up glasses—and a miracle occurred. Obviously, I hadn't paid attention to the diminishment of my eyesight. It must have happened so slowly, I hadn't noticed. I thought everyone saw neon lights as fuzzy and difficult to see. I thought everyone saw annoying shafts of light emanating from every source of illumination. Now with those lenses covering my eyes, it was as if someone adjusted the fine turning knob on the world. The neon signs fronting the Golf Mill shops came into clear focus. The shafts of light disappeared. The once invisible sign on the car dealership across the street was now clearly visible.

I experienced two feelings simultaneously—amazement and embarrassment. My first thought was to go back into the shop, tell the salesman that the lenses did no good, then order the glasses from another shop. But that would only make me appear more foolish to my wife when she learned of this ploy. I had no choice but to bite the bullet, and face the music. I slouched back into the shop and looking as dignified as possible under the circumstances, I simply said, "How long before I get the glasses?"

On the drive home, my wife, to her credit, didn't assume an "I told you so" posture, not in words nor actions, and she didn't express any anger because of my earlier cavalier dismissal of her now proven conjecture. There was only one angry individual in that car. For the second time that evening, my no-anger principle was violated, but I guess it didn't count if the person to whom I felt anger was myself.

Bettie Cunningham

Morah: The In-Between Stuff

Morah often thinks about her mother, Ronell, and the times they spent together before Ronell passed. She was only five when her mother passed suddenly of a heart attack. They were already living with Ganny, because her mother had lost another job and they got kicked out of the small apartment that they were living in because she couldn't pay the rent. They had stayed with another one of her mother's friends during Christmas time and then moved back in with Ganny.

Morah had heard Ganny say that her mother "...Don't know how to control her tongue when she talks to people, so they fire her, and she end up right back here." Morah really didn't know what all that meant back then but it never bothered her because she was always glad to be back at Ganny's house. Still, she also remembers being glad when she was with her mother too.

Of the five short years that she had with her mother, Morah recalls having fun, meeting different people all the time, and living in various places. She didn't know then that it was because her mother had lost another job, and she was too young to understand things like that. Her mother would tell her that they were going on another vacation to meet new people and make a new life for themselves. Although each move was a new life, and was exciting for a while, the new life never lasted long, and they were on to another journey, another new life or back at Ganny's.

There were times when they stayed with a few of her mother's friends who had children. Morah loved those times because she had other children to play with, to laugh and romp around with. She recalls playing dress up, playing school, blowing bubbles in the front yard, and waddling in the blow-up swimming pool that one of the families had. She also remembers her and some other children laying on the floor in a big living room coloring on the same page in one of those super big coloring books. She remembers those big ole thick crayons that she could barely hold in her hand. She can even remem-

ber the feel of the shaggy brown rug against her skin: it tickled when she rubbed her skin back and forth across it but not when she walked on it. She liked rubbing her feet and arms back and forth across it. It felt good to her and even then, she liked to feel good. She still likes to feel good. She thinks everyone does.

Morah remembers the times when her mother would coddle her in her arms and read to her. There were stories about a little skunk who didn't want to share a bed with his brother, one about a little boy's first visit to the dentist, and one about a little girl who played on a boy's little league football team. There was a story about a boy and a giant peach, and another about a bunch of toys that came to life. Her favorite was about a toy cowboy who came to life but was always crying about something. Her mother didn't like the cowboy because she said he was a "crybaby." Morah recalls asking her mother if she was a crybaby and her mother responded "No, you ain't no crybaby. Better not be! You're a big girl!" Even now Morah recalls thinking, "But I ain't big!"

One of the journeys to a new life with her mother, happened around Christmas time. They were staying with a man with a bald head. He was short and round and had a long white beard just like Santa Claus. Morah remembers asking her mother if he was Santa and her mother said, "Yes, he is, and only special kids get to live with Santa." Even though she never saw Santa's elves or his wife, Rudolph, or the other reindeer or all the toys Santa delivered to good boys and girls across the world, Morah believed it. She believed he was Santa and she believed that she was special because she lived with Santa. It was true because her mother said so. Morah believed it!

Although it didn't start out so well, they had a good Christmas that year. On Christmas morning, Morah woke up and walked into the kitchen where her mother and Santa sat at the kitchen table drinking coffee and talking. She remembers being excited with anticipation of the gifts that Santa had left her during the night. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she walked into the living room but there was no Christmas tree and no gifts. Where is Christmas? she wondered. Where are the gifts and toys? She didn't ask! As she walked back into the kitchen, her mother said, "Let's get you bathed Morah so we can get our day started." No "Merry Christmas," no Christmas tree, no

toys, no nothing; just Momma and Santa, Morah thought. She felt tears welling up in her eyes as she began to think that Santa had forgotten about her and had given all the toys away, even though she was a good girl all year long. She refused to cry because she didn't want to be a crybaby because her mother doesn't like crybabies like the toy cowboy and she wanted her mother to like her, to love her.

That Christmas morning, the three of them walked through the snow to a big building about five blocks away where there was a long line of people waiting to get in. Once inside, she got to sit and have dinner with the other children while her mother and Santa sat with the other adults. She forgot about not having toys and gifts because she was enjoying her time eating and talking and playing with the other children. Then Santa left and came back with his red suit, and hat and long black boots on. He sat in a big, oversized chair and handed out wrapped gifts and toys to all the children including her. He even had gifts for the adults.

When it was time to leave, Morah didn't want to go. She did not understand why she could not stay and play with the other children, but everyone was leaving. So, she, her mother and Santa left after everyone was gone. They put on their coats, hats and gloves and trudged through the glistening white snow with Santa carrying her bag of gifts and toys across his shoulder just like in the movies. Her Christmas didn't start out too well, but it had a wonderful ending with good times with the other children, tasty food and lots of toys and gifts and the added gift of being able to go home with her mother and Santa.

That Christmas night, her mother allowed her to stay up late so she could play with her toys. That night when she kneeled to pray, she thanked God for her mother, for Santa, for Ganny, for all the new kids she met at dinner, and for all her new toys.

That was their last journey to a new life before they went to stay with Ganny. Morah doesn't know why they couldn't continue to stay with Santa, why they had to move again. But they did! One day, her mother had packed their things and simply said, "We're going to Momma's." Morah remembers hugging Santa and feeling sad as Santa kneeled in front of her and said, "Take care of yourself lil lady." He didn't say anything to Ronell, and she didn't say anything to him, just

got the bags and left; took a cab to Ganny's.

Although she was only five when her mother passed, for a long time afterwards, if she really concentrated hard enough, Morah could still hear her mother's voice and smell her. But she can't anymore! Even when she tries really hard, she can't. She cannot remember her mother's voice anymore nor smell her. But she remembers some of the stuff that happened after she was born and before her mother passed away. She recalls some of the good times that she and her mother had before her mother left for good. She will always treasure those memories because most of them were good. Of all the stuff she remembers about her mother, the in-between stuff is the best, the sweetest.

So, when she gets lonely or begins to feel sad, she does one or two things: she goes inside herself to her memories; or pulls out the old photo album that belonged to Ganny and looks at the pictures of her mother. Those pictures are of the two of them on one of their journeys to a new life, of Ganny and their times together, of the three of them smiling and happy, of the in-between stuff.

Just like the white stuff that is smashed between the Oreo cookies, the in-between stuff is the sweetest. Just like the gooey stuff smashed between the Kit Kat candy bar, the in-between stuff is the best. And that is what Morah chooses to remember: the in-between stuff. That is one of the many things that Morah is thankful for: the in-between stuff. The in-between stuff is what helps to keep the memories of her mother alive. The in-between stuff!

Ryan R. Ennis

A Figure in the Night

Drawn by the buzzing street life, she left the comfort of her air-conditioned hotel room to experience the sweltering evening embrace of Downtown Riverton in mid-July. After checking out a few cocktail joints, she found herself standing outside of Club Lumina, whose windowless black façade had been enlivened by a waterfall of purplish lights. The bar's pulsating music promised an escape from the mundane and a night of uninhibited freedom.

Because she lived in a rural community where the residents' worst crimes were occasionally running traffic signs, she had little fear about the possible dangers lurking in the area. Neglecting to watch the local news, she also hadn't heard that the Riverton police were hunting for a serial killer who frequented the nearby bars. His victims were often petite blondes like herself.

From her leather handbag, Candice took out a compact mirror and examined her face. Despite the humidity, her hair and makeup still looked reasonably fresh. Her blunt bob, hitting just below the chin, suited her round face. She just wished her fine hair had more volume. After dropping the compact back in her bag, she gently fluffed her hair, then straightened the gold necklace hanging down across her sleeveless top. She smiled to herself, eager to partake in the nightlife.

Something—a noise, a strange feeling—made her turn around. A figure wearing all black emerged from the alley beside the building. Right away, she could tell it was man. He stopped a few feet in front of her. Because he had a ballcap pulled down low over his forehead, the brim covering his eyes, all she could make about his face was that he had a pointed chin and sunken cheeks. While he stood there, she just gazed at him, unsure what to say. Was he lost or confused? And if he was, what could do about it? She didn't know the area. She was only in the city for a few days to attend a weekend convention, where she would acquire additional competencies for her work as a pharmacy technician.

Without acknowledging the stranger, she headed inside the building, her heart racing with excitement tinged with anticipation. Tired of being a homebody, she couldn't wait to be a part of a scene where she could dance until the early morning hours and forget about her worries of carrying for elderly parents and a brother who suffered from depression. Passing through red velvet drapes, she approached the circular metal railing that surrounded the dance floor. She surveyed the scene. The club was pulsing with energy, the dancers moving in a synchronized frenzy beneath the sparkling disco balls.

Joining them, she found herself mimicking their moves, her body swaying to the rhythm of the music as she lost herself in the intoxicating atmosphere. While most of the patrons were dancing in either pairs or in groups, she danced alone. It didn't bother her. Filled with joy, she smiled and laughed to herself, caring little about what anyone looking at her might think.

But as the evening wore on, a sense of uneasiness began to creep into her mind. She became paranoid of being watched...watched by menacing eyes boring into her back as she danced. Halting, she nervously glanced over her shoulder to see if there was any truth to her suspicion. But the crowded dance floor offered no solace, only a sea of anonymous faces.

Maybe it was just her imagination, but she began to notice subtle shifts in the crowd, the way certain individuals seemed to linger on the outskirts, their gazes fixed on her with an intensity that sent shivers down her spine.

"Time to get out of here!" she declared suddenly, as if talking to a friend, though her voice was barely audible over the thumping bass. With a sense of urgency bordering on panic, she weaved hurriedly through the clusters of people and headed toward the exit, her heart pounding in her chest.

Before she could reach safety, a figure emerged from the crowd, blocking her path. He was wearing black jeans, a black t-shirt, and a ballcap whose brim rested just above the bridge of his nose. It was the man from the alley. He gazed at her with a sinister grin. Momentarily paralyzed with fear, she stared back but was unable to scream. As he lifted the ballcap, she saw that his eyes gleamed with malice.

There were patrons all around them, yet that wasn't about to prevent his plans. Clearly, he was there to inflict harm. Most likely, he figured the other patrons were too drunk or high to intervene—or later serve as good witnesses.

He was about to pull something out of his pocket, but she distracted him with a swift kick to his shin. Caught off guard, he grabbed his lower leg with both hands and wailed out in pain. The blaring music deafened his cries. From a passing waiter's tray, she grabbed a beer bottle and smashed it against the textured wall. She brandished the jagged shards like a weapon while her eyes blazed with defiance. Oddly, he barely looked up, as if he didn't feel threatened by her. He only continued to crotch and rub his shin.

Seizing her chance, she darted past him and exited the building with adrenaline-fueled speed, her face and neck drenched in sweat. She didn't glance back. Her lungs burned with exertion as she dropped the broken bottle and fled into the street, still mobbed with people. All she could think about was running the three blocks through the crowds to get back to her hotel. Only then would she call the police. Only after she had securely locked herself in her room would she relate the details of her close encounter with a deranged man.

The faces and buildings she ran past were a blur into she finally came to her hotel. In the elevator, catching her breath, she told herself that she had seen enough of Riverton. *No more nightlife for me*, she vowed. The next evening would be spent reading the literature from her conference, soaking in the jacuzzi tub, and then catching up on a few TV programs. Peaceful routines would help her to outsmart the darkness in the world.

On her floor, the ceiling lights were flickering. To avoid awaking up anyone, she walked softly in her low-heeled sandals across the creaking plank flooring until she reached her room at the end of the hall. From her purse, she retrieved her room's key card. To her great relief, she heard the door make a clicking sound as she swiped it, letting her know that it was unlocked. *So good to be back*, she thought. *So good to be off the streets and away from the shadows*.

The room was dark. She set her purse down on the dresser and hit the overhead light switch. It wouldn't turn on. Then she went to the

nightstand beside her bed and tried to switch on the lamp. That wasn't working, either. She backed away and decided to try the floor lamp by the window. If that lamp didn't turn on, she was getting out of her room as fast as she could. She'd call the police from the lobby.

Then she heard it—a light sound—the sound of the sheets rustling, of someone turning or moving in her bed. She nearly jumped in the air. Her heart thudding again, she stared at the disheveled sheets. Under them appeared a lumpy mass. Could it be just how she had arranged the pillows earlier, when she had taken a nap? Or could there really be someone there—another figure about to come out of hiding, ready to attack her?

With trembling hands, she grabbed her purse. To whoever—whatever—was in her bed, she called out, "No need to reveal yourself." She wasn't sticking around to find out more.

Sue Hayes

Hearts of Love

The quaint kitchen, with its faded wallpaper and worn linoleum, has been my sanctuary since I lost my mother at the tender age of four. Tonight, amidst the savory aromas of my grandmother's lasagna and garlic bread, I find comfort once again in this cozy little room. Across from me, Grandma quietly sips her tea.

"Can you believe it's just a week away, Shanna?" Grandma asks.

I glance up from my plate. "What?"

"Your high school graduation."

"Oh, that." I scarf down a forkful of pasta, scalding my tongue. "I'm not going."

Grandma's teacup pauses in mid-air. "W-Why on earth wouldn't you go, sweetheart?"

"Because..." I hesitate, feeling the sting of tears welling up in the corners of my eyes. "I'll be the only one without my mom to watch me graduate." The words catch in my throat.

"But I'll be there cheering you on."

"I appreciate you, Grandma, and everything you do for me, but it's not the same. Mom was the most important person in my life. She should be there."

"I know it's not the same, Shanna, but your mom will watch you graduate from heaven." She reaches across the table, covering my hand with hers.

"I've made my decision, Grandma." I gently pull away.

With a heavy sigh, Grandma rises from the table and shuffles to the living room closet. The hinges creak as she opens the door and retrieves an old photo album. Returning, she flips through the pages until she finds the photograph she wants.

"Look at this," Grandma says, pointing to my mom in a rocking chair, cradling her newborn daughter with a love visible even in the faded photograph. A single tear sparkles in the corner of her eye. "Do you see the overwhelming joy on your mother's face, Shanna? You

were the most important person in her life too, and she would want you to attend graduation.”

I glance at the faded Polaroid, then trace my mother’s smile with my finger. “Grandpa showed me this picture years ago. But it doesn’t change a thing. Mom still won’t be there.”

“Shanna, you go through this same ordeal before every major event in your life. When will you understand that your mother is always with you, right here?” Grandma places a hand over her heart.

As I glance at the image once more, I feel my mom’s spirit within me. However, it’s not enough, especially at this moment. A photograph in an album cannot fill the void of a mother’s absence on graduation day.

As our dinner grows cold, Grandma and I sit in silence, weighed down by sorrow.

“I’m not hungry anymore,” I mumble, pushing my plate away.

“Well—if you’re intent on skipping dinner, you might as well be productive. The attic needs cleaning. I suggest you start now.” Grandma’s voice slices through the stillness.

My eyes meet the determined gaze of the woman who raised me. Arguing with Grandma is something I’d rather steer clear of, so I rise and trudge upstairs to the attic. The familiar groan of the steps beneath my feet sound like a mournful march.

The attic door creaks open, revealing a cluttered space filled with the fragments of my past. Dust mites dance in the shafts of light filtering through the small window. After pulling the cord of the bare lightbulb above, I’m drawn to the closest box. As I lift the flaps, my breath hitches at the discovery of a treasure more intimate than any photograph—a pale blue bathrobe. The robe triggers a wave of nostalgia as I recall the scent of lavender, a fragrance once synonymous with my mother.

I pull out the robe, cradling it close as I shuffle across the wooden floor to the old rocking chair. While settling onto the seat, I clutch the bathrobe to my chest, closing my eyes in search of comfort from a time when my world was still whole. “I miss you, Mom.”

The chair my mom cradled me in as a baby squeaks as I rock back and forth. And though the scent that once clung to the fabric has faded,

the physical comfort of the robe remains, embracing me like an old friend.

A tear slips from the corner of my eye, tracing a warm path down my cheek. Another follows, then another. In the attic's stifling air, surrounded by the ghosts of yesteryear, I feel the sting of my mother's absence once again.

The thought of parading across a stage without my mom watching me was unbearable. Each tear that falls seems to harden my determination—I cannot muster the strength to attend my graduation ceremony. No amount of pomp and circumstance could fill this void in my life.

The musty scent of the attic overwhelms me as I sift through one carton after another, exploring relics of the past. In the fourth box, my fingers graze the rough edges of a stack of notebooks bound by a frayed rubber band.

As I open the top notebook, I'm drawn to the swirling handwriting of my mother. "My dearest Shanna," the entry begins, dated the very day of my birth. "My love for you surpasses everything else in this world."

The following words paint a vivid picture of my early years, each milestone documented—my first smile, first words, and first steps toward independence.

"Why, Mom?" I whisper, my voice breaking. "Why did you have to leave me? I still needed you."

Beneath my grief simmers a hot, raw anger at a world that robbed me of my mother, and at a God who allowed it to happen. I wipe furiously at my eyes, but the tears refuse to stop.

As the sun sets, casting amber and rose hues across the sky, I grab the last journal. Its entries offer a glimpse into the journey of a single mom, who courageously confronts her fears and grapples with the realities of raising a child alone.

The final entry, written five days before my mom's death, says: "Today, I buried the time capsule in the backyard beneath the Madonna statue."

In an instant, my mind springs to attention.

"I'll unearth it and give it to my precious Shanna on the day she graduates high school."

My feet pound the wooden floorboards as I run down the stairs. I dash into the kitchen, snatching up the cordless phone from its cradle, and punch in my best friend's number.

"Lexi, can you come over? Spend the night?" My voice rushes out, breathless.

"Sure, what's up?" Lexi asks.

"I'll explain when you get here."

Lexi arrives, and hours later, under the cover of darkness, we sneak out and arm ourselves with shovels from the garage. Beneath the moonlight's glow, we push and pull the heavy Madonna statue, slowly inching it aside. Our metal blades slice through the earth as we shovel load after load of dirt, creating a pit that could swallow us whole.

"It's not here," Lexi whispers, leaning on her shovel and wiping sweat from her brow.

A lump lodged in my throat makes it difficult to speak.

"It has to be here. The journal said my mom buried it beneath the statue."

"Maybe someone already dug it up," Lexi says. "Come on. Let's fill in this hole before your grandma wakes up and catches us."

"It was supposed to be here." I stare at the hole. Missing this chance to connect with my mom feels like losing a part of myself.

The next morning, I confront my grandmother at the breakfast table. "Grandma, do you know anything about a time capsule my mom made for me before she died?"

"No, dear."

I take a bite of my toast, then ask, "Has the Madonna statue always been in the backyard?"

Peering over her glasses, my grandmother says, "Yes. That old statue's been with us for ages."

My heart drops with disappointment.

Grandma's teacup clinks against the saucer when she sets it down and says, "We moved it, though, years ago, during the backyard landscaping."

"Moved it?" A spark ignites within me. "From where?"

"Where we planted the rosebush, dear—against the house. Why are you asking?"

“Um—Lexi wanted to know.”

Suspicion fills Grandma’s face.

I excuse myself so that I can call Lexi. When she arrives again that evening, I usher her to my room. “I know where my mom buried the time capsule.”

Thirty minutes after Grandma goes to bed, we sneak out, uproot the rosebush, and work with renewed determination to find the capsule. Two and a half feet down, my shovel collides with something solid. I glance at Lexi. “I think we found it!” We dig faster and moments later, we unearth an eighteen square inch sealed metal container caked with years of dirt and secrecy. Together, we lift the vessel from its tomb, then replant the bush and smooth the surrounding soil. With our hearts pounding and the precious cargo cradled in my arms, we slip back into the house and hurry to my bedroom.

My fingers tremble as they brush against the cold container—the last physical connection to the mother I had lost.

“Here we go.” With Lexi sitting cross-legged beside me, I pry open the lid.

“Whoa,” Lexi whispers. “Check it out.” Her eyes widen as I pull the first item from the time capsule—a silky lock of blond hair tied with a faded turquoise ribbon.

“From my first haircut,” I say.

Next, I remove a framed photo. It shows my newborn hands and feet pressed onto paper with black ink. “Look how tiny I was.” Among the remaining keepsakes are my baby pacifier, infant teeth, and first bib with the words ‘Mommy’s Little Angel’ written on it.

A beautiful beige scrapbook lies at the bottom of the container. I open it to the first page, and there’s my mother cradling baby me close to her chest. A red paper heart adorns the adjacent sheet, with the caption ‘Shanna made me proud when...’ leading into a list of dates and achievements in my mom’s handwriting.

“Look at this, Lex.” With each turn of the page, another heart emerges, filled with milestones: ‘First smile - April 6th,’ ‘First laugh - June 1st,’ ‘Held bottle by herself - August 19th.’”

Lexi leans in closer as I absorb the details of my early years—words that should warm me, but chill me to the bone instead, reminding me

of all the other proud moments in my life that my mother didn't get to write about.

"Shanna? Are you okay?" Lexi asks.

I shake my head. As I flip through more pages, my resolve hardens. "My mom should've been here for all my proud moments—especially for graduation."

"Maybe she can be there, in a way," Lexi suggests, but I snap the book shut.

"No, I'm not going." I drop the scrapbook into the container in a final act of defiance.

In the week that follows, Grandma and Lexi take turns coaxing, pleading, and reasoning with me. They speak of honoring my achievements, of making memories, of what my mother would have wanted. But I remain determined.

Then, on the morning of my graduation ceremony, as I sit at the kitchen table, pushing cereal around my bowl, Grandma emerges from her bedroom in a floral dress with a coat draped over her arm.

"Where are you off to?" I ask.

"To watch your classmates graduate," Grandma says.

A bitter taste forms on my tongue as I watch her leave.

My heart thumps against my chest. My graduation is slipping away. With each taunting tick of the wall clock, my indecision becomes more agonizing. I don't know what to do.

Then my eyes catch my mom's journal on the table. "Wait, wasn't this in the attic? How...?" Grandma put it there. The book is open to my mom's last entry. I re-read the passage about the time capsule, and when I turn the page, I stumble onto one last sentence I had missed before. "Counting down the seconds until the day I burst with pride as I watch my Shanna walk across the stage in her cap and gown and claim her high school diploma."

The journal slips from my trembling hands, and my resolve crumbles. "Dang it."

Adrenaline surges through me as I push back from the table and bolt up the stairs two steps at a time. In my room, I snatch my cap and gown from where they lay discarded on the chair, then dash down the staircase and out the front door. The late spring air embraces me like

a warm hug. Setting off at a sprint, my shoes slap the pavement as I navigate the familiar streets toward the school.

With each block conquered, the weight of my sorrow and anger seems to lighten.

As I round the last corner, the school stands before me like a beacon. Music spills from the open doors, spurring me onward. Just as the final call for graduates echoes from within, I burst through the doorway, gasping for breath, catching everyone by surprise. My homeroom teacher rushes forward as I don my cap and gown. She guides me to my place in line. While Lexi spins around and embraces me, I steady my breathing, and together, we march into the gymnasium.

“Shanna Therese Thompson,” the principal announces an hour later, his voice echoing across the gym.

Stepping onto the stage feels unreal, like I’m living out my mother’s unfulfilled dreams. My name rings out again, and I reach for the diploma. After shaking the principal’s hand, I descend the steps, cradling the parchment against my chest—right on top of my heart.

As I step away from the stage, my eyes sweep across the sea of faces before me. At the end of the first row, Grandma sits, her eyes glistening with unshed tears, her weathered face filled with pride. I’m drawn to my mother’s image, beaming from an oversized photograph resting on the empty chair beside Grandma.

Then, just as I reach my seat, my classmates, led by Lexi, stand and turn toward me. They fling hundreds of red paper hearts into the air— hearts that twirl like dancers caught in the whirl of the gymnasium’s fans. Applause bursts forth like thunder.

At that moment, I realize my journey forward isn’t about filling the void left by my mother’s absence. It’s about accepting it. I need to carry her memory with me, not as a burden, but as a source of strength. A sense of peace washes over me. As the last of the paper hearts settle around me, I allow myself a small, bittersweet smile. A smile that acknowledges pain and loss, but also acceptance and a newfound determination to embrace the future—one heart-filled step at a time.

Chloe Kertesz

Spring has Sprung!

The warmth is starting to return to the earth; life is slowly coming back into the surrounding areas. Birds are chirping louder and more frequently, crickets will soon start to sing their nightly song. Squirrels, and rabbits bring out their young to show them the ropes of survival. The trees and flowers bloom into beautiful colors, surrounding us in the beauty of celebrating life.

As we move along into this next season of life we begin to clean and declutter our homes, cars and lives. Deciding what gets to move along beside us. Discovering all the new and old things that bring us joy. All the while being reminded of the springs that have come to pass. All the happiness, sadness, hope and purpose that has come and gone. Embracing the changes that come along with the time of year.

We move from season to season in tandem with the earth. As she brings in life and light, we do our best to do the same. May this Spring bring back all the lost hope of the dark winter and love into our hearts.

Nashawn Lariviere

Paternity Test

“Attention passengers...please buckle your seatbelts as we are experiencing an unusual amount of turbulence...air hostesses please pause beverage cart and food plate collection and return to the main station to seat and buckle yourself in,” radioed the pilot of flight 0626. A red eye returning from Seattle Tacoma International Airport to Saginaw City MBS Airport.

Dean had just finished attending the James A. Chaffee Adoption matters work conference in Renton, Washington, and decided just before the last stretch of workshops to take the red eye home to Bay City to surprise his fiancée with dinner when she returned from work that day. As he completed the fastening of his belt in the two-space first-class bay, he dropped his cell phone in the space between the comfortable lavish seats. With his anxieties high, he preferred to wait until the turbulence stopped, and the plane returned to its normal number of bouts and jolts through the pinkish-yellow sky as the sun began its trajectory.

He hunkered down in his seat as the plane shucked and staggered through blow after blow of howling winds. Dean could feel the perspiration begin to form through the contact of his palm to the leather armrest of the seat. His toes scrunched tightly in his aged brown wingtip dress shoes. He squeezed his eyes tight and began to picture his fiancée in his mind and before long, the call was announced that they had passed through the turbulence and could now return to comfort as they begin to descend for landing. As the plane began to reorient, Dean decided to lean over and search for his forgotten relic. As he pressed his face against the window, he saw it had slid between the outer wall and the empty seat next to him. Dean’s eyes were aligned perfectly to see clearly into what he could piece together was Saginaw Bay given the announcement of landing and reorientation occurring.

Just as he almost secured his phone, his focus shifted. He sat upwards and began to stare at the part of the bay closest to where he

believed his home was, and it was unbelievable.

He thought to himself he must be hallucinating. It was some sort of snake-shaped creature at least four hundred feet long with its head placed near exactly where the boat port connected to his house sat. Immediately his focus returned to gathering his device so he could gather some sort of proof as Ashley would not believe him just a word of mouth, but he still could not get a good grip of his doomed rectangular minicomputer.

He began to flail and wiggle his fingers as he did not move his eyes from the sight in view. He knew that in a few more seconds he would lose this vantage point and be faced forever with a gut-wrenching feeling. He quickly called over to Mr. Adam Lapel, a youthful flight attendant with neat reddish hair and a bow tie on for today's service. He asked Adam if he could see the figure in the water and Adam peered through the window, fell into the empty seat, and gasped.

"What is that?" he replied, startled.

Just as he ran back to the air host station to grab his phone, the plane reoriented, and they both sat staring at each other in awe.

"So, you saw that too?" Dean eagerly searched for some validation that he indeed was not hallucinating.

"Yes, I did, and I have no idea what that was. What do we do?" replied Adam, seeking a similar level of validation from Dean.

"I don't know, but I think its head is positioned just outside of my house." They shared a glance, and Adam was quickly reminded by his co-attendant he has a job to do.

"Well, good luck with this Sir, honestly. I am sorry... I must go though."

Shortly after the plane landed and the process began for Dean to get home. His initial plans were no longer on his mind. His first instinct was to drop all his bags once he arrived home and run directly to the Bay in his backyard, and that is exactly what he did. Once he had pulled into the driveway, he noticed Ashley was already home.

This was startling at least for his idea to surprise her. He entered hastily, calling out to her with no response. Dean glanced outside towards the Bay and saw his fiancée in an orange and green beach chair sitting on the edge of the port along the Bay appearing to have been

talking to someone.

“Ashley! Baby, please get away from the bay we need to talk.” She turned around startled and began to walk back to the house, appearing to be putting her phone back in her pocket as if she had just finished a phone call.

He began to tell her about his sighting when it dawned on him to ask who she was talking to just then. Ashley’s blue eyes darted to the right corner of the room and back to meet his gaze when she replied. “Oh, just my cousin.”

Dean paused for a moment as he began to decide if he wanted to address the lie that his fiancée just told him or tell her first what he witnessed along with why he was so eager to request her to retreat from the bay. He paused and sat down at their muted marble living room table.

“Honey, who were you talking to outside? We have never lied to each other in our whole relationship. What is going on? We have played many board games and played to win, sure that is how we learned each other’s tells, but in our traditional day-to-day conversations we have never been distrustful.”

“Dean, I’m not lying,” she said as she followed suit and sat down.

“Okay, I lied a little bit. It was not my cousin I was talking to. It was your dad. I am sorry I panicked.”

“Oh, okay. Why did you lie about that?” Dean asked inquisitively.

“Because I didn’t want you to catch on to the surprise we are planning for you.” Once they finished that conversation, Dean then began to recount to Ashley what he had witnessed on his flight home. He witnessed her face go from worried to then a mocking of shocked. He could not break the feeling that he did not know who or what she was talking to outside by the bay, coupled with the horrifying sight he witnessed. He still felt there was information she was keeping from him.

After dinner, Ashley made a beverage and headed back to her initial Bay location and informed Dean, he could join too just to let her know because she would be on the phone. As she walked out, he watched her grab a lawn chair from the back patio and take it within inches of the dock end. Which was startling to him after just sharing with her the sights he had witnessed. Dean decided to give his parents

a call; they could help clear things up a bit.

Being adopted somethings still feel like such a luxury. Like picking up the phone and calling your parents. His father Charles picked up the phone. Dean and Chuck spent a couple of hours catching up, and he could not wait to bring up the question.

“Hey pop, quick question is everything alright with Ashley?”

“I don’t know,” he answered and chuckled. “She’s your fiancée, shouldn’t you know?”

Dean chuckled back. “Yeah, you’re right, it’s just she was on the phone with you earlier and lied to me about it.”

Charles stopped chuckling and requested Dean repeat what he just said. He then assured Dean that he had been at a community service event all day with his mother and that he had not talked to Ashley, but if by chance he had forgotten a phone call he would ask Angela, Dean’s mother. His mom also stated the same thing that they had not talked to Ashley today, but rather they did check up on each other the Friday before when they had heard Dean was leaving for a work conference just to make sure she did not need anything.

Dean then walked back to the window to see Ashley conversating with someone. He adjusted his sight to see her phone was nowhere to be seen and neither were her earbuds. In fact, they were sitting right by her backpack on the table. Dean said his goodbyes and apologies to his parents and assured them she just got a little mixed up, nothing to worry about. He gently opened and closed the screen door to be careful not to alarm Ashley. As soon as the door opened, he heard another voice, and as it closed only his fiancée’s. He pulled a chair close beside her as she sipped her beverage.

“Honey, we need to talk,” he stated.

She looked him in the eyes and replied. “I would suggest you grab a drink before we do.”

Dean returned with a Cranberry vodka and a Pabst Blue Ribbon in his hands and set them down on a table in-between them.

“Okay let’s talk,” he stated. Ashley nodded for him to drink a little of his mixed drink before they began.

Lightning flashed in the distance as warm rain began to dance all around them. The droplets crashed upon the metal awning that hang

over the port in the backyard. Ashley then began to speak.

“So, first I am sorry for lying to you this has been a long time in the making and we have been trying to figure out how to tell you this.” Dean began to think the worst as he loosened his blue anchor patterned tie and unbuttoned his white dress shirt. “I have been talking to your father, but like your biological father.” Dean carefully continued listening trying to piece together how they began contact, and what this had to do with watching her talk to herself outside by a sighting of a giant snake monster in their back yard Bay.

“So, you remember when you were so infatuated with Ancestry.com, but could not locate your father for the life of you. I did some digging mainly because I knew it was something that really bothered you and as we continued our talks about our future family. I really wanted to remedy that desire for you... Well, it took a lot of research, but I found him.” She continued.

Dean’s eyes had lit up with electricity for the following information.

“One thing I discovered is why it is so difficult for you to find him... well baby,” she said softly as she laid a hand on his ironed and creased blue pinstripe slacks “He...is...” she delayed the information as she cleared her throat, “A sort of god.”

“Sort of?” A deep resonated voice thrown from the water. Dean spat his drink and fell back in his chair.

“What is that talking?” Dean directed towards Ashley.

“I am your father Dean,” bellowed the voice from the crashing waves. In that moment Dean had forgotten all about the 400-foot snake-like creature he had witnessed from the skies as he was being communicated with someone claiming to be his biological father.

“Why don’t you show yourself?” requested Dean.

“Honey, Honey... slow down,” insisted Ashley as she slowly approached him. “I know this is a lot, but you surprised me. I ran out of options on how to introduce this to you. In my research I came across a journal of your great grandmothers—the gypsy mystic—who mentioned that she felt sorry for your mom and the difficulties that must come with being impregnated by a creature of lore and legend. She further referred to him as a sea serpent, and that puzzled me for many months. Until I began to piece it all together after some research assis-

tance from a lore specialist, we found a way to contact said being and then the day we moved here I met Jimmy. He told me all about how for millennia he was able to shape shift and walk the lands as a human until he fell in love and sired a son. For this the gods punished him removing his ability to walk among the humans, and you are that son. It is better if he tells you himself." As soon as she finished that sentence the bay behind their house began to part and allow way for a gargantuan figure to pull itself out from its shapeless body.

The figure lifted itself to view of the two. Its gold, green scales in decorative designs one would only think could describe a fantasy beast. The head of this being the size of their home.

"Hello, Dean I have waited what has felt like both 10 minutes and a lifetime to meet you. My name is Jörmungandr, but I go by Jimmy."

This serpent being with scales of gold and sapphire sits before them. Dean fainted as he went down, he could make out one last exchange.

"I told you we should have waited till his birthday to do this."

"I know, he surprised me."

Jesse D. Lockhart

Run Rivulet

She remembered there used to be a rivulet running behind the house, foggy though the recollection was. The memories from those early days were strange creatures, mist shrouded and furtive. They flitted behind the shadows of bolder impressions such as first days in new places and family deaths. By the time she was five, her and her mother were living in the apartment in the city. That was more than 60 years ago.

She had returned to see her birth home one last time. In her mind, it still stood proud on a bright spring day. She could see every shingle, every shutter, and every solid frame of timber that held it together. She could see the white siding, the green shutters, and the screened-in porch.

But, no matter how well she could remember, this plot of land had forgotten. The house was gone, fallen into the dim shadows where the sands of time dropped from the bottom of the hour glass.

And there used to be a stream, thin and shallow. It was a vague thing in her mind. She couldn't see it clearly the way she saw the old house, but she could feel it.

She remembered the sensations of its ice-sharp water running over her feet, lapping up her calves, reaching for her knees. She could remember the summer rain sound when it was full and charging. She could remember the wintertime trickle when it was warm enough for the ice to recede.

More than anything, she could remember that it ran on forever. She couldn't picture the water or the course in her mind, but she could see it stretch to the horizon and beyond. It was a bright silver streak cut across the rippling black fabric of her memories.

But it was gone. Present now was pavement, cinder block, brick walls, and broken windows. Shards of shattered glass gathered at the feet of long-closed stores. Sheets of plywood, bent from moisture, lay curled on the ground.

The parking lot surface was cracked and uneven from the buried ground trying to force its way back to the surface. In regular intervals, there were faded patches of yellow marking where cars had once gathered.

An entire world had risen and fallen since she had been back this way.

Would the time of her memory return, now that this cement-fabricated land had been left to decay? Could the grass grow again, roll across the fields, and erase other people's memories that had dared to replace her own?

And if it did, would her house regrow? Would it rise up through the earth, peaked roof pushing through sod and weeds to rise above it all? And even if that were possible, could the rivulet return?

She wondered how you removed such a flowing, free thing in the first place. She pictured thousands of machines digging to lift the water up, placing it into leaking dump trucks and hauling off her sense of permanence to places unknown.

How did you make a stream disappear? She looked out across the web work of streets and sidewalks and parking lots, and she had to know how they had done this impossible task.

She turned to the left and began to walk down the sidewalk. There were pains now in feet that had once played in the water. Knees creaked, threatened to let go with every step. They ached for the water that had once reached out for them. Her surrendering body was held up with the support of a cane thumping its rubbery tip on the sidewalk.

At one time there had been a video store. At one time there had been an ice cream shop and a jewelry store. At one time there had been a daycare, a laundromat, a clothing store, a pet shop. These lost storefronts fell behind as she trudged westward down the street.

And she walked on until she came to a place where the land dropped away. Here there was at last some grass gracing the declining land. Unlike the grid of shops and streets behind her, this lot was curved and round, without corner and without sharp edge.

And here, at the center of the lot, she found her rivulet. It had been turned, coiled, rolled into a circle and deposited in the center of a re-

tention pond. Where it had once run forever, long and shallow, from one end of existence to the other, it was now deep and wide and circular, forever chasing itself.

She began to walk down the gentle grassy slope. Her shoes slid on the damp grass, threatening to knock her feet from below her. Barely holding her balance, she bent down slowly, trying to hold the earth still below her. She gradually eased her way past the pains that threatened to stop her. She let go of her cane. It teetered and fell, but the single blow of the metal shaft was caught and muffled on soft ground.

The soft, cool grass welcomed her as she rested her weight upon it. She removed her shoes one at a time and set them aside together, two white reminders standing among the green. Then, unburdened, she stood once again and continued down the slope until the grass ended.

When she reached the water's edge, she did not stop to test it with a toe, as she would have as a child. She knew everything she needed to know about the water. She stepped in fully, confidently, her right leg plunging up to the knee. The earth below the surface was soft, pliable, and welcoming. Her left leg entered the water, and she was wading forward. And when she was floating, her body stretching out, laying across the water's surface, the pains of resisting gravity finally began to leave her.

She turned over on her back, spread her arms wide, and looked up at the sky. The blue expanse stretched and stretched and reached until it held all the world together. It looked down on her and regarded her calmly, without love, but also without hate, or fear, or anger.

When she said all she had to say to the sky, she turned over once more and plunged below the surface. With all her strength, she strove through heavy strokes to push the water behind her. She climbed downward, descending until the light of the surface receded and left her swimming sightless.

And then, after the pitch black had enveloped her, and her arms had exhausted their strength, she saw what she knew had to be there. She could see it with her own eyes. She could see the white siding, the green shutters, and the screened-in porch.

Michele Matuszewski

Musings from a 50's Teenager

Who put the bomp in the bomp bah bomp bah bomp
Who put the ram in the rama lama ding dong
Who put the bop in the bop shoo bop shoo bop
Who put the dip in the dip da dip da dip

Words. We had real words in our music. Or did we?

The other day as I was driving on some errands and I heard one of the oldies:

Ooh ee ooh ah ah ting tang walla walla bing bang
Ooh ee ooh ah ah ting tang walla walla bing bang

And there I go merrily driving along and singing to my heart's content (car windows closed.)

But our days weren't all about the Witch Doctor, Charlie Brown and Aly Ooop. We also had fabulous classics with no lyrics. They became extremely popular as instrumentals.

- Chanson D'amour
- Wonderland By Night
- Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White
- The Happy Organ
- Peter Gunn
- Walk Don't Run
- Tequila
- Honky Tonk Part 1 and Part II
- Wipe Out
- Pink Panther
- Raunchy

Just to name a few.

Music was, well, to me I say, it was ♪ MUSICAL ♪. There were a lot of instruments which required orchestration and a lot of writing and re-writing. The chorus was apparent. Some were very upbeat others very moody and romantic. As background music it was pleasurable to listen to. Some instrumentals were developed with lyrics after the fact and became more popular again. Canadian Sunset comes to mind as an instrumental that fit that description. Some of those songs went up the charts again. It was a time of ♪ MUSIC♪.

Then there were the fun songs that were silly but made a big splash because we could all relate to the silliness. Fun times. Ally Ooop comes to mind and Charlie Brown the school clown. Splish Splash was just pure nonsense. These had their time on the charts but soon faded only to return as the teenagers of that era aged into legal drinking age, resurrecting once more to the silliness over a beer. Memorable? Yes. Lasting power?

This is by no means a history of music, but rather meant to be a catharsis for me.

There were songs with lyrics that told a story – much like the Country-Western music.

Romantic lyrics abound. The themes were dating, first loves, broken hearts, and several even made top charts about the death of a loved one: Teen Angel and Tell Laura I Love Her come to mind.

Heartthrobs abound. Who couldn't fall in love with the melodies and the sentiment expressed. And there were so many songs dedicated to girls: Barbara Ann, Carol, Diana, Betty Lou, and a zillion more. There were a few boys' names like Norman and Joey but for some reason, the girls outnumbered the boys. Could it be that it was because so many of the singers were drop-down-handsome males in those days?

Elvis gave us Heartbreak Hotel and Blue Suede Shoes and grabbed a chunk of the charts. He certainly did liven up not only our lives but the wrath of our parents.

The hippie days came with messages for the politicians. Peter, Paul and Mary and the Kingston Trio flew to the top of the charts as folk music sprang up with meaningful anti-war lyrics and because the tunes were so clear and catchy everyone was singing and someone always played at least a few chords on a guitar and this era lasted a

very long time.

Which leads me to why I'm stirring up these images?

RAP.

Coming from the 50's generation, I could never understand RAP when it was first introduced as "music." It's probably too late for me to ever appreciate what is being spoken in these fast-paced creations. But I'm learning something about it lately as I pay attention to Ari Melber on MSNBC. He quotes so many of RAP's lyrics as having intense up-to-date meaning.

I have listened intently and am now aware that not all RAP should be ignored. There are probably as many anti-war, anti-discrimination, anti-bullying lyrics being published as there are ugly RAP productions with foul language and even fouler imagery. He really digs good RAP. I do understand that.

I sometimes take notes when Ari is interviewing one of his idols and turn on my computer to google the words so I can study them. Lots of word salad mixed in with a lot more words and nothing makes sense -- to me. I know that it is the vernacular, the language of today, that is as mystifying to me as "Ooh ee ooh ah ah" was to the adults of my generation. Everything sounds so mumbo-jumbo, but in reality, they are telling the same stories as our folk singers, but with many more words and innuendos relative to today's issues.

I can't relate to RAP at all. I gave it a try. I don't think I'm meant to join this category. (Hey, I don't really 'appreciate' opera either.) But by paying some attention, I can honestly say, I now respect RAP more.

I'm happy for those who love it and can even understand its popularity and I hope the good messages are getting through to our youth.

I'll stay in my lane, as they say, with what could be more inspiring than . . .

Well bless my soul, rock and roll, flyin' purple people eater
 Pigeon-toed, undergrewed, flyin' purple people eater
 "I like short shorts"
 Flyin' little people eater
 What a sight to see! (Purple People?)

RL McDonald

Goldilocks and the Three Wolves

One day, Little Red Riding Hood told Goldilocks, "Do not go to Mr. and Mrs. Wolf's house. They are not as nice as the three bears." "The three bears were not nice at all. The wolves cannot be any worse," answered back Goldilocks. "I am warning you, Goldilocks. Mr. Wolf almost ate me and my grandma." But Goldilocks insisted, "I will go wherever I please, Little Red Riding Hood." Little Red Riding Hood just shook her head at Goldilocks and left.

Goldilocks went into the wolves' cozy house. She saw Mr. Wolf's big old TV and turned it on. Then, she saw he left it on a hunting show. She did not like that, so looked for the remote control to change the channel. She looked in the couch cushions, she looked on the table, she looked under the table, she looked everywhere, but she could not find it. She finally gave up.

Then, Goldilocks saw Mrs. Wolf's yarn for knitting. She tried to make herself a scarf, but the ball of yarn unraveled. As it unraveled, Goldilocks tried to fix the yarn by spinning in circles. The yarn ended up all around Goldilocks to the point where she could barely move. Finally, she managed to wiggle and crawl her way out. She left the yarn on the floor and got far away from it.

However, Goldilocks still thought "I will do whatever I please." So she eyed the room and looked for something better to do. Then, Goldilocks saw baby Wolf's bright red tablet. "Oh, that looks like fun!" squealed Goldilocks. She picked it up to play a game, but the tablet slipped through her fingers to the floor. It shattered to pieces. Goldilocks shook her head and wondered how it fell. Maybe she shouldn't have done that.

Next, Goldilocks smelled pizza. She loved pizza and it smelled like pepperoni. She looked around for the pizza and there it was on the table. It was the wolves' lunch. First, she tried Mr. Wolf's pizza; but it had anchovies. Yuck. Goldilocks hated anchovies. It was disgusting. Then, she tried Mrs. Wolf's pizza, but it was plain cheese pizza. It was

missing something. So she put it back down and held her nose in the air. Where was the pepperoni pizza? At the end of the table, she spied it, a small little pizza. "Ummm, I smell the pepperoni!" she thought. She went down to the end of table and began eating. She liked it so much that she ate every bit and then licked her fingers. It was so good.

"All that food made me very tired," thought Goldilocks. Through the window, she saw a hammock in the backyard. She yawned and went outside. "Little Red Riding said that the wolves are not nice people," thought Goldilocks. "But maybe a short nap will not hurt. Besides, I will do whatever I please." Goldilocks fell asleep in the hammock in the bright sunlight. She was very pleased and slept soundly.

Then, the wolves came home. They were suspicious because the door was half-opened. Mr. Wolf noticed the TV and said, "Someone has been watching my TV." "Your TV! Someone unraveled all my precious yarn!" squealed Mrs. Wolf. Baby Wolf was not paying attention because he was crying, "Someone broke my tablet all to pieces."

Next they went to the table and Mr. Wolf saw his pizza. "Someone has been eating my pizza." "Someone has been eating my pizza too," said Mrs. Wolf. "Someone has been eating my pizza and ate it all up," cried Baby Wolf. "It's okay, Baby Wolf. We will find you something better to eat," said Mrs. Wolf. She gave Baby Wolf a big hug and looked around.

"Maybe we should teach him to hunt," replied Mr. Wolf. "You are not teaching my baby to hunt humans," said Mrs. Wolf. "Remember what happened when you tried to eat Little Red Riding Hood and her grandma; and the huntsman almost killed you. I will not have that again."

Mr. Wolf did not pay any attention to Mrs. Wolf and looked around, "I think I see a little girl outside," he replied to Mrs. Wolf. Then, he turned to Baby Wolf and said, "Are you ready for your first hunt?" Mr. Wolf pointed to the window where Goldilocks was sleeping in the hammock. Baby Wolf nodded and said, "Mama, please." Mama nodded her consent and the wolves sneaked outside. They found Goldilocks sound asleep.

"She looks tasty," said Mr. Wolf. At the sound of his voice, Goldilocks woke up. She was surrounded by wolves showing their teeth and

grinning wide. It was frightening. "Oh, my, Little Red Riding Hood was right!" exclaimed Goldilocks. "See, what you have done," said Mrs. Wolf. "You woke her up. The huntsman better not be around." While the wolves were arguing, Goldilocks ran away. She ran all the way to the three pigs' house. Mr. Pig had built a brick house to keep the wolves out. There Goldilocks was safe and sound. Goldilocks no longer went wherever she pleased, but she listened to good advice. She did not want to end up as a wolf's meal.

Vanessa Mitchell

Chapter 6: Sunday The Family Meeting

From WHY ME?

Little Kyle bellowed to mom from upstairs, "Mom, dad, is dinner ready?"

"Mia, go tell your brother dinner is ready and to wash his hands before coming down."

"Mom, dad, I have something I want to talk to you all about. Can we have a family meeting after dinner?" I asked.

"Sure, honey," dad said. By this time, my little brother had entered the room and sat down at the table.

Little Kyle chimed in and said, "I need to talk about something, too."

As dad passed the food around, he told us, "Okay, let's eat up while the food is hot, and we will talk."

"Little bro, can you pass me the Kool-Aid please?"

"Sure, big sis."

"Listen to you all," said mom. "You are being so nice to each other. So, who is washing the dishes?"

Little Kyle replied, "Mia and I will do the dishes."

"What?" dad and mom asked, surprised.

I stared at Kyle with a facial expression clearly conveying my curiosity about his intentions.

After mom and dad left the room, I ask Little Kyle, "Why did you tell mom and dad we would do the dishes, boy?"

"I just wanted to spend some time with you, big sis."

"You know we can spend time together at any time. We don't have to do chores just for us to hang out with each other."

"I know. But I just wanted to."

I asked, "Are you okay?"

He responded, "Yes, and I will leave it at that."

We proceeded to clean off the table, wash and dry the dishes.

"Mom, dad, we are finished washing the dishes. Shall we adjourn to the living room now?" Little Kyle suggested.

As everyone walked to the living room, Little Kyle asked everyone to sit in a certain seat. Why, no one knows, except Little Kyle. But we complied.

"So pumpkin, what is on your mind?" dad asked.

"Mom, Dad, you know I love you all. I respect you both. You have given Kyle and me a good life. We have never had to go without anything, and you all are always supportive of what we want to do."

Little Kyle jumped up and replied, "Yes, that is true." I turned and looked at him.

"Mom, I see it on your face at times. How you miss your family when you are on the phone with them. And, dad, I see the same in you at times. We have seen grandma, grandpa, aunts and uncles, and cousins more than any other times in our life since we have lived here in San Diego. It is easy for them to come out here and we go there. When we get together, we have a wonderful time. You can't tell me you won't miss that!"

Mom and dad looked at each other.

"Why do we have to relocate again?" I asked. "I know military families relocate on an average of every two to three years. But we have been here in San Diego for about five or six years now. This is the longest we have ever lived in one state. We have our own home and do not have to live on the base. I have finally made some real friends that you all like and welcome into our home. And Little Kyle, as well. We don't get into trouble. We obey all the rules. My friends and I have already planned out our high school and college adventures together. And Little Kyle, even though he is still young, is old enough to make plans with some real friends himself. He is beginning to play sports now, but now he has to leave. I pray, and I pray, and I ask Poppy why me! Why can't dad just have a normal nine-to-five job. But my timing must not be His timing for me to know just yet. So, I am waiting for an answer. I hope this is His timing."

"Wait! Wait!" dad said. He paused. "Wait," he said, looking a bit lost. "Who is Poppy?"

"Poppy? You don't know who Poppy is? Poppy is God," I replied. "Since we are always talking, I thought that I would give Him a name because it makes it easy and more personal to talk to Him. He gave me permission to call Him Poppy. So, I call God Poppy. We always talk. Sometimes I get answers and sometimes I don't. I figure my answers will come when He says it's time for me to know. Do you have to relocate again dad? To Italy? It sounds wonderful, and we are appreciative of experiencing all the different cultures. But can we put roots down here? Can we make this our forever home?"

Kyle jumped up again and shouted, "Yes, can we?"

"Now Mia and Kyle, I'm really sorry about how you both feel. But it's important for you all to understand that this is the life your mother and I chose. Now, we are at the point when I retire that we can really have a wonderful life. A bigger home. We will be able to send you all to the best college you all want to go to, travel...Yes, we do feel the pain you and Kyle have when we tell you that we are moving again. It hurts us, also. We see the children that you all meet and make friends with, but then, you have to say goodbye. We know you may not see or hear from them anymore. It hurts us too that we do not get to see family as much as we would like. But we do have social media to keep in touch."

I replied, "It's not the same, dad. Sure, we can talk and Facetime to keep in touch with each other. But we can't get together and hang out. We cannot go to the mall, games or movies."

"And I cannot play sports with my friends or go to the arcade games," Little Kyle replied.

"But guys, it is my job," dad said. "With my rank in the Marines, I have more responsibilities. I have to go where they send me."

"Well, can't you pull rank on someone else, and they send them?" I asked.

"No pumpkin. There are some things I have to do because of my position in the military. Guys, I ask that you both take some time and think about it again. Try to understand a little more. I know it hurts, but think about exploring the different and unique places you will see in Italy, just like in the other countries you have lived in. Italy is only for a few years. It will be over, and we will be back in The States before you know it. Oh, yeah. By the way, we have selected some schools for

you both and we will sit down in a few days to talk about them with you. I am still waiting on a few more pieces of information. And the house and neighborhood we will be living in seems to be beautiful. Look at this move as another treasure in your life that you will always be able to share with those who never get the opportunity to visit other countries. Memories you will be able to tell your children and your children's children and your friends."

Kyle threw his hand up.

"Yes, son?" dad asked.

"Dad, I am a little scared. What if I don't make any friends or do well in school?"

"Son, you are a smart kid. You have a funny personality, you make people laugh, and you are a very caring person. Everyone will love you. Just always be yourself and always tell the truth. Mia, you, as well, are a smart kid. You have become a lovely young lady with a beautiful spirit that attracts people to you. Therefore, you make friends easily. You all will be successful in Italy and anywhere you go. God is with you both!"

Mom said, "We love you guys. We would never do anything to put you both in harm's way. If dad thought that this move would not be safe for us, he would have fought as they say, tooth and nail in the military courts not to go. Instead, we think that this would be a great opportunity for us and his retirement."

With an expression of confusion on his face, Kyle asked, "Mom, what is tooth and nail?"

"Tooth and nail, honey, means to fight furiously, and fiercely, with all of one's strength and power. Like the Mighty Power Rangers you watch. They fight with all their strength and power. Don't they?"

"Yes," Kyle said. He jumped up. "They go like this... kicking." Kyle took this moment to demonstrate his abilities. Everyone laughed.

"Alright, son. We got it," said mom.

"We have prayed about it and, like dad said, it saddens us both. We knew it would hurt you both because we have been here the longest and the friendships you guys have made. But we have to go. We only have a month left, so we will have to start packing."

With a shocking tone of voice, I shouted, "What! Start packing?"

"Yes, Mia," dad said.

"We were waiting for the orders to be finalized before we said anything about how much time before we have to move to help alleviate some of your worries. But before we leave, we are going to have a big bash with all our friends and family and take lots of pictures for remembrance. Also, surprise! Guess what? Grandma, grandpa and your aunts, uncles, and cousins are coming and staying for a week. We called them when your dad first got the notice. We will have a house full. God help us with all this family at one time before we have to leave. How does that sound?"

Kyle jumped up and started dancing (at least what he calls dancing).

"Fun, fun, we'll have. Grandma, grandpa ... I'm gonna dance all around!"

I looked at Kyle sideways. "Boy, sit your silly self down!"

"So," mom stated, "are we on one accord here? Do we have that Miller Family love?"

Kyle ran up to mom and dad and gave them the biggest and tightest hug he could. I moved a little slower, walking toward them with a little hesitation.

"Aww! Come on, Mia," Kyle said. As I got closer, mom grabbed me and pulled me in. We all hugged.

"Thank you, guys, for being the understanding, loving, sweet children that you are," dad said. He gave us both the signature handshake. Just then, dad's phone rang. He told us he had to answer this call.

"Mom, Kyle and I are going for a walk," I said.

"Are you all okay?" she asked.

"Yes. We just want to be together right now and talk among ourselves."

"Okay. But you both know we are always here to answer questions or talk about anything you want."

"Yes, mom," I replied.

We strolled down the street, hand in hand in silence, both of us observing our neighbors and the neighborhood. "Sis, I am going to miss this place," Kyle said in a quiet tone of voice. "We have had a lot of fun here. The neighbors and the children we play with have been so

nice and friendly toward us. They welcomed us into their homes. They have always looked out for us. They were like our second parents, and mom and dad liked them, also. Mia, I know I pick on you a lot, but I mean no harm. I don't always say this often, but I am glad you are my big sister and I love you."

"Ahhh! Listen to you. My little brother is growing up, and I am so proud of you. Yes, I will miss this place, as well. Maybe someday Poppy will give us that forever home we long for with forever friends we can have fun with and make memories. I love you too, my little brother."

Quietness filled the air as we walked a little further. "I think we need to start heading back home, little bro. We have to get ready for school tomorrow."

Kyle started crying. "I don't want to move, Mia."

I tried to comfort my little brother. "Hey. Don't cry, sweetie. It's okay. I don't want to move, either. But we have to."

"Why us, Mia? Why do we always have to be the one who has to move? I don't understand, Mia."

I tried to be strong for my little brother, embracing him and wanting to cry myself.

"Don't cry, little brother. Dry your eyes. I don't understand either. Sometimes things can be difficult, and we don't understand why they happen the way they do. But we have to remember what Poppy teaches us in His Word about faith, love, and plans for our life. We have to trust His process, little bro. He will never tell us to do anything that is not in His Word."

"We have to trust that Poppy is speaking to dad to keep the world safe. So, he has to go where Poppy tells him. Dad helps to protect us from the bad people who want to destroy us. So, we have to keep our faith, little bro, and believe in Poppy that we will get through it. What do you and I always say and do during our hard times together?"

Looking at each other, we locked pinky fingers and recited, "If He brings us to it, He will take us through it."

As we embraced with a tight hug, I wiped my brother's tears with the tail end of my shirt and we both felt a surge of contentment come over us.

"Now, come. Let's head back before mom starts to worry where we are."

"Love you, sis!"

"Love you too, little bro!"

Sally Pinchock

Stress and Disappointments

In a conversation with my son, he was expressing disappointment in a relationship he was having with a friend. This is a friend who has a similar interest in cars. As I understand it, Andy was expecting that they would get together more often over a beer and share their stories. I have never met this gentleman but I know that my son is quite sincere about a relationship if one develops. You would want Andy for a friend who would stick by you and who would be willing to help you out. He is also well learned in many disciplines and can converse with just about anyone and add the fact that he is multi-lingual he sees life multi-culturally.

So I have been thinking about how to respond to Andy and I realize that we all often feel stress or meet up with disappointments in a situation and as a result we experience some kind of emotion; feelings hurt, angry, confused, helpless or whatever it might be. Does it have to be this way?

Well, for me, I know that sometime stress sets in when there are unknowns, something or someone that I have no control over. Mark Twain said that 98% of the things that we worry about never happen and I think the percentage might be a little high, but it is true. There is another saying that whatever you put your energy into expands. So if you think that something or someone is going to hurt you or is out to get you, I believe you actually invite that situation to yourself. If you feel grounded and look at a situation objectively, it loses its power over you because you have removed the emotion from your thoughts. The more emotional we get about something the more it feels good or not so good. Look at how people react to their favorite sports team winning or losing a game. Sometimes it's hard to discern what is important and what can be let go of but it is important that we are aware of how we are reacting to situations.

I think the situation for Andy created disappointment because he had an expectation that this fellow would be a good one for him to

hang out with. Obviously, he didn't see Andy in the same light. When our expectations are not met, we can become stressed or we can accept it for what it is, acknowledge that it is not how we wanted it to turn out and move on to another solution or drop it entirely. Stress and disappointment are really our unmet expectations. And we can change the expectation because we cannot change other people, the weather, the government, or institutions.

I am slowly learning that situations are not good or bad or filled with reward or punishment. There are 7.9 billion people in the world plus all of the elements of nature. This is too vast to be able to definitively say life should be this way or that. How can we possibly know all of the variables? The lessons for me that I am working on are how to accept that my life must go on regardless of what is happening outside of me. I must take care of myself physically, mentally, emotionally and psychologically because no one else can do that for me. I must respect others even if I don't agree with them because they have as much right to their opinions as I do and really, do we know who is more correct or incorrect? Too many variables. When I feel that I have come to a truth or belief, it is my truth or belief based on the composite that I am. My makeup is based on my experiences and relationships and my DNA and that can only happen for my own uniqueness because there is no one else in the world like me. This is even true for identical twins.

Sometimes I have to go down the rabbit hole and figure out how to get back out in some sort of sane way. I had a trip to Germany planned for December 2021 and there were 3 flight changes and finally the government stopped all flights to Europe because of an outbreak of covid. The experience that I had with Delta showed how I let myself get out of control. These were circumstances that I had no control over and I was so angry that I wanted to get even with someone, somehow. I felt my rights were violated and I wanted to let the whole world know. Physically my face swelled and broke out. My stomach was flip flopping every time I thought about it. My mind was so scattered I couldn't concentrate. My temper was getting short. I had not seen Andy and his family in 2 years. This wasn't fair.

Now I look back and have to admit that I was letting the situation take my personal power away. My personal power is what keeps me

grounded, rational, kind, accepting and allowing. I can still feel anger, hurt, but I don't give into it and let it destroy me. I hope that going forward, I remember the lessons that I have learned and that I am a better person for them. What I put my energy into expands. What do I want to expand? Hurt and disagreement? Stress? Or is it better to have Serenity, Courage and Wisdom? I choose the latter.

Nancy Louise Spinelle

Wish

Dedicated to Make-A-Wish and My Grandchildren Nicholas Andrew, Natalie Marie, Mary June and Sarah Avery, but especially to Megan Louise and Michael Leo who have December 23 and 25th birthdays.

It had been a perfect summer
day for a birthday celebration,
just as the weather forecaster
had promised.

Perfect, that is, until everyone had left and Natalie Eve's parents, spoiled the mood, by suggesting something about her sharing a gift.

"It's a Make-A-Wish family tradition, Dad said, "and now that you're getting older," he explained, "you can choose one of your gifts, like that stuffed dog, and put it away for our neighborhood charity auction.

Natalie Eve, who had been called
so because she had been born on Christmas Eve, had stomped up
the stairs lugging the huge bulging dog beneath her arm, grum-
bling all the way.

"Now it isn't bad enough," she said shutting her bedroom door
with a bang, "that they celebrate my half-birthday in JUNE because of
the busy holidays in DECEMBER,
but now they think I should give up my favorite gift for charity!"

Slouched in her rocking chair, brooding, Natalie Eve sat peering through the partially drawn drapes clinging to her stuffed dog.

She watched as the street lights below began to flicker aglow as if to try and coax the night away.

“And besides,” she whispered into her dog’s ear soothing smooth its tufts of fur, “I’ve already decided I’m not giving you away! I’m keeping you!”

“And,” she yawned, “I’m keeping you forever until your fur gets matted and your nose fades and your tail falls off!”

It was then, that she looked up into the clear night sky and found her wishing star. It was very bright. Brighter than all the rest!

“Tonight I Wish,” she said softly, “that you will make my wish come true!”

Natalie Eve stared and stared. She could tell her star was trying awfully hard, until finally it grew the least bit dimmer, before fading away.

“No-o-o-o Natalie cried as a single tear rolled down her cheek and fell to the floor. Not my wishing star!”

“Now my wish will never come true!”

Chapter 2

Natalie Eve sat frustrated and upset.
So upset that she buried her head
in her arms and cried. She cried so hard and for so long that her
tears
began to form a pool below.

That pool of tears grew and grew
and grew until it got so big, that the chair upon which Natalie Eve
sat, began to rise.

She cried for so long that she hadn't
even noticed that her tears had floated her all the way
to the top of the heavens.

It wasn't until she heard whispering and giggling that she thought
that she must be dreaming!

She would have gone on thinking
she was dreaming if a star hadn't startled her, tapping her shoulder
asking, "Who are you?"

Natalie Eve had had some very real dreams before but she was cer-
tain that this was no dream!

"Don't be frightened," spoke the same star, in a soft soothing voice.

"We are the stars of heaven that surround the earth. We heard your
wish and want to make your wish come true."

"I'm Natalie Eve," she answered,

her own voice surprising even herself.

“What’s your name?”

“We don’t have special names,” said another star. “We are all just stars.”

“Then how,” questioned Natalie Eve, gazing out at what looked to be a sea of stars, “does your mother and father call you when they need you?”

All the stars giggled aloud.

“We don’t have mothers and fathers. We are all one big family called,
The Body of Stars.”

Suddenly all the stars were silent as a twinkling light came falling down
landing right in front of Natalie Eve.

“What is going on here?” asked Falling Star.

This star spoke with such authority that Natalie Eve imagined that she must be their President.

Brightest Star stepped forward to explain.

“This is a girl from earth. She made a wish and because I could not grant her wish she began to cry.

Her pool of tears carried her here
to the top of the heavens."

"And why," asked Falling Star, "could you not grant this child's
wish?

No wish of a child is impossible!"

All the stars began to speak at once.

"It was no ordinary wish," said one star.

"She wanted it on very short notice," explained another.

"Well tonight," began still another star, "was such a nice clear night
that there were a lot of children making wishes and...and..."

"Nonsense!" interrupted Falling Star. "Why wasn't her wish placed
in
The Magic Wish Machine?"

Littlest Star, with head bent low, stepped forward to explain.

"It was me!" he said with a mischievous grin, pointing to the telling
trail of bits and pieces of shimmering light.

"I was playing with The Magic
Wish Machine and got it
all stuffed with stardust."

"Try thinking!" Brightest Star
spoke out.
"Every problem has a solution!"

So all the stars spread out throughout the heavens to find a quiet
place for thinking.

Littlest Star sat alone at the edge of a cloud and thought and thought.
He thought until he got an idea.
A wonderful, splendid idea!

"If all the stars all at once," he announced, "each thought of her
dream coming true together, then Natalie Eve's wish would surely be
granted!"

All the stars agreed.

And so it was, as they gathered around Natalie Eve, that the heav-
ens filled with a glorious glow of shimmering lights.

At last the spell was broken as
Falling Star spoke.

"It's almost morning. Soon all the stars will begin to fade into the
morning's warm daylight, and sleep there until night comes once
again."

Littlest Star looked up to Falling
Star and asked bravely,
"May I take her home?"

"If you go," Falling Star warned in a low voice that only Littlest

Star could hear, "you can never return."

Knowing that all the stars that left the heavens faded into stardust, Littlest Star, made his way forward and stood before Natalie Eve.

"If you're ready," he said proudly,
"I'll take you home."

Chapter 3

Natalie Eve could feel herself wrapped warm and secure within the star as they tumbled, swirling and twirling, toward the earth.

The ride was a bit bumpy and her head felt awfully dizzy as she awoke to the touch of her mother tapping her shoulder.

"I dreamt I went to the stars and back," Natalie Eve said excitedly, plopping her stuffed dog into the arms of her mother.

"I've decided to hold a huge Adoption Auction at our school for Make-A-Wish," she explained, "and whoever bids the most money wins my stuffed dog!"

"That's such a wonderful idea,"
mom said.

That's when her mother reached from behind her back revealing a beautiful box bound in reams of ribbons saying, "One last gift."

Beneath the lid of the box, and
under layers upon layers of tissue paper, she found a collar and a
leash with a picture of a dog.

She stared and stared at the
picture of the dog with fluffy fur,
and what looked to be, a white
mark right on its forehead.

A white mark that looked remarkably like a star.

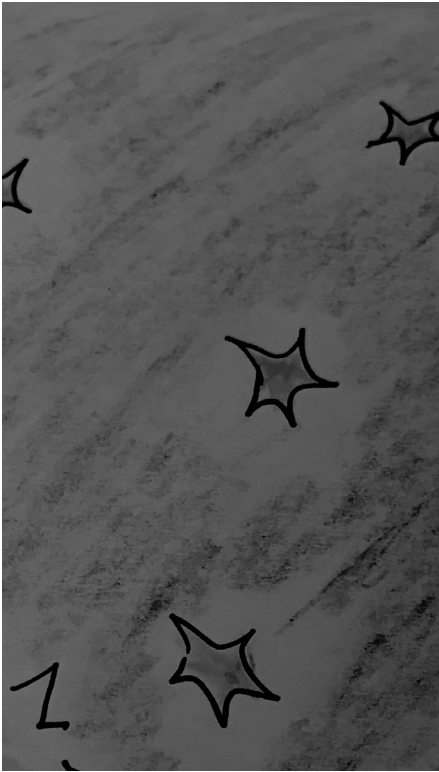
She stared and stared at the
picture of the dog with fluffy fur,
with what looked to be, a white
mark right on its forehead.

A white mark that looked remarkably like a star.

“Michigan Humane,” mom said smiling, “faxed that picture last
night. They thought they might have found just the perfect pet we
could adopt.”

Without another word spoken,
Natalie Eve, clutching the collar
and leash in one hand and the picture in the other, bounced down
the steps two by two calling out to her brother and sister.

“Maybe, just maybe, we could call our dog.....*Star!*”



NLS

Teresa Q. Tucker

Red Clay

The last time the crumbling earth floated past my eyes I recalled the ones that had been covered in it before. Each year, there is a sacrifice made to it. It's a beast that must be fed; its intestines want to be glazed with the remnants of flesh, wrapped in a box, encased in something solid and formal. Daily it gets its sustenance. We come in and we leave out.

The first time I touched it was like feeling life old and new. All of those that came before me had placed an appendage in it, left some skin cells to remind me that they had been here before.

That red clay is life.

A. Jevon Ward

Cheaper to Keep Her

Excerpt from Chapter One

It was 5 minutes before hurricane Olivia hit. A torn red cloth bag kissed the sky. The bag landed hard spilling some micro beads onto the wooden board. The bag slid an inch or so after landing knocking two blue bags into the hole. Dusty celebrated. He pulled his bandana off his head and shook his grayish blonde hair. Mike, his opponent, dropped his head in defeat.

Frustrated by his blunder, "You know you got lucky. If I didn't knock yours in that would have been game for me."

"Call it what you want, I'm still the corn hole champion," Dusty said gleefully.

"This a white people's game anyway," Mike shot back.

"You got next Harry?" Dusty asked.

"Nope, I can't," Harry said without lifting his fisherman's hat from his eyes.

"I'll go easier on you than I went on Mike," Dusty teased.

"I'm on restriction." Harry pointed to his arm tied up in a make shift sling.

Extra cautious not to get too much direct sun exposure to his pale skin; Harry sat as comfortably as he could on a small stack of milk crates in the shade. His talking parrot, Cholly sat on his shoulder. Dusty walked over to a small kiddie pool filled with ice cubes but mostly dirty water. He took off his calculator watch and grabbed a can of his favorite beer from the murky waters. Dusty tossed the can to Mike. Mike caught the can, wiped the mouth part of the can on his shirt and cracked it open. Foam sprayed everywhere.

"Ugh! What kinda beer is this?" Mike said after he spat out the cabbage tasting brew.

"This is all we had to drink in Nam," Dusty said, as he reached into the pool and grabbed another.

"But you're not in Vietnam anymore, you know there's plenty of other options right?" Mike asked.

"Harry think fast," Dusty threw a can to Harry.

"Huh?" Harry lifted his hat from his eyes. Cholly flew from Harry's shoulder and landed in the ceramic bird bath. The can of beer hit Harry right across the nose.

"Why did you throw that beer at me? That hurt."

"Maybe you should've learn to catch by now."

"Shows what kinda father you are, you never played catch with me."

"Stop living in the past Harry. You're a grown man, you should have learned to catch by now, that's a basic life skill."

"Okay but who launches a can of beer at someone unexpectedly? Probably the same someone who walked out on us and showed up years later like nothing happened."

"Like I told your momma, I was abducted so that wasn't my fault."

"Really dad, you still sticking to that story?"

"I don't mean to get into family business but I gotta know. Are you saying aliens took you?" Mike reclined in the patio chair with his hands clasped behind his head.

"Yeah that's right. Illegal aliens." Dusty defended.

"It's the way he did it Mike. He was just dirty with it."

"What do you mean? What he do?"

"Fourth grade, January report card day. I came home and I showed my dad my report card. The promise made to me was if I get all C's or better he would take me to see Bigfoot."

"Come on Harry big foot ain't real. That's just a dude in an ape suit."

"No Mike, Bigfoot the monster truck. It was at the Pontiac Silverdome. So I bring home a report card with a few A's but mostly B's. Dad tells me to go get my piggy bank so we can get gas on the way there. When I came back to the living room I heard his engine revving so I ran to the window just in time to see him peel off."

Mike died with laughter. By now Harry has two black eyes from the can of beer hitting him.

"Dang Dusty you did your boy like that?"

"I was a good father. We snuck into baseball games, we went to the zoo..."

"To the zoo?" Harry echoed. "That was Jerry's exotic farm. All of those animals were poached wildlife."

"You should have seen it Mike. It was like no other place on earth. I mean where else could you go and see lions and monkeys and camels?"

"Oh I don't know, maybe an actual zoo?" Harry said as he pinched his nose and held his head back to stop the nose bleed.

"Tomato - tomato." Dusty said.

"The farm was raided while we were there. I even remember mom being handcuffed. I had to hide in a stack of hay. Dad left us. He literally ran, got in the car and drove off leaving us."

"I had warrants son. I say it all worked out in the end.

"Hey, what's wrong with your bird?" Cholly flew uncontrollably in a strange pattern.

Just then the gate to the back yard flung open. The hurricane had arrived. She wore a navy blue business suit. Her tailored skirt came two inches above the knee. Her cognac loafers became lost in the overgrown grass. Her natural brown curly hair bounced as she walked. Her skin was the color of honey. She walked over to Harry and passed him an envelope.

"Did you get my text?" He asked his wife as he opened the envelope and removed the paycheck inside.

Olivia hesitantly replied; "I read it."

"You didn't respond. I really wanna make this work."

Ignoring Harry, she stepped around him and headed for the backdoor.

"Olivia say something. Say anything, please."

Olivia turned around to face Harry, she intentionally avoided eye contact by looking down at the junk mail in her hand. She finally glanced up at Harry.

"Didn't you wear that shirt yesterday?" Olivia scoffed.

Harry sniffed his tuxedo printed t shirt.

"I know what you need, how about me and you go to the ice cream parlor and share a malt. How does that sound?"

"It sounds like you're 'bout to ask me to the sock hop this Friday. It's not 1950 Harry."

"Why don't you let me do something nice for you? Whatever you want." Harry pleaded. Without considering his offer, she asked;

"Don't you think the grass needs to be cut? I mean come on Harry the front lawn looks atrocious."

"I told you Olivia I can't let them see me cutting grass."

"The workman's comp people ain't watching you."

"Yes they are." Cholly said as he flew by overhead.

"See even Cholly knows." Harry contested.

"The workman's comp people have far greater things to do than to babysit you. Speaking of which let me see what your check is looking like." Olivia snatched Harry's check from him.

"Is this it? Guess you won't be helping with any bills this week." She threw the check back at Harry. It fell to the ground.

"Learn to catch Harry." She smacked her lips.

"Baby, are you still upset about..."

"Not now. This isn't the time or place to discuss such matters." She cut him off. Cholly flew over and landed on Harry's shoulder.

"You could have left that funky attitude at work missy." Cholly chimed in.

"Keep on and we'll be having chicken wings for dinner." Olivia threatened.

"News flash genius, you can't get chicken wings from a parrot." Cholly flapped his wings.

"I hate it here." Olivia started for the house. Harry grabbed her arm and looked deep into his wife's eyes. A touch she hasn't felt in nearly a year. Almost turned on, Olivia gave Harry her undivided attention.

"What is that?" He spoke softly.

"What is what?" She asked softer. Olivia licked her lips, her gazed locked on Harry's bright blue eyes.

"You got something... Behind... Your..."

The intimate moment had expired when Harry pulled a quarter from behind her ear.

"That's your son." Mike said to Dusty.

"I need to get started on dinner." She straightened her posture be-

fore she walked away.

"You don't have to cook tonight. We can share a two for 25 at Applebee's. My treat." Harry looked down at his check. "Well we can go Dutch."

Olivia answered Harry by slamming the patio door. Dusty walked over to Harry and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Ouch!" Harry moaned.

"Get it together son, you had her right up until you did the quarter behind the ear trick. You didn't learn that crap from me."

"I didn't learn anything from you."

"Save them tricks for kids' birthday parties. Take it from me; black people don't like magic. It makes us highly uncomfortable." Mike advised.

"So what do I do?" Harry shrugged.

"It's not rocket science son, if you want your woman, you go in there and lay down the law. Maybe throw a little water and soap under your arms first.

"Nah skip all that. You dealing with a sista. You need to go shower and shave. Cut off that mullet. You gotta buy her flowers, run her a bath, make her dinner, maybe some chocolate covered strawberries, and rub her feet. You gotta rub the feet." Mike added.

Harry walked backwards toward the patio door. Cholly landed on the clothes line where the bed linen hang.

"Wish me luck guys. I have a good feeling about this." Harry said confidently. Harry walked through the backdoor and wiped his bare feet on the mat.

"Cholly I'll bet you a bag of sunflower seeds he fumbles this." Dusty said playfully.

"You're on." Cholly chirped.

Once inside Harry walked into the kitchen where Olivia had poured herself a glass of wine.

"Hey... So our anniversary is coming up."

"I know that." She said after a long exhale.

"I want to get you something really nice. What do you want?" Harry waited for an answer that would never come. He continued; "You can't figure it out either? So it's not just me?"

"Harry I don't want you to buy me anything. A gift means nothing if I have to tell you what to buy me."

"I just didn't wanna get you the wrong thing, you know like last year?"

"What about me says I wanted a set of Ninja turtle floor mats for my car?"

"The third year gift is leather Olivia."

"Harry! The floor mats weren't leather, and they had this bad odor to them. Almost as if they were used and you cleaned them up before giving them to me." Olivia wasn't wrong.

"Now baby why would you think that?" Harry looked away in hopes to not give away his deceit.

"I'm good. I might not even be here for our anniversary."

"What do you mean by that?" Harry stepped closer to Olivia to closed the gap between he and his wife.

"The job might be sending me out of town that week."

"Oh, okay. The whole week? Where are you going?"

"Harry can we just drop the small talk. Just get out so I can start on dinner."

"What are you making, are those diced onions I smell?"

"No Harry that's you. You need to bathe. You stank!"

"I'm going to go shower. I'll leave the bathroom door unlocked if you decide to join me. No pressure." Harry said smoothly.

"No thank you."

"That's totally fine too ma'am."

"Why are you still standing here? Bye." She placed her wine glass on the counter. Harry carefully lowered himself down on one knee, he took his wife by the hand.

"Baby I'm sorry. I was wrong. I've been wrong. Please don't give up on us. I'll do whatever it takes." Harry noticed her placid smile. The hurricane was letting up.

"Do you want me to sing to you?"

"No."

"I'll do it baby."

"No Harry don't sing." She laughed.

"Tell me what you wanna hear. What about this; My mind is telling

me no..."

"Okay Harry. I'm good."

"But my body. My body's telling me yes." Olivia pulled Harry up from the floor.

"I don't wanna hurt nobody..."

Olivia covered Harry's mouth with her hand.

"Go take a shower and let's go to Applebee's."

"I'm just gonna wash up."

"No, you need to shower, and how did you get two black eyes?" Olivia inquired.

"Because my dad never taught me how to catch."

"Harry!" Olivia grew exhausted.

Sharon Westwood

The Well-Worn Bible

Grasping the well-worn family Bible I take the first steps toward the altar where I will read the passages from the Good Book. I can't help but reminisce about rambling these steps a few years ago when I walked up to read at my father's funeral. This however is a happier time...a time to cherish. Watching my sister, I can see her sweetly glancing at her daughter as her first born marries the man of her dreams. The exchange of feelings between the bride and groom creates a memory that will last much longer than this ceremony.

As I hold this Bible to my heart, I reflect how this Book has been a part of our family ceremonies through many of the last years. Within these pages we have found courage to carry on; faith to move mountains; healing for sickness and pain; and hope for our dreams. This Book has been with us through our many journeys.

Yes, the well-worn Bible has been through much with my family. There was Grandma's death. I can still remember hearing the congregation sing "Rock of Ages." That perhaps was my first recollection of the church, hymns, and reading from the Book. I can remember the words, "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." The comforting words bringing trust and peace during the dark days of sadness.

As I saunter the pews like many who have walked before me, I catch a glimmer of the sunlight as it sparkles off the cross draped in purple. The scent of hydrangeas, peonies, and dahlias drift across the room as I hear the sweet chords of the violin as the quartet plays "Allegro from Spring."

The Book has also been a special place to hold onto things I hold dear. Sometimes slipping a paper or remembrance between the pages; I hold it there with hope and faith and dreams for the future.

As I take my final steps and place the Book upon the altar, I realize many may not know the peace, love, hope, and faith that ruminates from this special Book. For some it is just another reading,

but for us this Book portrays a family that has been through love and trials, times of plenty and times of lack. Through them all we have learned to lean and learn from this Book. I open the pages to Corinthians and read, "And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.

May this well-worn Bible continue to grace this family with love. May we always be connected to the Creator, and may it always bridge us to the past, present and future.

Anette Wolski

Lunch with Sherry

It was frigid again today. The temperature was 5 degrees above zero in our small Michigan town. Wind gusts were 25 miles per hour, making wind chills well below zero. I was concerned that Sherry wouldn't make it to our luncheon date, as she was travelling from a northern suburb of Detroit. On a good day, travel time would be an hour; but on a windy day like this, travel time could be longer. I had called Sherry before I left my house, but there was no answer. I left a message and drove to my parents' house. My parents, eager to have a change of scenery and eager to have a reunion with Sherry, were already bundled in their winter coats when I arrived. Since this cold spell had been lingering for the past week, my parents had not made it out of their home in several days.

My father was especially antsy. Newly diagnosed with COPD, he was having difficulty adjusting to the restrictions this disease carried. Now equipped with an oxygen tank—not a small, portable one mind you, but a big, clunky tank that you see scuba divers use—my father was not accustomed to adjusting his daily routine to the whim of the weather. A cold day like today could send him gasping for breath...but he was not planning on sitting at home—he had taken precautions the previous two days and had remained inside. Today he had had it...he was making a run for it. I had actually been surprised that my father wanted to join us for lunch. He was normally a quiet man when it came to socializing...and considering the weather, I thought he might just want to skip the entire adventure. But he was ready at the door, bundled from head to foot and armed with his oxygen tank, so I didn't question his decision to join us. I loaded the tank in my car and remembered to place it horizontally as the nurse had instructed, "So it doesn't become a torpedo in case of an accident," she had said. I always remembered to place the tank horizontally as the vision of a live torpedo in my car did not excite me. The oxygen tank was not heavy per se but was awkward to handle—it came with a wheeled carrier and

slipped into a hole in the bottom. Although stationary when pushing it, lifting it frequently caused the tank to become dislodged. I was often concerned that the tank would fall and explode.

As I gently placed the oxygen tank in the trunk, my father entered the back seat. My mother was still struggling on the stairs. Ever since she had had bilateral knee surgery, she did not walk well. She regretted having the surgery done on both knees simultaneously, but she had been in severe pain, so what was she supposed to do? My mother was also diagnosed with Polycythemia Vera Disease, which is a disease of the blood that basically turns your blood to goo. Although she may have leukemia, my mom opted not to have a bone marrow biopsy to confirm the diagnosis. At 88 years old, why put yourself through more suffering? Her doctor agreed and is treating her with the same medication used for leukemia patients. Suffice it to say, my mother is not able to walk quickly. My father is much more nimble at 87 and has no difficulty walking with the exception of the oxygen tank—the tank’s wheels, at times, just like shopping cars, seem to have a mind of their own.

By the time I had secured the tank in the trunk, my mother was approaching the car. I would have assisted her, but I was concerned about my father’s labored breathing, so I entered the driver’s seat, turned the car on and started the heater. After a few grunts and groans, my mother was successful in entering the car.

Sherry was waiting for us at George’s Grill. Due to the weather, she had left her house early—what would normally have taken one hour took almost two hours—but she made it safely and had arrived before we had. Sherry was an old friend of the family—her parents were my godparents, and our families had been very close when I was just a child. Sherry was 10 years my elder and was a retired school teacher. Although not a teacher, I worked in a school district as a social worker. Our lunch conversation was light and cheerful, catching up on old times and comparing humorous stories. We laughed a lot. Sherry also brought with her a rug that she had purchased for me three years prior. She had bought the rug as a thank you gift for my visit with her father just prior to his death. I visited the end of August. He died three weeks later. When I saw him, he looked like a refugee from a concen-

tration camp—I couldn't imagine him becoming any thinner, yet that's exactly what had happened during the ensuing weeks.

Cancer can be rough on the body.

The day I arrived in Arizona, we had a nice visit, the four of us, Sherry, Sharon, Dean and I. I asked Dean to tell me about his most memorable experiences, and he told me about their camping trips. It was very interesting for me to hear about their adventures, and the conversation flowed. After an hour or two, he announced that he was tired and wanted to take a nap. He turned to me and told me that he had a bad memory and probably wouldn't remember our conversation the next day. He thanked me for coming and for spending time with him. Sherry told me that he had not talked so much or laughed so loudly in such a long time, and for that, she was grateful.

The next day, Dean didn't remember who I was, or that we had had an enjoyable visit.

And today, we were sitting in a restaurant in Michigan, my parents' turn I'm certain, fastly approaching. In addition to COPD, my father has angina and diminished kidney function—down to 30%. His platelets are down too, at 128,000 when normal is between 145,000-300,000. My sister says that he probably has cancer. I look at his gaunt, frail body and believe she's probably right. This past week, we received the biopsy results from the skin they removed from his ear—pre-cancer. They're still watching the spots on his lungs and his next cat scan is scheduled in four months.

I'm thinking lung cancer. That's what smoking can do to you. He was 45 years old when he stopped smoking, but after 30 years of smoking, there's bound to be some damage. I remember the smell of the cigarette smoke combined with the smell of his shaving cream as he prepared for work. I can't describe the smell for you, but I can say that it always made me nauseated.

But that was then and this is now. I'm sitting in a booth at George's Grill next to Sherry. Mom and dad are sitting across from us. Dad's oxygen tank is sitting next to mom who insists on sitting near the end of the booth. I look at their faces and see them smiling, and I swear that their complexions have become more smooth instead of more wrinkled as they have aged. I wonder too, if the wrinkles on my 55 year old

face will fade when I'm in my 80's.

And then I'm brought back to the conversation, join in the laughter and thank God that I was able to share this joyful moment in time with the ones that I love.

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