

## [The Write Place At the Write Time](#)

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### "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.



"Domino" Linda Woods; [www.moonbirdhill.exposuremanager.com/](http://www.moonbirdhill.exposuremanager.com/)

## The Kerchief

By Marjorie Frazier

It was Christmas season, 1954, and my best friend Linda and I were writing our Christmas lists. The lists were not about what we wanted to receive, but what we wanted to give. It was one of the few times in my childhood when I could give – that I had the power at the age of nine to offer someone something out of pure love.

There were 2 main places of shopping in the Brooklyn neighborhood where

I spent many years of my childhood: Myrtle Ave, and Knickerbocker Ave. Both avenues were in opposite directions from the apartments that were our homes. The apartments were four room “railroad” flats, meaning that the rooms were linear with no doors for privacy. In order to get from kitchen to living room, one had to walk through the two bedrooms in between. Linda and I chose to go to Knickerbocker Ave. because it was closer than Myrtle. Both avenues were similar – lines of mostly privately owned dress shops, shoe makers, drug stores, ice cream parlors and music shops (selling the 45 singles for our generation along with the 33rpm albums so popular with our parents.). Woolworth’s and Cheap John’s were two of the chain stores that interspersed the mom and pop’s so popular and successful in the 1950’s. And Woolworth’s was the haven for our small Christmas budget – full of dazzling half and whole dollar items that would make knock-out Christmas gifts for parents, grandparents, and possibly siblings.

I savored the sights and sounds of the large decorated store as we walked up and down the aisles, resisting the impulse to dance to the Christmas jingles being piped over the air. I remember wanting to buy Evening in Paris perfume for my grandmother, but it was way over budget, so she’d have to settle for a flowered handkerchief.

This particular year, I was desperate to buy my mom something special. I could hardly believe my good luck when I saw the most beautiful kerchief I’d ever seen in my short life. It was multicolored and resplendent with female dancers in various colorful costumes. The colors were intense blue, red, yellow, with very little white in between. That’s what made it so special. There was no room for the eye to rest and I was dazzled. It was priced at \$1.00 and I was so thrilled to know that my mom could wear this beautiful scarf on her head when she went to mass on Christmas morning. I could barely sleep that Christmas eve, as excited about what I was giving as I was about what I would receive from Santa.

As mom opened the small box made to hold a pair of nylons, she lifted the tissue paper to see the kerchief lying in wait. She paused for a moment and looked over at my flushed face and glistening eyes and smiled. “It’s a

beautiful scarf, thank you so much.” Mom gushed as she hugged me warmly. I felt absolute completion from a morning full of gratified wishes. I’d received my Ginny doll with full wardrobe and mom loved her kerchief.

As we prepared for Sunday morning mass, I asked mom if she was wearing her kerchief to church. I can’t remember her reply, but felt satisfied that she was saving it for the most special of occasions.

Months passed and I would see the kerchief lying in the dresser drawer, untouched. I knew it was too beautiful to wear to any common event, and trusted that my mother would know when the right time would come. Meanwhile, I could enjoy just looking at it lying in my mom’s stocking drawer. But as time passed, I had a deep urge just to try it on to see how it looked and felt. It was a little scratchy on my face, but there was no doubt that this was the most beautiful kerchief ever made. On a sudden impulse and without asking (for fear that mom would say no), I decided that I was going to wear the kerchief myself to Sunday mass.

On that eventful morning, I quietly pulled the scarf out of the dresser drawer and put it into my coat pocket. As I walked to church, I bubbled with excitement thinking about the stir I would create as my envious classmates lusted for such a prize.

In those early days in the 1950’s, most catholic school children were required to attend a special children’s mass with their schoolmates and nuns attending. It usually took place in the lower church (in those days there were a lot of people attending mass) and the sisters would take attendance and walk up and down the aisles during mass, making sure that we were being appropriately devotional.

The church smelled of frankincense and holy water, and the priest’s voice would bounce off the marble walls and floors, echoing his words to ensure that we would hear the message.

I entered the church feigning devotion and piety, with the kerchief covering my bowed head and tied under my chin. It was more difficult than usual to concentrate on the movements on the altar because of my self-consciousness. At the end of mass Sr. Mary Robert, my fifth grade teacher, called me outside the church to speak to me. She was a small, wiry middle-aged Scottish woman, as strict and harsh in language as in rules; parents as well as children groaned when we were told we were to have her as our teacher for a second and then third term. She smelled like fresh soap and her face was shiny. Her thin lips started to formulate words as if in slow motion on that Sunday morning that stunned and shamed me. She told me that I was never to wear the kerchief to mass again. “How do you expect anyone sitting near you to concentrate on mass?”

I can't remember what happened after that moment. I don't remember walking home from church. I don't know whether I told my mother what sister had said or if I asked mom what she really thought of the kerchief.

I do remember that it went back into the drawer and stayed there, nestled between embroidered hankies and stockings and an autographed picture of a popular band leader of the 40's. It stayed there for as long as I can remember.



"Raft" by Newa; Copyright 2009

## Devil's Gate Dam

By Mark Barkawitz

We'd first heard about Devil's Gate Dam as youngsters. Because it was the closest thing to a lake within hiking/biking distance of our Pasadena homes—with its intriguing moniker—we decided one Saturday in late spring to go on an exploratory mission. So with my little brother Bruce and our St. Philip the Apostle grammar school classmates, "Thick" Dick Alfano and Pat Lawrence, who wore plastic-framed eyeglasses and his hair parted near the middle, we hopped on our stingray bikes and headed northwest. Because my brother was eleven and I was thirteen at the time, we didn't share the day's itinerary with our parents. Neither did the others.

We left early that morning because we knew it would be a long, uphill ride and we only vaguely knew where we were going. We had previously hiked up the lower Arroyo Seco from just south of the Rose Bowl, following the creek bed north past the Rose Bowl Golf Course until we reached the source of the creek water: a large, steel-grated hatch/gate—like the opened mouth of the devil himself—up on the northern-most section of canyon wall from which water spilled like a waterfall. Above us, the newly-built 210 Freeway had obstructed our passage any farther.

But riding our bikes on surface streets that Saturday put us on a zig-zag, maze-like course. We had no map. We knew the reservoir was just below JPL—Jet Propulsion Laboratory—but none of us knew exactly where the heck that was either. Freeway on-ramp signs on north Lincoln Avenue pointed towards La Canada. I was no geography whiz, but I advised the guys anyway:

"If we reach Canada, I'm pretty sure we've gone too far."

The others agreed. After a couple hours of peddling and squabbling—"This is the wrong way!"—we finally found a side street somewhere in northwest Altadena that lead us directly west until it dead-ended at a wire fence

densely covered with bushes, vines, and trees. But we found a break in the fencing and on the other side a single-track, dirt path that we rode down to a ridge above the upper Arroyo Seco, where Devil's Gate Dam lay placidly below us. Like de Soto discovering the muddy Mississippi, we cheered our accomplishment.

Because it was late spring, the dam level was about three-quarters full: about the size of two football fields side-by-side. We rode down the pathway, ditched our bikes, and headed for the shoreline. Our noisy approach caused literally hundreds of small frogs to hop for the water, where they joined the ranks of their pollywog kin, who swam for deep water. Our feet sank in the muddy shoreline, so we took off our canvas tennies and socks and rolled up the cuffs of our blue jeans. The blackish-brown mud squished between our toes as we waded out into the fairly-warm, brownish water. The shoreline had already begun rescinding as summer approached and partially-submerged bushes and small trees poked their upper branches above the water level. The small shrubs under the murky surface pricked our bare feet and scratched our shins. We dared each other to swim to the other side—"I double-dog-dare you!"—but no one wanted to strip down to their boxer shorts and fully submerge themselves in the muddy water.

So instead, we searched the shoreline, capturing frogs—Dick cautioned about warts if they peed on your hand—and skipping rocks across the water's smooth surface, until Bruce came across the vestiges of a makeshift, wooden raft: six-foot long fence boards tied together with clothesline perpendicularly to two, log-like tree branches underneath. It was stuck in the mud. We each grabbed a corner, resurrected it from its muddy mooring, and set it afloat on the dam water. Pat and I found a couple of long, dried-out tree branches—the water wasn't deep—to use as poles to propel our craft. We climbed aboard one at a time—and when it didn't sink—Pat and I pushed our raft like Italians in a gondola away from the shoreline. We cheered our bon voyage and headed for deep water: the most direct route to the other side. But mid-way across—where the water was deepest—it was hard to reach our pole branches all the way down to the muddy bottom so we all four paddled with our hands. And that's where our Tom Sawyer adventure took a Huck Finn twist, because the frayed, clothesline ties that had baked in the sun for who knew how long, began to pull apart and with it the boards of our raft. Pat and I poled for the nearest



shoreline. But as we did so, the gaps between the fence boards under our feet grew wider and we lost one of our poles. The nearest shoreline was obstructed by treetops and partially submerged bushes that blocked our docking. So I yelled to my fellow sailors: "Jump!" But each time someone jumped off for the shoreline—and landed in the muck—the pressure on the raft ripped apart more boards. We were going down quickly. And as the last man on board, I went down with the ship.

Fortunately, the water was only armpit-deep. So I slogged my way to shore. We were all soaking wet. Muddy wet. Uncomfortably so. But still, we captured a bagful of frogs, which we figured to take home as pets. We walked our bikes back up the dirt pathway and noticed the "NO TRESPASSING" sign we hadn't noticed on our way into the reservoir. Unfortunately on our downhill bike ride home, all the little frogs either escaped or fell out of the bag into which we had stuffed them. And home was where our parents wanted to know why our clothes were caked with mud and why we stank like a backed-up sewer. Forced to confess our Devilish transgression—our parents all conferred by telephone—we were all four grounded for the remainder of the weekend. But it seemed a relatively small price to pay for our amphibious odyssey and its epic retelling to our envious classmates that Monday lunch hour at St. Philip the Apostle grammar school.

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### Confessions of a Writer

By SuzAnne C. Cole

Hi, I'm SuzAnne and I'm a writer. I'm new to Writers' Anonymous, but as I understand it, I'm supposed to admit what those closest to me have understood for some time. I am powerless over my addiction to writing, and as a result, my life has become unmanageable. At least that's what my family says, and they would mention an incident last weekend as an example. My husband and I were taking care of our grandson Sasha, a precious little boy, who in his four years has proved a bountiful source of writing material—three anthologized essays, seven published poems, and enough additional deposits in my writing bank for me to draw on for years.

I've also begun making up stories for him, so, of course, I'm thinking about writing children's books.

One weekend, as Sasha was having lunch, he said, "Gramma, how does your brain feel about a Sam and Sasha story right now?" What writer could resist? I began spinning out one of our usual stories about Sasha, a good little boy, who always behaves, and his imaginary friend, Sam, who always misbehaves. Sam gets timeouts for screaming, running away, throwing rocks through windows, and other misadventures while Sasha gets ice cream and miniature cars for his collection. This particular story was going along so well, that as I was telling it, my scribbler self was thinking, 'Hey, this is good, I like that plot development, damn, I hope I can remember it until tonight after Sasha goes to bed, and I can finally get to my computer.'

Then, all of a sudden, I found myself in my studio in the back yard, writing down the as-yet-unfinished story. And Sasha? He's still back in the house, sitting at the table, crying for the gramma who has deserted him in the middle of his story. I guess that's what my family means when they say I'm powerless over my writing addiction.

So here I am at Writers Anonymous, a self-help group I didn't even know existed until my family arranged my "intervention." Amazing the resources available on the Internet, isn't it? I can't tell you how much easier it makes writing and researching, not to speak of the ease of reading sample magazines, collecting guidelines and submitting electronically. Oops, sorry, I'm off the track, aren't I? Anyway, who would have thought my family could find a group of WA and a sponsor for me in this little town? I guess it just goes to show how many closet writers there are.

So now I'm working on my moral inventory, and I've come to the part where I need to confess my writerly sins. So here goes: I have a tendency to use people; I'm friendly and a good listener until I've soaked up all their quirks and motivations and heard their stories, and then, I discard them like used tissues. For example, I encouraged our heating and air-conditioning man to tell me the whole sordid story of his betrayal by his wife with her office mate, but when his story was finished, I was finished with him. Suggested he get back to replacing the filters while I hurried to

the computer to transcribe the details. And I did greet him avidly on his next routine maintenance visit, dying for the next installment in his domestic drama, so I could get on with the next chapter in my novella—whose subject is a repairman whose wife is cheating on him.

As a writer, sometimes I withdraw from my own life. Do you know what I mean? Something happens to me, I'm experiencing it, yes, but simultaneously my scribbler self is writing about it in my head. . . and in the third person: She's grocery shopping and she sees a woman smack her small child hard in the face. What's she going to do? Walk on by? Say something to the mother? Go home and call Child Protective Services? Sometimes it even seems that what the real me does is not as important as that the scribbler gets everything recorded—the feelings, the look on the mother's face, what the child wears, the crowded aisles of the supermarket, the latest comestibles towering over all of us.

What would you call that? The objectification of the self? Unfortunately, it doesn't stop with the self. Everything becomes material for the scribbler, the good things and the bad, the joys and the sorrows, nothing so tragic it cannot and will not eventually be used—my brother's death, the pain of my parents, our son's divorce, my sister's mental illness, the murder of one friend and death from cancer of another.

So, I see my turn's up. That's my confession. That's why I'm here at Writers Anonymous. But as I look around at us, a roomful of writers, some of you taking notes, all of us with our incredible stories, I have a great idea. What say we try our hand at a collaborative novel?

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### When Dreams Grow Up

By SuzAnne C. Cole

My earliest dream was a childish cliché based on the fairy tales and nursery rhymes I devoured—being swooped out of our crowded wood frame house

by a handsome golden prince on a white horse. Lulled by the rhythms of the galloping steed, I left behind unrealistic expectations, family quarrels, and a sick baby sister who got all of the attention. I kept faith with that dream until I turned ten, when, in an unusually flush year, I was given a birthday gift of two months' worth of horseback riding lessons. Seen up close, a horse turned out to be rather fearsome, given to unexpected snorts, occasional kicks, and its own idea of where and how to go. I quit before the lessons were over, my horseback riding prince erased by strong sun and pungent stable smells.

However, I'd always loved to color and paint, so I still harbored a dream of being an artist. Except that later that year, my art teacher, shaking her head over my stiff American flag carved on a linoleum block, said sadly, "You just don't have an artist's eye." I accepted her judgment and never thought about creating art again until I was almost sixty. Then a delightful artist at the Jung Center taught me the gift of art as play, something I love to practice.

Even though I was one of the top ten graduating seniors in my class of more than 800, I was not allowed a dream of a Seven Sisters school. Financial resources were conserved for my younger brother, who went to Princeton. I attended the local university, lived at home, and graduated in three years to save tuition money.

The acceptable "dream" of a high school girl in the late fifties was to graduate from college, get married, have children, keep the house, and support her husband. However, since finding a husband was not guaranteed, it was wise to prepare for work just in case. Respectable vocational choices were secretary, teacher, and nurse. I took shorthand and typing in the ninth grade; I found typing useful but never mastered the squiggle language of shorthand. So I relinquished the dream of becoming as glamorous as my divorced Aunt Lois, an executive secretary to an Oklahoma oilman, who traveled with him to exotic locales and beamed when he said he could hardly tie his shoes without her.

Nothing about nursing appealed; I hated the starched uniforms, prissy caps, odor of disinfectant, and sight and smell of body fluids. Not until I became the mother of three rambunctious boys did I learn to tolerate—and deal with—dirty diapers, blood, piss, vomit, and mucous. But even then I was grateful I had only to handle the effluvia of my own offspring.

My senior year of high school was blessed by an inspiring English teacher, Madge Gibson, whom we called “Mighty Madge” behind her back, a respectful tribute to her diminutive stature (4’ 10” at most, she stood on a box to see over her lectern). She began the semester by interviewing each student individually. To me she said, “You must stop bleaching your hair” (platinum blonde then), and, “Suzy is a childish name, you need to become SuzAnne.”

I was in my early thirties before I acted on either counsel but made more immediate use of the research skills she taught, the world literature we struggled through, the Shakespeare she adored and read so well that even restless jocks in the back row paid attention. At university I studied the literature she’d taught me to love and secondary education so I could, if necessary, become a teacher too. That dream faded when, in order to obtain my certification, I practice-taught a rowdy, inattentive bunch of repeat students.

Fortunately, earlier that spring I’d won a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to attend graduate school, and so my dream changed—to teach, yes, but at the college level. With four suitcases and a footlocker, I headed to Stanford University where I earned an MA degree before marriage and motherhood interrupted my doctorate. When my youngest son was three, I began teaching at a community college, a job I enjoyed for more than twenty-five years.

Teaching led to writing, my final dream. Textbooks at first, because the books we ordered for our students didn’t meet their needs. And once published as an academic, I felt an urge to write for pleasure, to experiment with words, to record the nuances of feelings, to invent characters, who, while having some familiar features, also breathed, walked, joked, and

swore, as individuals in their own right. Helped by a most sympathetic writing instructor, I found both passion and the fulfillment of a dream. A reader become a writer whom other readers read. What could be more fulfilling?

### Growing Up - Again and Again

By Don MacLaren

I was generally shy and quiet when I was a student at Saint Stephen Catholic Elementary School, but as the snow melted in the spring of third grade I gradually came out of my shell, just as if the heat from the sun were freeing my soul. I sat in the back of the classroom with two other guys and we tried to disrupt the third grade class as much as we could. The warmer the weather got the more obnoxious we became. We weren't bullies, but we were respected and feared, and thought of ourselves as rebels. It was then, when I was eight years old, that I smoked my first cigarette. One of the other two kids that sat with me in the back of the class said he had some cigarettes and suggested we go somewhere to smoke them. Since I lived less than a block from the school, I led them to the alley behind my house.

It was in that alley that we smoked, coughed and our heads spun in that dizzy spring of 1968, after the Tet Offensive and just before the assassination of Martin Luther King. We looked at the shards of glass from a broken wine bottle and stepped on them, as if we were trying to destroy the world we inhabited, crush the shards of glass into the sand from whence they came, and wait for a new world to blossom all over again.

My buddies came over a few more times to smoke. They would bring a few cigarettes they had stolen from their parents and I brought a few that I had stolen from mine. I immediately developed a revulsion for Tareyton 100s, with the charcoal filter, the brand my father smoked. Not that I really loved smoking to begin with when I first started, but I prayed to God that my father would change his brand of cigarettes so that I could rip off something from him I could enjoy smoking.

The alley behind my house was a psychological border between the two dominant cultures in my hometown of Grand Rapids. There was the white

culture that began in the neighborhood I lived in and got whiter and richer the farther east one moved away from the alley, and there was the black culture that got darker and poorer, the farther west one moved. The alley was where they sometimes converged. One of my friends who participated in the cigarette-smoking ritual was black.

My family lived closer to the stores and restaurants of the middle/working class area at the edge of the ghetto, walking distance away, than we did to the white enclave. When we were kids we often went to the stores, the Tiny Giant ("Tiny things with Giant prices" as we kids used to say) and the Easttown Pharmacy that had a soda fountain we rarely had enough money to sit down and order a drink at. At both the Tiny Giant and the Easttown Pharmacy we would buy candy, MAD magazine, and bubble gum - with the baseball and football cards that went along with it.

Once in the fifth grade, a friend of mine who resided in the white enclave suggested we rip off one of the stores and I reluctantly went along with him on my first premeditated theft. Up to that time my juvenile delinquency had been confined mostly to stealing cookies from the cookie jar at home or Tareyton 100s, with the charcoal filter. I didn't know what to rip off that day in the store, but when the clerk wasn't looking the first thing that caught my eye was some instant tanning lotion. Since that was the only thing I thought I might be able to use - I think it was between the hemorrhoid ointment and the tampons - I quickly grabbed a bottle, stuck it in my pocket and walked as quickly and unobtrusively as I could out the store, not far behind my friend. I didn't actually need or want suntan oil, but since I stole it I figured I might as well apply it to my skin, which I did that afternoon after I got home. I probably got just about the best suntan I have ever had - in February. This was a suntan lotion full of toxic chemicals that automatically tanned you, without the help of the sun. Later, both my mother and my teacher asked me why I had a suntan. I forget what excuse I used on them but I never did tell them the truth. I tried to wash the tan away, scrubbing and scrubbing as if I were contaminated with radiation, trying to peel the heat off, wishing I could jump out of my skin and run away into the snowy cold of the Michigan winter.

Another time I went into the Tiny Giant (Tiny things with Giant prices) and ripped off some BBs, figuring I could use them for the BB gun one of my friend's had. It wasn't a very wise choice since BBs make a loud, shaking sound when you put them in your pocket and try to walk quickly and unobtrusively out the

store. Up to that time I'd made wiser choices - candy bars or bubble gum - while enjoying my shoplifting at Tiny Giant during the two or three forays I made there as a young criminal. The clerk of the store stopped me as I was walking towards the door after he heard the "shake-shake" the BBs made in my pocket and ordered me to hand over the contraband. "Don't come in here again," he told me.

My pre-teen juvenile delinquency never went very far though. My buddies and I lost interest in Tareyton 100s and I learned my lesson about the perils of shoplifting after being caught with the BBs. I was 86'd from the Tiny Giant but several months later I ventured into the store again, hoping the clerk wouldn't recognize me. I picked up a Nestlé's Crunch bar, sheepishly laying it on the counter. The clerk looked at me and I could tell by that look that he remembered me. But he rang up my purchase and gave me change after I handed him a quarter.

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A couple years after I smoked my first cigarette, one of the older kids in the neighborhood suggested we go to a large vacant lot one block west of my house we called Farmers' Field, to pick mint and smoke it. Smoking wild mint using notebook paper proved more pleasant than smoking Tareyton 100s. We tried smoking it fresh at first but it was hard to keep lit so we furtively laid some of the leaves out on the roof of my parents' house, which was easily accessible from the window in the room my brother and I shared. We let the mint leaves bake for a day on a section of the roof and smoked them up for a few days in a row after that.

When we weren't smoking mint that summer we were at Farmers' Field playing baseball. One part of Farmers' Field was a field with wild grass. The Saint Stephen's football teams used it as a place to practice. The grass rarely needed to be cut, because when there wasn't snow on the ground, the field was used so often for football practice and pickup baseball games that the grass didn't have a chance to grow more than a couple inches.

Another part of Farmers' Field consisted of some woods next to the field itself, where we had picked the mint, and where incongruously there were wasted body parts...of wrecked cars. There was also a rotting log near those body parts that we would walk on, which itself was next to a very small pond - a big puddle



actually - about twenty feet in diameter. We would stand on the log and try to walk across it without losing our balance, trying to prevent ourselves from falling into the gross puddle. Cigarette butts surrounded the puddle, and some of them floated on its surface, discarded by some of the older kids from Saint Stephen's, or perhaps by some mysterious stranger we never saw.

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Like the alley behind my house, Farmers' Field was an unofficial border between the middle class, mostly white neighborhood where I lived and a working/lower class mixed neighborhood at the edge of a ghetto.

One day we went to Farmers' Field to play baseball, and on the edge of the field - on the ghetto side - we saw a black kid about 15 years old who held a .22 rifle and eyed us menacingly as we played. There were a few younger black kids about our age surrounding him as he held the gun tightly, marching back and forth, as if he were guarding the entrance to the ghetto. But one of the older kids from my neighborhood called the cops, and the armed black sentry left his post a few minutes later - just before the cops arrived.

I played in the outfield that day and picked up a line drive that was hit very long by a black kid who lived one street west of mine. It was difficult to judge how a ball would bounce in Farmers' Field because there were so many bumps and holes, but I got it on the second bounce. There was a runner on third, and I just barely threw him out at home plate on one bounce, managing a very long throw, a lot of the kids going "ooh" and "ah," impressed at my skill. To celebrate my accomplishment I took one of the firecrackers I had in my pocket that had been smuggled from someplace (firecrackers were illegal in Michigan) and lit it. Though it had a fuse, the firecracker blew up almost immediately, just as I was releasing it from my hand. My hand stung like hell for an hour or so, and I was probably lucky I didn't lose a finger or two.

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One evening in late summer when I was about 12 years old, just as the sun was beginning to set, a few friends, my brother and I were hanging out across the street from Farmer's Field, tossing a football back and forth. A couple black guys and a white girl - all of them a couple years older than I - walked to the edge of Farmer's Field and looked across at us. Then, one of the black guys walked across the street and approached us. "Hey, she sellin'," he said, pointing to the white girl. One of the older guys I was with said, "that's OK, we don't need

her." It was the first time I had been approached by a prostitute.

"What's she sellin'?" my brother asked, "marijuana?" We all laughed. "She's sellin' herself," I said, deeply serious, as if I were in religion class, answering a question put to me by one of the nuns. Then, the older kids I was with laughed at me.

By that time sexual fantasies had begun to occupy a large part of my life. However, I was scared to act them out with the girls I was attracted to. There was a girl who lived across the street who invited me to come over to her basement, but I was too tongue-tied to talk and too physically paralyzed to reach out for her when I finally did make the subterranean journey.

In eighth grade there was a dance at the end of the school year. I'd had a crush on a girl who sat next to me in Spanish class. After a long debate with myself I finally got the nerve to call her and ask her to the dance, even though I don't think I'd said more than two words to this girl the whole school year. She told me "no," but she was very nice about it. "I'll see you there though," she said. I saw her there while I was standing alone in the corner. She had been asked to the dance by one of the most popular, if not the most popular boy in the class. Ironically, he spent time there with other girls, dancing with them, and I don't think he danced with her once the whole night.

In my classes I spent time gazing in wonder at the girls budding into puberty. One time, in the 9th grade, a very pretty girl, mature physically beyond her years and part of a very hip clique, noticed me staring at her in English class. She was quite unattainable, and perhaps more appealing because of that. "Stop looking at me," she said, almost, but not quite, under her breath. I did. I was devastated by what she said. But at least she had caught my gaze and we had shared a moment, I reasoned. How nice it would have been if she had smiled at me and we had walked home from school together - alone. I would have been happier than I could have fathomed, but no, instead she metaphorically spit in my face.

Not long after that I got into the only fight I've ever gotten into during a class. Just as the guy in front of me was about to sit down in Algebra class I pushed his desk and chair away and he fell flat on his butt. I thought it was perfect timing on my part, and I was perversely proud of myself. He quickly got up though, and before I knew it he turned my desk over and I fell backwards,

hitting my head hard against the floor. I sprang up and started pushing, punching, and flailing at him. By the time the teacher broke it up I was on the verge of killing him. Thus, the reputation I'd had as a shy, meek kid began to change. The next day someone gave me marijuana (for the first time), and one of the best-looking girls in the school came up to me to congratulate me on winning the fight, and seemed to be making herself sexually available. Meanwhile I sensed that the girl I'd been staring at earlier, was beginning to stare at me.

By the time I was 14 a lot of kids had started using drugs. I was both curious about drugs and terrified of them at the same time. All the anti-drug propaganda I'd been fed really scared me, and made me feel self-righteous for not doing drugs.

I threw the marijuana away that I'd gotten after the fight, but later that freshman year in high school a classmate asked me if I wanted to buy some pot. I decided to go ahead and try it. The next day I handed him some of my earnings from my morning Detroit Free Press paper route and bought a bag of marijuana from him.

A friend of mine from the neighborhood came over the next Friday night. We smoked joints he had rolled in Zig-Zag papers as we stood next to the ice-covered pond in Farmer's Field, but the marijuana didn't do anything for me. I slept a few hours that night, woke up at 5:30 to deliver papers, then went to hockey practice.

The next week though, we rolled the remains of the marijuana I'd bought in notebook paper, just as we had with mint several years before, then made the trek in knee-deep snow to the alley behind my house to smoke it. That time I got high. We walked around outside, laughing after we got buzzed. At one point I jumped head-first into a snowdrift we came to, throwing myself into the cold.

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A couple years later, when I was playing hockey at Catholic Central High School, one of the girls in the stands noticed me. She was Italian, just slightly overweight, with light brown hair, light skin and a pretty face. A friend of mine told me this girl liked me, and later a meeting was arranged. I remember being in her driveway in the backseat of someone's car in the winter when we began kissing. It was spontaneous - French kissing. I was in heaven - finally after 16

years, I kissed a girl. We saw each other for about a month or so.

Her dad was a pudgy, balding man with glasses who owned a pizza parlor. He would suspiciously eye me behind the Playboy magazines he read in his den as I entered and left his house. On our second date I entered his house tripping on two hits of purple microdot LSD. My girlfriend didn't have anything to talk about, so she put on an Aerosmith album. I was tongue-tied, looking at the trails coming from her face. Later, she became interested in a Polish guy who went to our cross-town rival school - West Catholic.

After breaking up with her, a girl stopped me in the hallway at Catholic Central. She told me there was going to be a dance at the high school gym with a good band, and said that she hoped I'd come. I came and she asked me to dance while I was there. Like my first short-lived girlfriend, the girl who asked me to dance was also Italian. It was the first time I'd ever danced with a girl in my life. I thought she was nice. She had olive-skin, black hair and a nice, healthy body. But I was interested in another girl - her fraternal twin sister.

I told a friend of mine which girl I was interested in, and a week or so later when he and I were sitting in a car in the parking lot, while another dance was taking place in the gym, his girlfriend and the girl I was interested in walked out to the car. They got in and my friend and his girlfriend immediately began making out in the front seat. After a few, uncomfortable seconds my friend's girlfriend turned toward her friend and me, sitting in the backseat. "Do you guys wanna try?" With barely an introduction, we tried. It was great, kissing in the backseat in the Catholic Central parking lot that cold, snowy Michigan night - surrounded by a ghetto and skid row, next to a run-down apartment building inhabited by winos. I felt just about as good as I'd ever felt in my life.

But Grand Rapids was not the place for me to set down roots and plant my seed. I was destined to run away on fire to someplace like the Golden Gate Bridge, or further, as far away as I could get - and look at the place I'd grown up in from another perspective...like upside down.

After more than a year together my girlfriend stopped taking my calls and refused to see me after I graduated from high school. I then went through a long, lonely period of acute depression, which I tried to self-medicate my way out of with drugs and alcohol.

The woman I thought I would marry had disappeared from my life as if she were marijuana smoke I exhaled into the cold air in the alley behind my house.

Eventually though, after I had quit drugs I found other women, one of whom I nearly married. She and I came from different parts of the country and our skin was different colors – hers black and mine white – but those differences were only superficial. We lived together in San Francisco's Haight Ashbury for a year until fate split us apart when she moved to Europe.

Later, here in New York City, another woman and I fell in love and lived together, planning to marry. Our native languages were different, but again, there was more we shared than that which separated us, until one day when she told me she had not been destined for me.

As I write this she is gone. I feel better, however, for having written what I did – tracing pieces of my meandering life's journey and ending the story with her. I learned long ago that the pain that replaces love after love has run its course does not disappear with drugs or alcohol. Perhaps, having been hurt so deeply when I was a much younger man has inoculated me from the depths of depression I once knew. And anyway, as I complete another chapter in the story of my life I feel that the journeys I have made, which often led me to the depths of pain, were worth the price I was charged when the journeys came to an end.



"Mark J" by Newa; Copyright 2009

## Mark & Peter J's Backyard

By Mark Barkawitz

Mark J. was the first person I ever saw eat dog food—pasty Skippy right from the can with a spoon. At the time, I thought it was an odd culinary choice. It never occurred to me back then that he was hungry and there was no other food in the house.

It was 1958—my brother Bruce was five; I was seven—when my family rented a two-bedroom, California bungalow on Holliston Avenue. And down the block—just north of the old railroad tracks that used to run east and west through our town—lived the 'J' family. I don't know if I ever knew what their parents did for a living, but they spent most of their time in a nearby bar around the corner on Walnut Street, which meant the boys had little parental supervision. Mark J., —a lean, freckle-faced tow-head with narrow, mole-like eyes—was Bruce's age; Peter was a few years older than I and already a troubled youth (it wasn't unusual to see a Pasadena Police car parked in front of their house), who hung-out with us only when his older friends weren't available. My Mom thought Peter was a bad influence on us. She was right. Peter once showed me how to take apart a neighbor's stereo. Unfortunately, he didn't show me how to put it back together, so Daddy had to buy the neighbor a new stereo and I got grounded for the remainder of the summer. And that September, my parents took me out of Jefferson Public Elementary School and enrolled the Barkawitz brothers at St. Philip the Apostle Catholic School—to keep us from turning into juvenile delinquents. Like Peter.

The 'J' house was usually—okay always—a mess inside and the lawn was rarely mowed outside. But their big, over-grown backyard was a thing of wonder to a couple little kids like Bruce and I from the yard-less apartment buildings of New York.

The lot was deep with a dilapidated garage separated from the house by a huge oak tree to which Peter and his friends had attached a thick, knotted, hemp rope to one of its large, uppermost limbs. This enabled us to swing back-and-forth from the back roof of the house through the air like Johnny Weissmuller—aka the original Tarzan in the movies—to the roof of the garage. Wow!

Talk about fun! And way in the back of the yard, there was a tall eucalyptus tree in which Peter and his buds had built a tree house of sorts. With rope and nails, they affixed an old, splintered extension ladder vertically to its trunk, leading up to the yoke of a large branch into which they had nailed a 4'x 8' sheet of plywood and erected four-foot high, plywood walls, where Peter and his buds would smoke cigarettes pilfered from the packs of his parents. This perch was nearly two-stories off the ground and offered a panoramic, bird's-eye-view of the backyards of the other houses on the block. An old, over-stuffed couch sat comfortably at the base of the eucalyptus. Back then, Bruce and I thought it was the neatest place on the whole block. Even after we moved away, we'd come back years later—much to the chagrin of our parents—to visit the J. boys and play in their backyard.

One day on my way home from school—in my salt-and-pepper corduroy pants and collared-white, uniform shirt with my canvas backpack full of books—I stopped by the J's house. Bruce had gotten out earlier that day and I was to meet him there. As I approached the house, a plume of black smoke rose from the backyard. I hurried around back to find Bruce and Mark J. frantically hosing down the old couch that was on fire under the eucalyptus. Apparently, Peter and his buddies had left a pack of matches in the tree house. Bruce and Mark J. had been flicking lighted matches through the air and inadvertently set the couch below them on fire. Luckily, they had gotten out of the tree before it, too—and they along with it—became inflamed. They almost had the smoldering cotton out by the time I got there—somehow none of the neighbors had called the fire department—so our biggest problem became the repercussions.

“My parents are gonna kill me when they see this couch,” Mark J. lamented, as we all stared at the black, smoldering cotton.

“What're we gonna do?” Bruce asked.

They both looked at me. As little brothers, they were both accustomed to having big brothers cover their tracks whenever necessary. So even back in grammar school, I was quick to switch to damage-control.

“You gotta shovel?” I asked Mark.



He nodded and retrieved an old, wood-handled spade from the garage.

I let them in on my master plan: “We’ll bury it.”

And bury the old couch we did. It took us hours—blistering and splintering our bare hands as we each took turns shoveling—to dig a hole wide enough and deep enough to accommodate a seven-foot long sofa. And after we’d covered it back up with dirt, the mound of fresh soil rose like a belching gravesite, marking our clandestine work place. Anyone else’s parents would have immediately noticed this obvious landscaping renovation in their backyard. But apparently, it wasn’t visible from their sightlines on the barstools at the beer bar around the corner—because Mark J’s parents never said anything to any of us about it. Nor did they ever question the disappearance of the old couch itself.

Many years later as a young man, I read in the Pasadena Star-News about Mark J’s demise. After drinking till closing—the sins of the father—at Smilin’ Joes Tavern on Colorado Boulevard, Mark J. passed-out in the back seat of his old car parked overnight on a dark, side street. That night, someone poured gasoline on his car and set it aflame. Mark J. never woke up. And although no one was there to bury the evidence this time, the Pasadena Police have never determined if it was an intentional homicide or the work of an arsonist, unaware of the sleeping body in the darkened back seat—the body of our childhood friend Mark J., the first and only person I ever saw eat dog food from a can.

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