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Come in...and be captivated...

"Our Stories"

We have decided to devote a portion of our magazine to non-fiction. These are stories of things that have happened serendipitously, being in the right place at the right time or just heartfelt musings, thoughts, and feelings on life. Join us in our non-fiction section. These stories speak to anyone and everyone and are told by anyone and everyone who has a story to tell.



"Boats in the Harbor" by C. Michelle Olson; <http://www.cmichelleolson.com/Home.html>

About this image: "My inspiration with this boat photo is silence. I love how water relaxes people—just the sight of it can calm a wandering mind. Boats dotting the harbor still and sleepy, represents life's quiet moments. We need to take time out of our busy lives to stop and ponder the meaning of life; and it is during those quiet moments, we come to know the meaning. Flowers are making their happy presence standing tall and proud like they are speaking to people: 'Hey!' 'Find reasons to smile.'" —CMO

Of Fork Tines and Family

by Lois Greene Stone

I sprinkled rose petals on the tablecloth; they circled the 1940s glass bowl my mother had called her 'rose bowl.' She filled it with fluid and floated roses, and I use flower-shaped candles that skim the water's surface. I rolled up the damask pattern napkins and slid individual ones through colorful rings. While these napkins are made from perma-press fabric, because of my aging, I still have, just to see and touch, the cloths and napkins given to me when I married. Heavy, beautiful items that I had to

starch and carefully iron, the material has memories both tangible and emotional.

A wooden chest, lined with anti-tarnish felt, houses sterling flatware that had belonged to my husband's grandparents. I imagined my own, as a bride, ornate as my mother's had been, and the pleasure I had bringing the tinged brown spots back to gleaming as I polished. I still like sparkles: stars in the sky, sunlight illuminating ripples on a lake or making snow shimmer. The maple flatware box contains a bland-looking pattern that doesn't satisfy my tactile sense, yet it has a generational past, and there were always more important expenses, as marriage years changed numbers, than buying elaborately designed utensils.

When did the crystal goblets, also once belonging to my husband's grandparents, begin to lose the thin gold border that edged the rim? Only the unused cordial ones indicate that trim. I'd have purchased ones to finger and feel a pattern, but like the sterling, I accepted what was handed down and created my own history with them.

The China was selected with my husband. Our taste, and I focus on the time-line as I set a table. It's not for company coming to dinner...my family will be here. Nothing in my home is either for 'show' or for guests to admire. It's special space to be occupied and used with the persons most dear: family.

When my mother taught me skills as a young girl, she had me embroider tablecloths and matching napkins in sizes from card table square to dining room length; I've a granddaughter that wanted a couple, and my daughter has one. Somehow, ironing the pure linen never seemed like a chore, and my cotton yarn that created a picture could remind me how I took a plain white bolt and made, with my tiny hands, a linen painting. I carted the card-table-size to my first tiny apartment and my youth and home were intertwined as I put plates on the table-covering.

Company. My family is company. Over the many decades, so far, since I donned a bridal veil, friends have been in and out of my life. Time and place saw those met as my husband completed medical school and left behind when internship began and we moved. More uprooting during the four years of medical residency had the temporary relationships based on available housing; then the mandatory armed service for two years had us forming friendships destined to dissolve once we left for civilian life. Small

children called for friendships with couples who had offspring of similar ages so we could share playtime, adult time, holidays as we were still far from blood kin, and those were altered as political conversation or differences in child rearing caused friction.

I began to hear too many times about sterling only being used for company, and 'what if your child broke a crystal glass?' Why not? I'd rather it be used and my child accidentally broke it than it sat like a display waiting for another to take it when I'm gone and decide it's just too old or not pretty enough to be kept. Tiny cracks in values caused chasms and 'friendship' deteriorated.

Only as my children grew, married, reproduced, did they notice that their offspring were seated in my dining room with the ornate table carefully decorated and hearing the stories about the sterling pattern I don't like but why and how it came into my possession, and the 'so what' if a grandchild accidentally breaks a glass. My values are a constant.

It's hard now. My arthritis makes polishing fork-tines enemies that I stay determined to conquer; the maple chest no longer gets lifted but I remove and replace items from where the chest sits in a cabinet. I use a step-stool to grasp the stemware from a shelf that seems higher as I grow shorter. 'Why are you still doing this?' I am asked. Because 'I can' is not quite an answer, because 'I want to' says more, because, the truth is, 'I still feel that no one is more special than my family, and dining is different from biologic eating' in my home. When will I make this easier on myself? Hopefully, never.

Bio- Lois Greene Stone, writer and poet, has been syndicated worldwide. Poetry and personal essays have been included in hard & softcover book anthologies. Collections of her personal items/ photos/ memorabilia are in major museums including twelve different divisions of The Smithsonian.

Bullhorns

by Ilan Herman

Heavy mist hovered over the remote army base, tops of tents peeking through the fog, when the 6 am horn awakened me to duty. I was 19, got in

the night before with orders to join the small northern compound at the feet of Mount Hermon in the Golan Heights, a wind-swept steppe once ruled by Syria and now occupied by Israel. I was drafted to defend the security and safety of Israel, something I found dubious but also a matter I hadn't fully considered.

Surrounded by strangers and barren volcanic rocks, I now had other things to worry about, like getting dressed and shivering my way through the mist to the chow tent, where I gobbled scrambled eggs while staring into empty air, the clatter of plates and cussing, the drivel conversation of young men parading a uniform to signify their wish to belong.

Done with breakfast, I walked up to the command post, where two jeeps stood parked. I was dressed in khaki fatigues, an M-16 slung over my shoulder.

The sergeant says, "Get in the jeeps." So we do, six of us, and we drive away into the lifting mist. The jeeps clatter over the dirt road for about 10 minutes and then slow to a chug. We get off the Jeeps and stand in a circle, and the sergeant says, "Place your positions."

"What position?" I ask, but he lowers his eyebrows and quips, "Just do your job."

A slender brown-eyed soldier takes me aside and points twice. "See the people on the hill?"

"Yes," I say and look up at about 200 people standing about 100 feet up the barren ridge. Women, covered in dark heavy dresses, faces obscure, men with wide mustaches, white collared shirts and dark pants, and many children, tiny hands reaching out to clutch the weathered palms of their elders.

"Now look over there," says the soldier and points the other way.

I squint to cut through the lifting mist, and see, on the other side of the valley, a large group of people standing on a barren ridge. I can't tell what they look like, but realize they look no different than the people standing above the barren ridge behind me.

I was standing on the border between Syria and Israel, one declared in 1967 after great carnage, arbitrarily and without consideration for the

population. Villages connected for centuries through marriage, commerce, love, death and God, now separated; families decapitated, mothers and children torn apart, fathers and sons ruled by guns of occupation.

"I see them," I say, "so what's happening?"

"They're going to talk to each other," the soldier replies.

"How they gonna do that," I ask, "they're really far away."

"Take another look," the soldier says and points to the mass of people behind us, now rivaling 300, "see what they're holding?"

Only now I am aware of the many bullhorns people hold dangling by their side.

"So when they start screaming at each other, you stand on the path and point your gun at them."

My skin crawls. "What? Why?"

"So they don't run down the ridge and try to cross the border," the soldier says.

I look at him and blink like a madman: "I'm not going to shoot them."

He shrugs, mutters, "Whatever, just don't freak out," and walks away.

I'm slouched in silent bewilderment, when, out from the gates of doom, dozens of bullhorns come to life and blare in voices high and low, children and elderly, cracking, sobbing. The voices sail across the valley to the other ridge, where many bullhorns sound back, choppy garbled and senseless, a white-water rapid river of syllables riding the mist, a huge herd of donkeys braying at the top of their rabid lungs.

The lament washed over me, hit the ridge across the valley and came back and went back and came back and went back until I almost lost my mind. I stared at the pebbles beneath my feet, gun pointed at the ground. *What happens if one desperate soul runs to cross the border, to unite with a loved one, to embrace a sick child, to aid a dying parent...am I really expected to shoot them?*

I was sick to my stomach, and with it came a stark, clear, precise notion that I was in the wrong place doing the wrong thing, and that if I ended up killing an innocent person in 'defense of my country', I'd be committing a murderous crime that would haunt me till my dying day.

The bullhorn cacophony lasted for 30 minutes, my head stuffed with wet towels and humming with hornets. Then we drove back to base and had lunch.

The next afternoon, I went to the infirmary and met with the base doctor. Sitting in metal chairs, tent flaps dancing in the breeze, I said: "I'm not doing this anymore. You can lock me up, court marshal me, do anything you want, but I'm not pointing a gun at anyone anymore."

We sat in silence for moment. The doctor was no older than 28 , softness about his blue eyes.

He nodded. "I understand. I feel the same way."

I let my shoulders drop. "So what are you saying?"

He scribbled on the piece of paper and handed it to me. "I'm sending you to see an army psychologist, I know him, he's a good guy. He'll assign you to a non combat unit."

I stood up. "That's it? How come?"

He shrugged. "Because you're telling me you don't want to kill, and I believe you. Few soldiers come here telling me that. They don't mind killing Arabs, some look forward to that, so don't worry about it. We have more than enough people ready to kill. Now get out of here."

Bio- Ilan Herman lives in LA and works as a musical producer and copy editor. Please Google Ilan Herman Kindle to view his literary catalog.

www.soundcloud.com/IlanHerman for music production samples.



Photo of Mark Barkawitz; image credit Dan Unfried

Amphibious Again

by Mark Barkawitz

Doheny, July 9, 2012—Just got out of the ocean. One year ago last summer, I was in an isolation unit at City of Hope getting a stem cell transplant to wipe-out the cancer that had broken my L-5 vertebra and threatened my life. Five-months-and-one-week after back-fusion surgery—three titanium rods installed with a half-dozen screws by world-class neurosurgeon Dr. Rahul Jandial—I strapped my surfboard to the roof racks on my truck and drove down anxiously. (I was supposed to wait six months but I'd been working-out vigorously, swimming laps so I wouldn't drown, and it was over 100 degrees in Pasadena!)

I was able to paddle-out. But I never *really* knew for sure if I'd actually be able to surf again, a sport which I'd taken up as a teenager and had continued all of my adult life until my back broke from the cancer 2½ years ago. There was a small, south swell running—perfect, little waves for my liquid re-hab. I caught three, small waves—muscle-memory took over as

soon as I rode each—and then paddled-in. Didn't want to overdo it on my first day back out. Rock-danced the shallows to the sandy shoreline. Tomorrow, I'd return and ride six, small waves.

Sitting on the warm sand under a clear, baby-blue sky, staring out at kindred surfers bobbing like multi-colored corks on the blue-green ocean, I pounded my chest, thanking all—All—who had helped return me to this pantheistic altar, at peace with the majestic world around me, a small part of something much bigger. *Cowabunga, Brah!* There was life after cancer; and it was good!

Author's Note: From the soon-to-be-released collection 29 AGAIN & Other Cancer-Fighting Stories by Mark Barkawitz through Woof Books. A book about cancer, that isn't a bummer!

Bio- Mark Barkawitz has earned local and national awards for his fiction, poetry, essay, and screenwriting. His work has appeared in newspapers, magazines, literary journals & anthologies, 'zines, and on dozens of websites. He has IMDb feature film credits as screenwriter, actor, & associate producer (Mark Bark) for *Turn of the Blade* (NorthStar Ent.) and supporting actor in *The Killing Time* (New World Pictures). He's taught creative writing classes, coached a championship track team of student-athletes, and ran the 2001 L.A. Marathon. He lives with his wife and has two kids in Pasadena, CA. His new e-novel *Giant Killers* is now available @ Amazon.com (averaging 4½ stars).

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My Night in the Tijuana Jail

by Patrick Byrne

I recently purchased a CD featuring folk music hits from the 1950s and 60s. As they played I leaned back in my recliner and reminisced about the days and events from that time in my life. As the Kingston Trio began singing their classic tune "Tijuana Jail", the memories rushed in and I was suddenly back in 1962.

I was at my first Navy duty station following boot camp, a helicopter squadron based in Imperial Beach, California, 15 miles south of San Diego. The squadron's primary mission when deployed at sea was to fly "plane

guard" from aircraft carriers and rescue downed pilots that crashed or ditched at sea. It was a six month assignment while I awaited my slot to open at the Navy's journalism school in Great Lakes, Ill. During this time I had the task of putting out the base newspaper, not so cleverly called The Chopper. It was typed on a blue stencil with a plasticized coating and run off on a mimeograph machine. Anyone who knows what I am talking about can testify to what a painstaking and messy process this entailed.

The base backed up to the Mexican border with the bright lights of Tijuana clearly visible at night. Tijuana or TJ, was a wide open town and a magnet for party-seeking sailors and marines stationed aboard the many ships and shore bases in the area. Since the town had no drinking age, 18 year olds like me were able to drink freely and enjoy the bawdy live entertainment on display in nightclubs that lined the main street.

I recall one night in particular partying with other sailors at a beach house near the border. None of us knew who owned the house nor did we care since it had all the ingredients for a great time. As the night wore on a call went out for a booze run to TJ, since it was close and cheap. I quickly volunteered to accompany the driver and after a harrowing but brief drive we were across the border (border crossing was easier then). We parked in the heart of the nightlife observing the local custom of paying a young Mexican boy to guard the car. Off we went each in a different direction to first visit a few of our favorite spots before meeting up again with our assigned booze order.

Approaching my favorite bar on a side street I noticed two very suspicious characters near the club's entry. I paid scant attention because there are many suspicious characters roaming the streets of Tijuana, but they did seem different. As I brushed aside the curtain and peered into the dark and smoky bar it was obvious something was very wrong. It was strangely quiet and the bartender had his head down in a beer box trying to look busy. The usual cast of girls sat motionless in the booths lining the wall, signaling with their body language for me to get out.

I had been drinking and was a bit confused but even in my foggy head I knew it was time to beat a hasty retreat. As I turned and pulled back the curtain stepping outside I was immediately grabbed by the same two guys I had spotted upon entering. They shoved me back into the club and quickly flashed a badge shouting, "Policia!" I decided based on their near derelict appearance they were not the police and pushed them aside and took off

down the street. This was not a smart move and it started a sequence of events that are still vivid to me after all these years.

As I ran down the street past the glittering lights of noisy nightclubs shoving aside the crowds that swarm TJ on the weekends, I was still able to hear shouts of "Stop! Stop! Stop!" Turning as I ran I saw a gun in the hand of one of my pursuers. Wisely, I decided to stop and take my chances with these guys still not convinced they were the police. Finally cornered and pushed onto a dimly lit side street, they attempted to force me into an unmarked car. It was a dirty, beat up old Ford and I refused to comply while absorbing a barrage of blows to my stomach and ribs, but oddly, never to my face.

At that point I started swinging, landing a punch to one of my antagonists allowing me to again take off running. This time after fleeing for about a block, a police car with uniformed officers pulled up and at gunpoint ordered me to get into the car. I immediately obliged now confident I was in the custody of the police and off I went to the Tijuana jail.

First, I was brought to an office there confronted by three men with scowling faces. The two standing I recognized from my street encounter, one now with a swollen eye. The third man was neatly dressed and seated at a desk. He asked why I ran from the detectives. I told him I did not believe they were the police. He quickly added, "Did they show their badges?" I replied, "Yes, but—" nothing came after "but" as I was punched and thrown across the room by the officer with the swollen eye. This confirmed my guess that he must be the guy I caught with a wild swing as I refused to get into his car. Two uniformed police then entered the room, picked me up and I was then taken to a holding room near the cell area and thrown onto a cement floor. There were no chairs just a dirty closet like space smelling of urine and occupied by scroungey border riffraff eyeing me with less than a warm welcome.

I went to light a cigarette when one of the men signaled he wanted a smoke. I nodded 'no' and they all got up and headed toward me. I threw them the pack and suddenly we were all good friends.

After what seemed like hours I was led out and placed in an endless line of others arrested that night including the working girls. As I stood in this cavernous corridor I was constantly teased by the girls who seemed to be enjoying the entire process. They were just being playful and having some

fun at my expense. I knew many of the girls came from small towns and villages further south in Mexico where there were no jobs or future. In Tijuana they could make enough money to live comfortably and still send American dollars home to their families.

Peering down the long booking line I saw a bespectacled man pecking away on an ancient typewriter. Since it was apparent this was to be a lengthy and tedious process I decided to pass the time with other English-speaking detainees. Conversation centered on our individual circumstances for being arrested. After sharing my story I was told that I had been caught up in a drug crackdown and was at the wrong place at the wrong time. I was not aware of any drug dealing in this bar and back then drug activity was on a much smaller scale than the rampant and dangerous level today in Mexico.

Finally, my turn came and the typing whiz gave me a quick glance and asked my name, branch of service and where I was stationed. He knew without asking for I.D. I was in the military. It also occurred to me that at no time did anyone ask for an I.D., take my money or any possessions. It was apparent that there was a special protocol for the U.S. military, including as I learned later not being struck in the face.

I was now led to the main jail area and assigned a cell. It was dank, smelly and already overcrowded with nasty-looking characters best described as the bad guys in a Clint Eastwood Western. Later, I overheard several were drug dealers and another a marine deserter. Totally out of place was a black guy dressed as a college preppie in bass weejun loafers, missing only a letter sweater and looking very scared. He immediately approached me and asked if we could “team up” as he put it to lessen our chances of being mugged by our charming cellmates. I figured joining up with a preppie for security was better than going it alone. We staked out a corner and were not bothered the entire night. I asked why he was there but he just waved me off. I understood, it was none of my business and we just had a temporary pact to get through the night.

The noise level throughout the three tiered jail was loud, incessant and at times disturbing. From the top tier there were unintelligible shouts punctuated by screams not from physical pain but of sheer desperation. Up there were the true lost souls. I learned from listening to my cellmates it was where they stowed the hardcore until transfer to prison. Tier two prisoners had some hope and down at my level are the “weekenders.” This probably explained the light-hearted mood of many in the cells on my side

of the cell block occupied only by men. Across the corridor cells were occupied by women. The ladies came prepared with candles, snacks and magazines. They busied themselves applying makeup and preparing for their almost certain release in the morning. The catcalls and indecent proposals flew back and forth until the wee hours.

In some ways it was almost a party atmosphere but the alcohol was wearing off and I now began to worry about how things were going to go with the Mexican police and the Navy. I knew that charges stemming from drugs were not a cause for concern in my case but resisting arrest was another matter. As morning approached a dirty, creepy elfin-type figure came by each cell offering for a price to bring in breakfast from the nearby cantinas. Although I was hungry my appetite was not great enough to overcome the thought of this guy handling anything I would eat.

Soon after, I heard official footsteps and spotted the Shore Patrol (S.P.'s) accompanied by "swollen eye." Before they reached the cell the marine deserter asked me not to tell the S.P.'s he was in the military. I agreed but shook my head thinking I would rather do time in a Navy brig than stay in this hell hole. As the S.P.'s approached one started to crack a smile as he recognized me from the squadron. The Navy gods were with me. Although we did not know each other well we were shipmates and in the Navy that bestows certain obligations. He asked for my I.D. through the bars and then asked if anyone else was military, staring directly at the marine. There was no response but the S.P.'s knew he was military; still, they let it go.

The cell door opened and as I walked out I turned to look once more at my preppie security blanket. He had that same scared look as when we first met. There was nothing I could do and I still had no idea why he was there or even his name. The entire night he only offered that he was from Los Angeles.

Down the corridor and into the same office from the previous night there sat the same neatly dressed man at the desk. Beside him stood "swollen eye." The man at the desk explained to the S.P.'s what had happened and that I was free to go, but that in the future I should obey lawful police orders. I apologized profusely for my actions and was ready to head for the door when the S.P. from my squadron asked the detectives to explain the welts and bruises on my body now clearly visible through my shredded shirt. The seated detective without answering, and obviously irritated with the question, pointed to "swollen eye" and then said again, "You are free to

go.” His tone of voice was clearly a command and we left without another word.

Once out of the jail and headed back to the border, the S.P.’s chewed me out royally and then said they would do everything they could to keep me out of trouble with the Navy. I was not AWOL (absent without leave) and the police had explained to the S.P.’s that I was not involved in drug activity.

The Navy officer at the border station was given a quick explanation of my circumstances. He looked at me and said, “You are a mess.” Then added, “They didn’t hit you in the face did they?” I replied, “No, sir.” He said, “They never do.” The officer knew I was wrong and I knew I was wrong but the Navy does not like its people abused under any circumstances.

I was driven back to the base and escorted to squadron headquarters. I had to check in with the OOD (officer of the day) a chopper pilot known for being a hardnose. He greeted me with a cold stare and said, “Byrne, don’t say a word, I got the story from the border station. Go get cleaned up and don’t let me see you again.”

I saluted and dashed out knowing I would not face any disciplinary action. It was a great relief. I went to the barracks, showered, changed clothes and realized it was still only late Saturday afternoon and that the party was to last all weekend. I managed to catch a ride and was astonished to see the party still going strong. The driver from the night before asked, “What happened to you?” I briefly explained my story and he said he waited a while and then figured I just decided to stay in TJ. Although he was aware of some excitement on the street, he had no idea I was the main attraction. The party rolled on, but I left early and returned to the base and finally got some sleep.

I awoke Sunday morning with numerous bruises and a monumental hangover. Only now was the full impact of Friday night’s follies finally beginning to fully sink in and I felt grateful to be back at the squadron, safe, and with no charges civilian or military pending. Now as the Kingston Trio sing the last few notes of “Tijuana Jail”, I think that for all my foolish and dangerous behavior back then, I can’t help smiling and saying to myself, It sure was great being young!

Bio- Patrick Byrne is a retired businessman (commercial real estate) currently residing in Delray Beach Fl. His writing had been limited to business matters until a few years ago

when he began to reflect on events that occurred during his Navy days in the early 1960s. Several of those narratives have appeared in previous editions of *The Write Place At The Write Time*. This latest story was written at the encouragement of his brother.

Patrick and his wife have travelled extensively, just returning from Africa, and still compete in triathlons and endurance events.

The C Word

by Brianna Sacco

At six years old, I saw the darkness that this world entailed. I felt pain and sadness. I knew what it meant to hurt. I knew what it meant to be angry. At six years old, I understood what it meant to be hopeful and hopeless at the same time. I knew how it felt to “hold onto the good times.” What good times? The good times I had during my childhood: my childhood with my best friend. At six years old, I lost my childhood. I lost my childhood to a monster that tears and shreds people and families apart. This monster forced me to grow up.

I lost my childhood to the C word. Cancer.

Felicia and I were born a week apart in October of 1993. We were two tiny little girls born to sisters. Since day one, Felicia and I were inseparable. Two peas in a pod, Curly and Cueball, the dynamic duo, were all nicknames our family called us. We were the same in many physical aspects: under weight and too short for our age. Yet we were slightly different in appearance. Felicia’s skin glowed a nice, light, fair skin. She had a freckle on her face for every grain of sand, whereas I had an olive skin tone that tanned with any glimmer of sun. We both had dark brown eyes with long eyelashes that we could use to bat our way out of any troubling situation. Our hair types, on the other hand, were extreme opposites. I had wild curls that bounced like springs and Felicia barely had any hair at first (hence the name “Cueball”) and then poker straight, light brown hair.

We went to school together, took dance class together, and spent hours on end coloring, watching television shows, playing with dolls, and playing outside on the swing set. We loved having sleepovers at either of our houses or Mom-Mom’s. Our sleepovers always included Felicia’s “Blankey”, my “Elmo” and our Pull-Ups because we peed the bed every night. We were

chatterboxes and dancers. We were full of life. Even though we had the same interests, Felicia had a different personality. The family called her Flower. She was not delicate like one, but sweet and accepting as flowers are. She never had a backbone like me, never had a smart mouth like me, and never once complained. She went with the flow, as flowers do.

Flowers encounter their fair share of storms, and Felicia was no exception. I watched as my Flower started to wither. First, the petals began to fall, and then the cheeriness and brightness began to fade. Why would my mother let me watch this storm ruin this flower? Wasn't I supposed to be sheltered from the storm and not see what it was fully capable of?

The beginning of the storm is blurry for me. I remember the first big surgery that removed Felicia's kidney. I remember because I sat on the cold, dark couch with Felicia and removed her bandages. I saw the bloody mess that wrapped from above her bellybutton to the center of her back.

I was not afraid.

I saw the beginning of the storm and I moved along with it. I saw Felicia begin to lose her hair. First little strands, then clumps and then all she had were hats to cover her head. I went to chemotherapy with Felicia. I watched them attach strings connected to bags of fluid to her ports. I would hide behind the *Where's Waldo?* book every time Felicia got sick during her treatment. The arch her back would make, the little bald head that bobbed up and down from the pink bedpan. She never cried, so I never cried. When the treatment was over, we went back to being six-year-old girls. It was different, though.

Our play dates were not all that playful, but cautious. We watched television, colored; Felicia would get her needles, sometimes we made shrinky dinks or baked cookies with Mom-Mom, but we could never play outside or run around. We stopped peeing the bed. We began to grow up. Felicia could not do strenuous activities because one wrong move could bust one of the many stitches that encompassed her small, frail body.

She had many surgeries. So many surgeries, I knew my way around Children's Hospital like the back of my hand. I would follow the wall of colored fish swimming along to Felicia's humming room. Her room hummed, not because people were singing, but because of the machines that kept her strong. Nobody sang in this room, nobody talked in this room.

I was nervous in this room. Not because of the noises the machines made, not because nobody talked, but because of how it transformed Felicia. The sad skeleton that lay in the bed was not Felicia. The bony, cold hands were not the hands I held when we danced together. The sunken eyes with no life were not the same big brown eyes that we shared. We were both scared.

I gave her a small smile to show her how brave I was. I wanted to be brave for her. I wanted her to see I was not afraid of what she had become. She was still my best friend and I still loved her. I always asked my Mom when Felicia would get better. She never gave me an answer. I missed the “good times.”

I remember one time Felicia had one of her many surgeries and my Mom donated blood to her. How she proudly showed me the cotton ball and tape on her arm where they had drawn the blood and said: “Look! I helped Felicia today! We have the same blood type!” I ran to my bedroom screaming and crying. I could not understand why this ugly monster wanted my Mom now too. I thought the C word was going to do the same thing to her as it was doing to my best friend. I had associated needles, blood, chemotherapy and hospitals to one single word: cancer. I hated the needles, the chemotherapy, the smell of Lysol, but I especially hated the hospital. I was afraid of the hospital. I knew every time I went there, Felicia would be sad. I would be sad. I would see the face of my best friend in pain.

My Mom had followed behind me, sat on my bed, and explained the same thing would not happen to her as it had Felicia. How her blood would help Felicia and that I should be happy that my Mom was able to help. I could not help.

Felicia had 13 surgeries. 13 times I can remember her being in the hospital. Every time Felicia got sick, even with a slight fever, back to the hospital she went. I hated those fish that swam along the wall. I hated the hum of the machines. I hated how nobody talked when we saw Felicia. We all just stared with an occasional whisper. I was angry at what cancer was doing.

I was six years old and I learned how to remove bandages from wounds without pulling at the skin. Felicia would only let me remove her bandages because I didn't hurt her like everyone else did. I did not mind. Mainly because once they were off, we could dance and play like we had always done. We did ballet together at Ms. Nancy's studio. Felicia would always wear the hat with the ponytail. We would run across the dance floor, do

turns, leaps and giggle the whole time. Our giggles filled the studio and we could forget about the monster. Felicia would do her turns so hard her hat would fly right off her head. She was never ashamed of showing off her bald head and I was never embarrassed for her. We were used to this. This was our normal: Curly and Cueball.

As time went on, the monster began to die off. I had made three birthday wishes before the storm was over. While my friends were wishing for ponies and Polly Pockets on their birthdays, I was wishing for something I should not have known existed. *I wish Felicia would get better*, is what I whispered inside my head before I blew out the few candles that lined my Elmo, Powerpuff Girl, and then my Backstreet Boys cakes. Three birthday wishes is what it took for my wish to come true.

At 20 years old, my birthday wish was returned. This time it was exchanged for another monster. Felicia had texted me one night while I was alone in my dorm room. One of the side effects of her previous radiation treatments was cancer. My immediate reaction was to burst into tears. I cried and I knew she did too. She had been diagnosed with cancer for the third time. This time it was Thyroid cancer. I assured her everything would be okay and once again, she would beat this with no problem. She had me and I would be there every step of the way. My Mom-Mom and her older sister, Dana, had beaten this cancer. We knew this type of cancer as if we were family-friends. One quick surgery to remove her thyroid and all would be good. In that moment, I was filled with the memories of when we were six years old. Not a naïve and innocent child anymore, I was prepared for the storm.

Even though the storm has ceased, to this day, I cry when I have to get a needle, pass out at the sight of blood and become mute when forced to go to a hospital. Maybe I am somewhat traumatized from what I had seen, or maybe I am just now aware of what I had really witnessed. I was ignorant to what that storm could fully do. I know now that Felicia could have been defeated. She had stage three Wilm's Tumor, a childhood cancer that affects the kidneys and can metastasize to major organs, like it did to Felicia. The cancer started in her kidney and relapsed in her lungs. She is missing her right kidney, ¼ of her right lung; part of her liver, part of her diaphragm and her heart has shifted to the center of her chest. We do not know what

else the radiation has done to her body since she went through this at such a young age.

Felicia is now a student at LaSalle University striving to achieve a bachelor's degree in Biology. With this degree, she can attend medical school and then make a difference in children's lives. Her ultimate goal is to be there for sick children who are going through similar experiences she encountered. This monster not only scarred her heavily emotionally, but physically. She is scarred, but she wears those scars proudly because it shows that she has won. The dynamic duo has survived the storms of the C word and to this day, is inseparable.

Bio- Brianna is a Senior at Villanova University majoring in Communications with two specializations of Journalism and Public Relations. She is a native of Philadelphia and enjoys watching the Flyers. She loves all things Disney and enjoys her free time with family and friends.

Monolithic Views

by Susan P. Blevins

We tend to hold such monolithic views of other people. Why is it so difficult to conceive of multiple facets to a person's personality? People see me, dressed in a little black dress with pearls, and assume I am a conventional, upper middle class, nicely brought up, educated lady. They seem unable to conceive that my heart is that of an adventurous explorer, a shameless hussy, a hardworking laborer, a devoted priest of God, a nurturing mother/grandmother, an efficient housewife, a sophisticated socialite, a dedicated student, and so on and so forth. I have experiences that demonstrate all these facets of my being, and they are all me, all authentic, all part of a mosaic which is Susan.

We have the opportunity to be all things, to taste all things, and it's not an 'either/or' opportunity, it's an accretive opportunity, which develops both from our basic personality and from our experiences, enriching and expanding us into more interesting, empathic human beings. The more experiences we undergo, the richer and fuller we become as human beings. The more often we break the mold, and allow ourselves to endure those

moments of insecurity as we expand into greater being, the more we are likely to grow.

In other words, my philosophy of life has been to 'try anything once' (except hard drugs), to say 'yes' to what life itself brings me, as opposed to deciding in my ego what 'I' want or do not want. If an unsolicited opportunity is offered to me, out of the blue, and it is usually one which will well and truly shake me out of my comfort zone, then I feel obligated to myself and to life to say 'yes', I'll give it a whirl. Invariably, the experience teaches me about myself and enriches me and my relationship with other people, and ignites a new self-confidence.

Two examples spring to mind. The first was when I was on a survival course in Israel, hiking the Sinai with a group of military-hardened Israelis, I being the only 'shiksa.' We were up before dawn, climbing at least one mountain every day, and one day being told to rappel down a dry waterfall which was a mere 160' drop. I was utterly terrified, and the first step into emptiness was probably the most loaded step I had ever taken in my entire life, but once I stepped over the edge of the cliff, trusting the rope and my team, meeting my fear head-on, I discovered that I was wild about the descent, and wanted to go back and do it again!

Well, that was not going to happen, because the rope was too short, by design, and I had to drop, booted and fully clothed into a long, high mountain lake and swim to the other end, and repeat the performance, but this time rappelling down in a live, icy-cold waterfall. That initial step over the edge was a step into life, into the unknown. It was a huge opportunity to conquer the demons of fear which coursed through my mind.

The second time I needed to 'take the plunge' so to speak, was of a very different nature. Two young friends of mine, who had been dating for a while, and whom I knew really well as a couple, surprised me one day on the phone by asking me to officiate at their marriage! I was speechless, and the first word which rose in my throat was 'NO!' I told them they were crazy, that I was not qualified to marry anyone, and that they should speak to their parents, which it turns out they had already done, and been told that I was 'perfect' to perform the marriage.

I told them I would think about it. I looked at the matter and knew two things: that I loved them both very much, and that I trusted spirit to guide me through this next growth phase of my development. I was being asked

to confront my age-old fear of speaking in public, a direct legacy of being brought up in post-Victorian England, where I was told continually that 'little girls should be seen and not heard.' I told them I would do it, and prepared a unique marriage service for them, loosely based on the Book of Common Prayer, which they loved and didn't modify at all.

The funny thing was that on the day of the marriage I didn't even feel nervous. I knew only that I loved them and that their marriage was so right. It gave me not only an immense joy, and a huge boost in self-confidence, but also confirmed to me that I have priestly qualities that long to be voiced. As I was performing the ceremony, I felt that I had done this many times in past lives, in many countries. I felt a seamless connection to previous incarnations, and a sense of being in time. Now I am just waiting and hoping that other young friends of mine will ask me to marry them!

So we will be challenged, and have opportunities our whole life, and we have to be looking and listening for them, open and alert to new possibilities, new opportunities to conquer the fear which so easily dominates us, and therefore society as a whole. I am particularly fond of FDR's famous line from his 1933 Inauguration Address, that the "only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Life is such an amazing experience, to be grasped and relished, in good times and in bad, for the hardest lessons teach us the toughest truths. I have promised myself never to complain about growing old, about wrinkles, a bit of a belly, a slowing down, or whatever it may be. It is a privilege and a grace to grow old, with a healthy body and a sound mind.

I think that what is important for me is to live each day fully, with a grateful heart, and to have the wisdom to discern what is important and what is not. We all need access to the bird's eye view of things from time to time, to put things in perspective, and I hope to share this with those younger than myself, to show them the joy that comes from loving and serving one another, and giving back to others what life has so generously bestowed on me during my seventy years.

Bio- Susan P. Blevins, an ex-pat Brit, lived in Italy for twenty-six years, traveled the world extensively, and has now settled in Houston, Texas, where she is enjoying writing stories based on her travels and adventures. She had a weekly column on food in a European newspaper while living in Rome, and has published various articles on gardens and gardening while living in northern New Mexico, before moving to Houston. Her passions

are classical music, gardening, nature, animals (cats in particular), reading and of course, writing. She has written a journal since she was about nine.

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