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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.



"Pacific Reflections" by C. Michelle Olson; <http://www.cmichelleolson.com/>

Leaving Home

By Marilyn Janson

I stare at the knobs on the stovetop. "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10..." Counting to 60 is my self-imposed limit. The stove is off. "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10..." It's not on. All of the switches are in off the off position. "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10..." Enough. Stop it. Eddie is waiting. We have to go. If I watch the stove for one minute and it doesn't explode, it's not on. Trying to relieve the stress and anxiety I take in deep breaths of the stuffy air and exhale. It's going to be fine. I stare at the knobs. All I have to do is touch the stovetop to feel if it is hot. But what if I touch it and it is hot? I would not be able to leave. I could turn the stove on just by touching it. And one of the switches is off center, not completely in the off position. The oven could be on. If I move the knob I could turn it on. "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10..."

A voice whispers in my ear, *While you're on the flight, your house is going to explode. The fire will spread to your neighbors' houses. People will die.*

That dust mop you call a cat is going to be barbecued. And it will be your fault. When you're in the air there's nothing you can do about it! You'll be trapped. Every second that you are on the flight, you'll wonder if the cops are waiting at the gate to arrest you. When they hunt you down, they will haul your ass off to jail and put you away for the rest of your useless life...

Dad, stop it! Leave me alone. Get out of my head.

Remember when the lamb chops caught on fire?

How could I forget? I was four years old when it happened. While Dad sat at the kitchen table reading the newspaper, I played on the floor with my toy oven. Mom tended to the lamb chops cooking in the gas broiler. The meat snapped and sizzled. The greasy smell of the fatty food made me hungry.

Then I heard a swooshing sound. My face flushed with heat. I looked up and saw the angry red and blue flames reach out to me like octopus tentacles. Puffs of smoke hung over the kitchen.

“Oh no!” Quickly, Mom grabbed a bucket and filled it with water from the sink. She tossed the water into the broiler.

Then she swiftly scooped me up and brought me into the family room. She hurried back into the kitchen.

In the cramped house I heard Dad yell to Mom, “You are such an idiot! You can't put out a grease fire with water.”

“If you know so much, then you do something!” she screamed.

Then, I heard a slamming sound.

Dad said, “You're supposed to suffocate the fire by shutting the oven door.”

Silence.

He came into the family room. “Everything's okay, Linny (his nickname for me). Your mom isn't too smart. She could have burned down the damn house.” Dad went to the wet bar and poured himself a drink.

* * *

“1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10...” The oven is off. I haven’t turned on the stove since we moved in 10 years ago.

You’re to blame, when the house burns down, Linny, Dad says.

Go away! You’ve been dead for 23 years. “1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10...”

I try to tear my eyes away from the stove. The sound of Eddie’s feet shuffling in the hallway makes me feel jittery.

So much pressure to leave the house and I have so much more to check. Maybe I should come back to the stove after checking everything else in the house.

I struggle to peel my fingers off the SATURDAY VACATION CHECKLIST that I am holding in my fist. My pen lingers over the space next to STOVE OFF. But, I cannot bring myself to put a check mark next to this item.

Before going to bed last night, I used my FRIDAY NIGHT VACATION CHECKLIST and put marks beside the spaces next to MICROWAVE UNPLUGGED and OFF, DVD UNPLUGGED and OFF, ED’S LAMP UNPLUGGED and OFF, ED’S CLOCK RADIO UNPLUGGED and OFF, T.V. UNPLUGGED and OFF, PATIO DOOR LOCKED, FRONT DOOR LOCKED, COMPUTER OFF and UNPLUGGED, PRINTER UNPLUGGED, ELECTRIC PENCIL SHARPENER UNPLUGGED, and COPY MACHINE UNPLUGGED.

Again, I try to check off the blank space next to STOVE OFF. “1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10...”

I take in some shallow breaths. The apartment feels as if a vacuum cleaner is siphoning up the air. Exhausted and thirsty from all of this stress I pick up a bottle from the counter and gulp down some water.

The bottle of water was open. I could have tipped it over and the water could have spilled into the electrical outlet. That might cause a fire. Couldn’t it?

I decide to come back to the stove after checking off everything else on the list. Moving on to the kitchen faucet handle, I remember that several times my husband had neglected to turn it off completely. Every day before leaving the house I take the strainers out of the drains in both sinks and

push down the faucet handle. Or else we could have had a flood. “1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10...”

From behind I feel Eddie’s eyes boring into me.

“It’s time to go,” he snarls.

It is only 6:00 AM, but the summer Arizona heat is baking the roof of the upstairs apartment.

I can see through his soaked tee shirt.

Eddie peels the shirt from his skin and then pulls a handkerchief out of his pocket. He mops the perspiration from his forehead.

My husband is also on the list. On Friday night, he was required to take a shower so that I can make sure that the faucet is not dripping. Also, he had to push up the lever on the air-conditioning unit to 80 degrees to save on electricity. He could have turned it off, but we would have suffocated. Locking the windows the night before we leave the house is also on the list.

He picks up an indoor temperature gauge that is sitting on a table. “It’s friggin’ 90 degrees in here,” Eddie says, his voice rising to a squeaky pitch, warning me that he is going to lose it.

Our cat, Dakota, creeps into the kitchen.

Carefully I move out of the kitchen to avoid bumping up against the dishwasher (and inadvertently turning the knob to the on position). I go into the family room.

Dakota lets out a meow.

“Come here, boy,” I say.

The cat comes to me. After picking him up I place my hand on the smooth skin under his front legs. Feeling the strong thump of his heart and listening to his soft purr is comforting.

“Why bother going away if leaving the house is so tough for you?” Eddie says.

I look up at my husband. "I can't let my OCD win. I want go places and see things. And I'll never forget when you went to Europe without me."

"Could you blame me? I had to get away."

Dakota squirms and jumps out of my arms.

"I'm better now. With the meds at least I can drive and leave the house."

Eddie bends down and opens the cooler that is sitting on the floor. He takes out a can of soda.

Last night he was required to take the sodas and ice packs out of the refrigerator and put them in the cooler. After we go to sleep the refrigerator is off limits. I worry that if the refrigerator were not closed, Dakota would jump inside and get stuck if the door slammed shut behind him.

My husband pops the top of the can. When he takes a drink his lips curl into a frown as if it tastes like oil from a car engine.

"Warm?" I say.

"Yeah."

Dakota jumps and meows.

"I wish that I could take you with me, boy," I tell the cat and give him a hug.

"We've got to go, now."

"Okay, okay. I'm almost finished."

Dakota rubs his head against my eyeglasses.

"Goodbye, boy." Reluctantly, I let go of the cat.

Krista, our pet sitter, takes care of Dakota when we are away. I will call her every day. She will tell me if the house is still standing.

Eddie picks up the cooler, takes the soda, and goes into the mudroom. "I'll be in the garage."

"But you have to watch me shut the door to the mudroom," I call after him.

On any other day, Eddie would have dumped the warm soda into the sink and tossed the can into the recyclable bin located outside the front door to the house. But this morning he is not allowed to open that door.

Last night he took out the trash, newspapers, and soda containers so that I could check off GARBAGE OUT, CANS OUT, NEWSPAPERS OUT, and FRONT DOOR LOCKED on the list.

I go through the house and check off the last items. Dakota is also on the list. Last night I filled the cat's two bowls with water and put food in his dish.

I stuff the VACATION CHECKLIST into my humongous handbag crammed with meds, tissues, cell phone, pens, mints, gum, money, extra eyeglasses, I-POD, a small notebook, and the bottle of water.

After entering the mudroom, I open the door leading to the garage and yell, "Eddie, you can come back in now."

He comes out from behind the trunk of the car and looks at me wearily with his huge, tired, brown eyes.

"Come in here," I command.

He follows me through the mudroom and into the family room.

I point to the cat. "Dakota is in here, right?" I want to make sure that he does not follow me out to the garage and escape.

Eddie says, "Goodbye, boy."

We leave the cat and head out to the car.

"Watch me lock the door." I close the door and turn the lock.

"It's locked," he says as if repeating a mantra.

Eddie opens the door leading to the garage. He pushes the remote and the garage door makes a scraping sound as it moves along its hinges.

"Come back here. You have to watch me lock the door that connects to the garage."

He turns and sighs.

The sunlight feels good against my face. I take in deep breaths of the cool, refreshing air.

I insert the key into the top lock and turn it. I do the same in the bottom one.

“The door is locked, isn’t it?” I say.

He reaches toward the doorknob.

“No! Don’t do that.” If he touches the knob the lock might open.

Therapists have told me that I use these repetitive behaviors as a way to avoid facing my fears. I am stressed out about going on every flight. Not even the meds help. I suffer from panic attacks when there is turbulence. The plane is going to crash. I am sure of it.

We get into the car and shut the doors. But, we are not finished yet.

Eddie backs the vehicle out and presses the garage door remote.

I watch as the beige colored door reaches the ground.

Eddie steers the car toward the gate.

Turning my head, I squint to catch a glimpse of the garage door. It appears closed, but maybe I am wrong.

I bend over and plant a kiss on my husband’s cheek.

“I’ll take another spin around,” he says.

“You are the best husband that I ever had.”

He grins. “I’m the only husband that you ever had.”

When we reach our house, he slows down and stops.

“Is it…”

“It’s closed.” He drives back to the gate. It opens and we are on our way to the airport.

Obsessive compulsive disorder is a condition that a number of children are born pre-dispositioned to yet if no traumatic events trigger its onset, the condition itself never manifests in the form of active symptoms. In my case, years of mental abuse and watching my mom begin to believe that she could not do anything right, certainly helped to bring the OCD on. Yet as the gate in front of our house opens and I finally take the step of being ready to leave the house for a long trip, I feel that a gate has opened within and through this simple action, I’m challenging the face of the fear. At least for this moment, the inner voice of my father is stunned into silence.

Walcot Street~ A Memoir

By Geoffrey Heptonstall

It is a curious thought that at one time there had been a cattle market on Walcot Street in Bath, England. I seem to remember some cattle pens. Bath is a city, a small one, but with a long history of urban and urbane living. This surely makes the thought of cattle auctions in the city centre bizarre. Bath is many places that all converge at Walcot Street.

I knew it well. To be young and creative in Bath was, and is, to know Walcot Street. It looks at first glance to be an uninteresting backwater. It is behind the elegance visitors seek out. One of the first things you see on the left (if you approach from the city centre) is a flight of steep stone steps leading up to the Paragon, one of those curving boulevards of Palladian grandeur. Walcot Street is lowly, close by the river. Even the meanest of ancient streets in Bath are interesting and, thanks to the stipulations of Beau Nash, well built. Artisans and servants were to be housed well in Nash’s kingdom. As surely as he ensured servant girls were not prostituted, he ensured working families were not humbled. Walcot has decayed, but its buildings have some fine features.

When I knew Walcot Street, rental rates for studio or workshop spaces were low. Plenty of places were available. Close by were places to live at affordable rents, as well. Artists and crafts people found a congenial atmosphere to work and live.

The main Walcot Street pub, the Bell, had a longstanding reputation as a place to hear jazz. It survived the Sixties when jazz in Britain fell out of favour. The clarinettist Lol Coxhill lived on Walcot Street. So did one of the Temperance Seven (his name I forget). He had one of the curio shops where period furniture and clothes could be found. There was another pub called Old Jack's. It had a sign projecting out, like an old tavern. There was a picture of a man with a beard and a black hat. That was Old Jack, one of the many characters of Walcot Street.

Then there was Jock, a drinking man who drifted in and out. Angela Carter, the English novelist and journalist, mentioned him in a piece she wrote about Bath. Perhaps she was there the night Jock burst into a restaurant to perform cartwheels before waiters hustled him away. There was Sandy, ageless in shaded spectacles and a peaked cap from a regimental uniform of the sort you could buy in the Walcot Street Market; theatre companies found the market's resources invaluable. A strange old man worked one of those stalls. His voice had that courteous, patrician quality of an Anglican bishop. Later down in a Somerset town I saw him arrested one afternoon in the post office. He seemed to be on the run. What his crime had been I have no idea. Passing false cheques, perhaps? Or posing as a bogus clergyman? Who knows?

What was happening was an experiment in living at counterpoint to the conventions of society. Marriages, mortgages, salaries and pension credits: these inducements of secure prosperity were foresworn in favour of free, creative expression, a bartering of goods and services, a communal spirit that respected individuals. It was not, however, a community without rules. There was a dress code which reflected a way of speaking and of thinking and behaving. No one rose early. Afternoons and evenings were the most active times.

Surprisingly perhaps there was no café. Instead, there was the irresistible Red House Bakery that sold bread and delicious pastries baked on the premises.

Mushroom Books was somewhere to hang out as well as to buy books. I helped out there, and I designed a wall with a portrait of Yeats. I have the original even now. It still pleases me, but I was never able to repeat it. So, despite determined efforts, a career in design did not emerge from my first experience of working in a bookshop.

What did happen was Walcot Street Theatre. At lunchtimes and all day Saturday I performed with a troupe of people, some of whom joined rather spontaneously. I devised sketches and routines. We improvised from very rough ideas, encouraging as much audience participation as possible. Street theatre was less common then, and so we were able to attract people to the novelty of it. One afternoon, a famous actor of both British and American films, Jack Watson, who lived locally came down to see us. I suggested he join in, but he shied away, saying this was our show, not his. Some time later I met a theatre critic from one of the national papers. He remembered me from Walcot Street Theatre. He also remembered the performances in detail, which he found to be good in his opinion.

One routine involved a piano we found. Pushing it down the length of the street (seven or eight blocks), we improvised songs as we went. This sounds like nothing on paper, but it worked beautifully when performed. Less successful was my attempt to recreate the scene from *The Music Box* where Laurel and Hardy carry a piano up a long flight of steps. It was an old piano, bought for a song, so to speak. It did not survive the experience. Our audience seemed to think the crash was intentional. Well, it was certainly spectacular. There was an awful lot of noise, followed by unwarranted, but welcome, applause with cheers.

The bohemia I found was stimulating. It was for a time the encouraging atmosphere the aspiring creator needs. It was plain fun. There were some truly creative people at work in a small, shared vicinity. Some of them went on to success in a wider sphere: Felicity Bowers and Keith New in art, Peter Gabriel and Margaret Stewart in music.

Everyone who wants to create wants to come across other people who look creative. They are hallmarked by traits of intelligence and spiritedness. They may be found at any time of day or night in one of the artistic haunts of the city. They may offer you a glass of wine, greet you as an old friend, and ask you how your work is progressing. They seem too keen to hear what you have to tell them. That's all they do all day – talk.

Walcot Street, it seemed to me, would never be realized as an alternative to the mainstream of society. The most it could do was to feed into society. I was not alone in thinking this, for people were moving away as tempting offers elsewhere beckoned. My experience was not unusual. In time I needed another community.

Bohemia is an elusive country. It is located in memory. Walcott is remembered for the reasons I have conveyed. It was colourful, noisy, quite wild but never dangerous. There was no pressure to accept anything you felt you could not handle. It was an experiment worth venturing then, and it is worth remembering now.

Friend

By Noelle Sterne

I'd just returned from our regular monthly lunch date. As usual, my friend and I exchanged the latest news, relished the gossip about other friends' breakups, and laughed until our makeup ran. But driving home, a wisp of a feeling, like the last several times, began to surface.

A feather across my mind, it quickly heightened. What irked me so much? And what was precipitating the headache creeping across my eyes?

At home, curled in my big writing chair, I went to my journal. It always gave me answers. I started writing.

The visit started with the same pleasant preliminaries as always—the phone call for a day that fit both our schedules, the big discussion the night before. "What do you feel like? Chinese? Italian? Decadent Deli?" Giggling, we chose Decadent—two kids skipping healthy diet school.

The restaurant was perfect 1960s Deli. Arriving first, I looked around. The roomy booth had upholstery past its prime. On the table sat the perennial bowl of sour pickles, with little pieces of garlic bobbing in the brine. The plastic-covered menu, three feet tall, promised anything your heart desired. Smiling hello, the gravel-voiced waitress asked if I were alone. From her collar hung a giant wilting cloth gardenia.

Continuing to write, I felt a small nervousness, almost an excitement. It always told me I was getting closer to the truth.

As I studied the menu, my friend rushed in, breathless and flushed. We screamed and hugged. She slid into the booth opposite me and immediately

started talking.

"The traffic! This idiot in front of me for six miles! Couldn't make up his mind. Where did he learn to drive, Jupiter? Kept weaving in and out, the jerk!"

I wondered why she didn't pass him or take another route.

She kept talking, interrupted only by the waitress taking our orders for overstuffed pastrami sandwiches and diet sodas.

I kept writing, trusting the moving pen. As the visit unrolled in my mind, the answers came.

My friend lived, I saw, in a state of chronic indignation. Everything—from the curl of the napkins to the highway driver to how others raised children—provoked her righteous anger.

As she talked, her eyes stuck wide open with pupils staring, the frown between her eyebrows deepened, and her lips moved like a sped-up cartoon. Sharp hand motions punctuated her words, her fingers alternately clutching the air and flattening in open-palmed incredulity at humankind's folly.

She jumped from one thing to another with quirky logic: Restaurant pasta less than al dente merited a loud complaint to the general manager and a demand to dress down the chef. Other bank line customers were ruder than a 4:00 a.m. Black Friday lineup. The supermarket checker's sluggishness proved the regression of human evolution and threatened our entire civilization.

After almost an hour, she wound down, sandwich untouched. Now, I thought, I could talk, finally sharing meaningful bits of my life and the news about mutual friends. I looked forward to her listening and sharp comments. And we'd laugh with full abandon like we used to.

But today, instead, the conversation sparked something else for her to deplore. And she'd be off again, eyes popping, voice strident in irate virtue.

In the past, sometimes I'd sympathized with her constant diatribes and even joined in, exploding in mutual congratulatory righteousness. But then I'd come home with a headache, and, despite my lunch indulgence, not at all nourished. Today, I now saw, was no different.

When we finished the meal, outside the restaurant, we kissed and promised to call.

As I wrote in my journal, the picture grew clearer. I'd known for a long time but didn't want to admit it. She'd been a friend so many years, and we used to have such fun. But the headaches and truths scribbled out in my journal couldn't be denied.

It was time to say goodbye.

Stinky's Brush With the Law

By George M. Flynn

"Stinky" is a tame, talking Blue-fronted Amazon parrot. Years ago, his original owner developed an allergic reaction to Stinky's feathers, and she sold him to us along with his large cage for peanuts. When his former owner observed our three young children, she knew fledgling Stinky had found a great new home.

Stinky already said a few words like "hello," "how are you?" and "good morning;" and our two daughters wasted little time teaching him many more words and short sentences.

Our oldest daughter, Jennie, coached him to say "Merry Christmas." Unfortunately, Stinky would never say it in December but would scream it all summer long. Go figure!

She also taught him to say, "Have a nice day." Each morning when we would leave for school, he would utter those words. It became comical.

Our other daughter, Katie, trained Stinky to scream, "Let me out!" Whenever he yelled that sentence, we would remove him from his cage and place him on our arm or shoulder or out-of-cage perch.

Social and intelligent, Stinky acquired new words and phrases easily. You hear stories of parrots mimicking their owner's foul language. Luckily for us, no one in our family cursed (that I know of, anyway.)

Our son, Jimmy, enjoyed feeding Stinky seedless grapes and scratching his yellow head. Afterwards, Stinky would coo "thank-you."

A treasured family member, Stinky has enriched our lives in a way only a pet can do. He's always able to put a smile on our face--always. How proud our children were when they introduced him at Bring-Your-Pet-To-School-Day in fifth grade! The only talking pet, Stinky dazzled everyone with his antics.

We figure Stinky just turned twenty-one. Our three children are all grown, married, and raising families of their own now. When they phone, they can hear Stinky jabbering in the background. They've all introduced their children to Stinky, and just like they were enthralled by him as kids, their children are, too.

Stinky loves cracking open almonds, munching fresh fruits and vegetables, ringing his bells, gazing out the window, bobbing up and down on his perch to Dolly Parton singing "9 to 5" and seeking attention.

Recently, my wife, Carole, and I packed our Subaru to the brim for a week's vacation down the Jersey shore. We stowed Stinky in a small, traveling cage and wedged it between suitcases, coolers, clothes, towels, beach umbrellas, etc.

That July morning dawned unseasonably cool and cloudy as we left home. Half-way down the Garden State Parkway, we pulled into a rest stop to get something to eat and to use the bathrooms. I opened the car's rear windows half-way and locked all the doors.

After leisurely grabbing a doughnut and coffee and using the facilities, we started back to the parking lot.

"Look, George," Carole pointed, "there's a small crowd of people around our car. One of them is a policeman!"

"What's going on?" I asked a woman who raced past us.

"Someone left a screaming child unattended in a locked car," she explained.

Worried, we sprinted to our car.

“Officer, what’s wrong?”

“Are you the owner of this car?” he inquired.

“Yes, what’s wrong?”

“Can’t you hear your child screaming?” he asked brusquely. “Leaving young children unattended in a locked car constitutes endangerment.”

“Officer, that’s not a child screaming; it’s our parrot, Stinky.”

“Parrot?” he said disbelieving. “Unlock this car immediately!”

I unlocked the back, raised the hatch, moved some clothes that had fallen on the cage, and then presented Stinky.

“Let me out, let me out, let me out,” Stinky squawked.

Concerned onlookers craned their necks, peering into the car.

“Well, I’ll be!” chuckled the officer, obviously amused. Everyone started laughing uproariously as word spread that it was a talking parrot.

Before the crowd dispersed, Stinky fluffed his feathers a few times and then advised everyone, including Officer Smith, to “Have a nice day...9 to 5, 9 to 5, 9 to 5...Merry Christmas.”

And that, my friends, was Stinky’s one and only brush with the law.

The Proposal

By Thomas Lucas

I have been told that many women play out their dream wedding, even plan it years before the occasion, often before meeting the man they eventually marry. I think it’s true that many men consider how they might propose marriage years before they meet that special someone. If they have any creativity at all, they will skip hiding ring in the tiramisu and dropping

down to one knee in an Italian restaurant. In case you didn't know, that's to ensure the woman says yes, being a public place and all.

I have considered various creative proposal strategies over the years, and proposing to my now-wife offered its' own challenges. My wife and I didn't have a traditional courtship, and we aren't traditional people. In fact, we decided to get married before I even proposed. So this was my dilemma, how to propose in a way that would surprise her, and contain all the romance that a truly unexpected proposal delivers.

After some serious brainstorming, I relied on my writing to accomplish this task. I had given her poems as gifts in the past, why not create a story for her? It would be memorable, and permanent – as she could always reread the story to remember how incredibly romantic I am (potentially a get-out-of-the-doghouse-card). But the story wouldn't truly be a surprise unless I tricked her. It would have to be in the presentation.

I wrote the story in a day. What I was trying to capture was the sense that when we know something is right, we need to act in that moment. When we don't, and we let that moment pass, there is a great chance that we will never see that opportunity again. The characters in my story all have a bit of that going on, and the key prop, the returned package, is the manifestation of the regret of missed chances.

At the time I was teaching at a high school, and working on a book. I came home that night and told her that I had written a short story for submission to a school district contest, and asked her to proofread it for me. I explained that I couldn't bear to be in the room while she read it, and I went into our bedroom to wait for her reaction. Here is the story she read:

STORY - Neither Snow

It was another one of those bitter cold Michigan mornings. John lay in bed, warm from a night of hibernating under the covers, with the cool air biting his face. He did not want to get up, but the alarm clock continued to argue otherwise.

It was still dark outside. No one should have to awake at this time, he thought. Still, you do what you have to do, and so he sleepily made his way through his morning routine: shower, coffee, shave. The apartment

was so cold and quiet. Aside from the cold, he liked it. A quiet morning felt right today.

After the car was warmed up, he made his way to work. He had been working at the local post office for a few years now. It was a small, rural office that was frequented only by locals. He knew everyone by first name, and that's how they knew him. It was a cozy situation, and at this time in his life, it was the right place to be.

The drive to work was time for a bit of radio and large gulps of coffee to shake the cobwebs of sleep away. The radio signal buzzed in and out – there wasn't a strong station for 100 miles. From what he could make out, it sounded like there was quite a snow storm coming in. Maybe that would keep people at home and make for a peaceful day at work. The winding dirt road slowly crept up a modest hill as he made his way to the top.

Soon, he found himself busy sorting mail and making idle chitchat with his coworkers. They were a pleasant group, not a dramatic or irritating one in the bunch. There was Roger, a stout Santa look-alike, who had worked at this very post office for 30 years. He was always telling amusing stories about the older people from town that came in from time to time. There was also Geraldine, roughly about 50 years old, although she would never admit it. She always knew what celebrity was up to “no good,” and loved to go on and on about it. These were just a few of the coworkers that he had been working with, and they certainly kept things interesting.

Tom, one of the mail carriers, came in from the loading dock. A real horse of a man, he usually carried five times what anyone else could. He was truly built for the job.

“I don't think we're going to be getting any business today,” Tom declared.

Everyone looked up. Tom motioned for them to come back to the loading dock. Putting down their work, they all followed him back. They were greeted with a solid wall of snow. The storm had arrived and it meant business. Tom was right, there wasn't going to be much work after the sorting was done. No one would bother to drive up the hill in this weather, and chances were slim that they could drive out today. Before long it became clear. They were going to be snowed in.

Pete, Steve, and Nancy promptly put their work down and announced they were going to head home. Geraldine sat and weighed her options. She never could make a decision. Roger, well Roger wasn't going anywhere. Work was home to him, and the way he saw it, there was always something that could get done. John knew that his car would never make it down the hill, so he figured he would call his girlfriend at work and stay until the storm subsided.

Hours passed and the snow just kept coming. John, Geraldine, Roger, and Tom had done just about everything they possibly could. They sorted the mail, swept the office, and did endless amounts of overdue cleaning. Telling stories along the way, time seemed to fly by. It was well past quitting time when they ran out of steam. John decided to take a look outside. There was nothing but bad news. They were seriously buried. The radio said that the roads wouldn't be clear until morning, so it looked like they would be spending the night.

Tom handed John the keys to the old bomb shelter. Supposedly he could find blankets in there. John didn't even know there was a bomb shelter, but he headed downstairs and sure enough, there was a door he had never even noticed before. John put the key in the rusty lock, and after a hefty turn of the doorknob, he managed to get the door open.

Like Tom had promised, there were some dusty blankets and some other supplies. What was most interesting was a shelf on the far wall of the gray brick room. On the shelf was a single manila envelope. It bulged with the shape of a box or book. It was covered in dust, but that didn't matter to John. For whatever reason, it was fascinating. It looked ancient and worn, but the most interesting thing about the envelope was the address. It was some street address he didn't recognize, even though it had their town name. There was no name with the address. It only read, "To my one and only love."

There was no return address. John grabbed it and brought it up with the blankets. If he was going to be stuck all night in this place, at least he would have something to look at.

When John came up from the bomb shelter, Tom's eyes widened when he saw the package in his hands.

“Why did you take that?” Tom asked accusingly.

John hesitated. “Why? Is it important?”

“It’s well, no it’s not important. It’s just kinda sad. It’s just...ahh, you might as well just read the book inside the envelope. All of us old-timers already have. That envelope has been in this office for over 80 years. It was returned from the mailing address, but because there was no return address it just sat on the shelf. Eventually somebody here got curious and opened up the envelope. After reading the book, they decided it should just sit here until someone came to claim it. So far, no one has.”

It was going to be a long night, and John had heard every story that Roger and Tom had to offer, so he decided to make the book his entertainment for the night. Before settling in, John tried to call his girlfriend again but the line was dead. Surely, she would know he was still snowed in; it was a small town after all. Still, he couldn’t help but be worried that she was ok at home.

Grabbing a warm corner by the lobby radiator, John pulled the book from the dusty envelope. It was an old composition book, and Tom had been right – the date written on the first page was a little over 80 years ago.

It was the journal of a young man who had attended the old university that used to be just outside of town. Most of the early entries were just about his history studies and various thoughts about life and the nature of things. The first part of the notebook was interesting but certainly not sad. John took a short break and looked out the window. It had finally stopped snowing. That was a good sign, maybe the plows would start up soon. John made himself a mug of hot chocolate and sat back down with the book.

When he reached the middle of the journal, John began to sense what Tom might have been talking about. The entries began to describe the young man meeting a girl from Spain, who had come to stay with family in town and study at the university midway through the year. Apparently they had made some kind of connection, because much of what the young man wrote about was his love for this girl. There were poems and sketches of her. From what John read, she loved this young man very much in return.

But there had been trouble. Her father did not want her to marry an American, and certainly not one from a small town university. Although the young man had sworn his love for her to the father, and although she had sworn her love for him, the father took her away. The young man was torn apart by the situation, and left town for many days. What he didn't know at the time was that she managed to break away from her father and had come back to town to be with him. She waited for many days, as many as she could, before she returned to her father brokenhearted.

When the young man returned to town, he went to visit her family. They told him how she had returned to join him, and how devastated she was that he was nowhere to be found. In his sad escape he had ruined his chance to be with her.

The remainder of the journal was filled with his disappointment over the loss of their love. Apparently he mailed the book to her family and left town for good. The family, not wanting to be a part of the controversy any longer, left the package at the post office for her to pick up should she ever return. After 80 years, John thought, she was not going to return.

John knew what he had to do. He looked out the window again. There was no more snow. Grabbing his coat and his keys, he headed right out the door ignoring Tom and Roger who insisted he would never make it into town.

John drove his car with a purpose that he never knew he had, and although he never should have been able to make it through the thick, wet snow, he somehow made it into town and to his girlfriend's house.

Walking in snow up to his knees, he pounded on the door which was beginning to glow with the warm light over early sunrise. She answered the door, with as much surprise as her tired eyes would allow.

"Are you ok, honey?" she asked.

"I'm fine. But that's not important," he said, nearly out of breath. "What's important is -- would you marry me? Would you spend the rest of your life with me? Because I know I want to spend the rest of my life with you!"

It should not come as a surprise to anyone that it was easy for me to tell when she completed the story. She ran into the room, threw her arms around me and said, "YES!" We will be married four years now, come June 30, so it's a real treat to have this story published so close to our anniversary. Until now, my wife had been the story's only reader, and no matter where my writing may take me, it will always be the greatest story I ever wrote.

My Mother's Death

By Adrienne Pine

My mother's death was a shock at first. And then it was a relief. She was diagnosed with bone cancer on March 9, 2012. She died in the last minutes of March 21. How long she had had the bone cancer, her doctor would not suppose. What was known was that the bone cancer was a metastasis from breast cancer she had survived fourteen years ago. For the past twelve years, she had been cancer-free.

Her doctor said that it was highly unusual for breast cancer to recur in the bone after so many years. However, our cousin, a doctor himself, explained that breast cancer never really goes away. It is sneaky and insidious, and it doesn't give up easily.

For as long as I can remember, something was always wrong with my mother. She was a beautiful woman and looked the picture of health, but in fact her body was a mass of aches and pains, which she blamed on five pregnancies. They—that is, we—had destroyed her.

In recent years, she believed that she was suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome and chronic mononucleosis. In the past six months, she'd been feeling worse; she had trouble walking and was in pain. She'd wanted to lose weight and hadn't been able to; suddenly she dropped twenty pounds. After falls and spells of dizziness, my father insisted that she consult our otolaryngologist, who found fluid in her inner ear and performed an outpatient procedure to drain it. But her symptoms did not improve. The neurologist who saw her next recommended an X-ray and didn't like what she saw in my mother's bones. In the early days of March, my mother was

ordered to the hospital for a bone biopsy. On her way to the car, she fell in the garage, and my father couldn't pick her up. He had to call a neighbor for assistance.

On January 6, she had reached the age of eighty. On March 8, she and my father celebrated the fifty-ninth anniversary of a marriage that had endured in spite of incompatibility and mutual disappointment. Forsaking her usual sarcasm, my mother said something "so syrupy" to my father that later he told us he should have guessed that she was mortally ill.

The doctor giving her the diagnosis stressed the positive aspects: the cancer had not spread beyond the bones, and with chemotherapy, she might live a few more years, although she would likely be confined to a wheelchair.

If this was meant to be the silver lining, my mother didn't see it that way. She sunk into despair. Her pain was treated with morphine and then methadone, which doped and confused her, as well as paralyzed her digestive tract. However, the drugs eased her pain, even if they couldn't take it away.

She wasn't ready to die, but she was even less ready to suffer what her own mother had suffered. Over thirty years ago, Grandma had wasted away from liver cancer until there was nothing left of her. After Grandma died, my mother said that she would never endure what Grandma had gone through.

The memory of her mother was in my mother's mind during the thirteen days between her diagnosis on March 9 and her passing on March 21. As she prepared herself to die, we were making plans for her to come home.

In the hospital, her sodium levels dipped; once they were normal, she could go home. Two nurse's aides alternating twelve-hour shifts would take care of her. In family discussions, we assumed there would be a siege during which the illness would be treated and kept at bay, followed by a time when Mom would inevitably succumb. How long she would survive, her doctor could not predict.

My mother confided her true state of mind to her rabbi. "Rabbi, I know I'm dying," she said to him when he visited her in the hospital.

"We're all dying," he replied.

“No, I know I am dying soon,” she said, “and it’s all right.”

He told us this after the funeral, at the shiva minyan.

* * *

By the time it was diagnosed, the cancer had compressed the bones of my mother’s spine and legs, and she couldn’t walk or move her legs. My sister Mimi, who was her favorite daughter, was with her during that heartbreaking week in the hospital. “I’ll miss you terribly, but I don’t want you to suffer,” she told Mom before she went back to Florida. “You can let go whenever you feel ready.”

However, even Mimi did not suspect that it would happen so soon. She recommended to her three sisters that we stagger our visits. Janey was planning to arrive on March 22, and Laura on March 24. I was planning to come on March 26, when Mimi was also returning.

On the morning of March 21, Mom complained of shortness of breath. She was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation and connected to a heart monitor. She was asked if she wanted to be put on a ventilator should she stop breathing, and she said she did not.

That evening, when her heart began to fail, her wishes were followed. Her lungs filled with fluid. At 11:30 PM central daylight time, my father was telephoned at home, where he was in bed asleep. At 11:45 PM, before he could arrive at the hospital, she died of acute pulmonary edema.

In New York City, where I live, it was already March 22. I got the phone call from Mimi at 2:00 AM. Dad had called her and asked her to call the rest of us.

* * *

My mother died just as spring was coming to its fullest expression in Birmingham, Alabama, the city where she was born, married, and had her children, and where she had lived her entire life. The foliage was a promising shade of bright green. The suburban lawns were visions lined with banks of azaleas in full bloom. The year was still young; as yet, the sun’s heat had no weight to it.

As I drove along the roads of my childhood, it occurred to me that my mother's youth had been the best season of her life. Everything afterwards was a disappointment. And she had never really gotten over it.

Inside the woman she became, there was always the popular girl, the belle of the ball, whose life had never fulfilled its promise. Once her wit and repartee had charmed girls and boys alike, young and old; she was accustomed to being the center of attention, adored and adorned.

Long after she married and had children, flirtation lived on in her encounters with tradesmen and repairmen--Stanley at the grocery store, Gus at the gas station--men she saw casually in the course of her errands. She seemed happiest when she was flirting, but I never saw her flirt with my father. Nothing so lighthearted existed between them. Instead there was a furious passion that erupted in explosions and battles.

It is one morning at breakfast, and I am three or four years old. I don't know what started their argument, but Daddy wants to leave for work, and Mama is angry and threatening to pour coffee on him. He is angry, too, and taunts her that she won't dare do it. "Don't you believe it," she cries, grabbing the coffeepot from the stove. She flings a fountain of hot coffee that reaches him as he tries to escape out the front door, splashing all over his good suit. He screams, and she flees back inside. Furious, he stomps up the stairs and inside the house to change, cursing her but avoiding her. His suit is stained the color of dirt, the color of excrement.

That stain endures—dirty, shameful, coloring our family life for years to come. So much unhappiness and disappointment. And so little tolerance and affection.

Long before my parents met, something had happened to each of them that left them damaged. Neither was emotionally whole enough to love in an unstinting and generous way. Their connections to each other and their children were based on transactions. "I'll do this for you, if you do that for me." Nothing was free, and everything had its price.

This was how they related to each other, and it was how they treated their children as well.

Mom tyrannized over us because she could dominate us. The home was the only sphere in which she was powerful. Every morning Dad escaped into the practice of law. It was a place where he had reason and justice on his side, and she didn't exist. Only within her family was she all-powerful.

My parents fought constantly about money. There was never enough. Because my mother had no way of earning money and no intention of trying, she intensified the pressure on my father. He'd left a law firm where he was unhappy to go out on his own and struggled for years as a single practitioner before he was successful. But even after success came, the obsession with money continued.

It was more than a need for money that they expressed. They thought about money constantly, how to get it, how to hoard it, how to save it from anyone else spending it. My parents let their lust for money control their lives. The conclusion was that money was worth more than we were. We were constantly being reminded that they couldn't afford us, but they were stuck with us. They calculated each expenditure, and it was up to us to prove we were worth every cent they grudgingly spent on us.

In her battles with our father, my mother pressured us to take sides, and woe befell us if we didn't select hers. We grew up afraid of her temper and her outbursts. "What if Mom gets mad?" we would worry, and by "mad," we meant her screaming until the veins stood out on her neck, and her vocal cords sounded as if they were stripped raw. In her rages, she hit us, and she tore up our rooms. Once, when I was a teenager, she picked up a heavy pair of ceramic mushrooms that sat on the coffee table and hurled them at my head. I ducked instinctively, and when the mushrooms exploded against the wall, shattering into fragments, she screamed that I had broken them. And in the shadows of her screams was Mimi, trying to find a way to glue the mushrooms back together.

Mom did not care how much she inflicted hurt. The harm within her that in turn caused the wish to harm seemed inexhaustible. That she never apologized was like a badge of honor for her, as if an apology were an admission of shameful weakness.

She claimed that she hadn't wanted any of her children, that we were all the results of accidents and mistakes. She told us that she had jumped off the kitchen table, and thrown herself down the stairs, hoping for a miscarriage, but it hadn't worked. Even though she said this many times, it was hard for

us to believe. After all, she took care of us; she hadn't abandoned us. She shopped and cooked, sewed our clothes, made sure we went to school, and took us to the doctor.

She was kindest to us when we were sick, and then she would bring us trays with soft boiled egg scooped out of the shell into an egg cup, to be spooned up with bits of toast, ginger ale with some of the bubbles stirred out, and hot tea and saltines. She loved us best when we were babies, before we had learned to talk or to walk, or express our will, when we were still helplessly dependent. Once we were toddlers, she did not like us so well. She was sure to find something in our behavior to object to.

* * *

At our first therapy session after my mother's death, my husband said, "It may sound blunt, but I think that your life will be a lot better now that she is gone."

It was hard for me to hear this. It set me apart from other daughters. It was as if I could hear my mother's voice in my ear accusing me of being hard-hearted and unnatural. She enjoyed reducing me to tears, until I had dissolved into a pool of water, like the Wicked Witch in the Wizard of Oz.

"Everyone thinks you're a good girl, a smart girl. You're a sneak, you've pulled the wool over everyone's eyes but mine," she would yell at me. "I know the real you. You're a nasty, two-faced little bitch, you're a selfish f#\$% who doesn't give a good goddamn about anyone but herself. You don't love me, you don't know how to love. Look at you! I can't stand the sight of you!"

How I sobbed and begged for forgiveness, hoping she would stop. But she remained cold and hard, as ungiving as steel. And I thought what she was saying must be true, because when I searched my heart at those moments, I could find no love for her.

Ten years passed, and twenty. This scene was replayed hundreds of times, in countless variations. My mother's gift for twisting meaning was worse than the cursing and the hitting, because it caused me to doubt myself.

When I was younger, the only way I knew how to resist was passively. While she attacked me, I stood stiff and still, my face expressionless, while my

mind escaped. I imagined that I was a prisoner in a cell, peering out the bars of a window, turning myself into a bird flying free. When she gripped me violently by the shoulders and shook me so that my teeth rattled in my head, I imagined that I had left my body behind, and I was somewhere else, where I wasn't being hurt.

She knew what I was doing, and it infuriated her. And even though I tried as hard as I could to be a stone that absorbed nothing, I didn't completely succeed. There was a part of me that took in every word she said and believed it.

And in between her rages, my father lectured me that it was my duty to endure whatever she did to me, just as he endured it when she got mad at him. He believed that his forbearance made him morally superior, and he wanted me to be like him. He insisted and then pleaded that I should give in to her. Do it for me, he begged.

And so I would agree to give in. And then all the crying that I had repressed, the sadness and the suffering that I had been holding back with rigid control, would burst out of me, and I would sob, wanting to believe that what he was offering me was comfort.

And I would go to my mother, dread in my heart. Time and again, my dread was fulfilled. Despite my father's promises, my mother interpreted my apology as an opportunity for a further attack. She went for the chink in my armor, and she struck deep. She struck again and again, until I was like the mutilated dragon, writhing at St. Michael's feet.

My father's claim of the moral high ground went hand in hand with his belief that he commanded an impartial view from this exalted place. He meted out blame. "What do you do that sets her off? She never gets mad at your sisters the way she gets mad at you. Why can't you learn not to provoke her?"

I didn't want to provoke her. I wanted her to love me, but she didn't. She constantly found fault. Something I did or said, or something I didn't do or should have done was always setting her off. Maybe she was right. Maybe deep down I was a bad person, pulling the wool over everyone's eyes. The truth was that I hated my mother, and at the same time I loved her with a painful love.

It took me a long time to learn to protect myself. It took distance. It took silence. It took decades.

* * *

At the end of my mother's life, she stopped battling. In our last conversations, she showed no wish to fight with me. While there were no deathbed confessions or revelations, neither were there accusations or threats. I didn't know how close to death she was, but she knew, and she kept her own counsel. She never used the word "cancer" in conversation with me. She insisted that it was her chronic fatigue syndrome and her chronic mononucleosis that was causing her problems. I had stopped challenging her years ago. I listened, and I sympathized.

In a strange way, illness always brought out the best in my mother. She was long-suffering and heroic. As a patient in the hospital, she made an effort to cooperate. On that floor, she was the nurses' favorite. She always wanted sympathy, and now it came to her in abundance.

But she wasn't getting better. And the depths to which she was falling took her by surprise. I could hear the shock in the tone of her voice.

The pleasures of her life slipped away from her; she could no longer concentrate on reading, or watching television. Eating, walking, going to the bathroom, getting dressed were no longer activities of her daily life. Given this state of things, did she make a conscious decision to die sooner rather than later, in order to avoid the misery that lay ahead of her? Did she will her heart to fail, her lungs to fill with fluid? I wonder what it was like for her in those final moments, alone in the hospital room. I admire her courage, and I love her for not fighting the inevitable. If I were in her place, I would prefer it her way.

* * *

After my mother's death, I was left with a sense of emptiness. I found consolation in the family treasure trove of pictures. I loved looking at the images of my parents at the beginning of their marriage, when they were younger than I had ever known them, and their life together was a future promise. They seemed to beckon mysteriously from the unknowable past. What secrets could I unlock if I were to speak to them?

My sisters and I have fallen in love with these pictures; we copy and exchange them by email and flash drive. In these idealized images, our parents are smiling and beautiful. They appear happier and more confident than any of us ever remember them being.

Appearances deceive. Self-assertive and opinionated though my mother was, she was not confident. Despite her obvious gifts and accomplishments, she allowed herself to be paralyzed by fear. She was miserable every day of her life, and yet, long after her children were grown, she didn't have the nerve to leave an unhappy marriage where she felt dissatisfied, overlooked, misunderstood, and unloved. She was afraid to take a risk for happiness, although she found my father emotionally stunted and self-absorbed, and she blamed him for not providing for her in the way that she wanted. Ultimately, it was not love, loyalty, or friendship that kept her from leaving my father. She had never worked outside the home, and she didn't intend to start. She was worried enough about losing financial security that she clung to the evils she knew rather than fly to others that she knew not of.

In his own way, which was not her way, my father loved my mother very much. Once she was gone, it was touching to see how much he missed her, and how lost he was without her. Oddly enough, what he seemed to miss most was her sarcasm. Funny how I never realized how much he actually enjoyed being the butt of her jokes. When I asked him about his happy memories, he fondly recalled her witticisms at his expense, variations on the theme of how she wished she'd never married him.

"The thing with Mom is that you never knew if she really meant it or not," I commented.

"Nah, she didn't mean it," he replied softly, twisting his body with shyness like a schoolboy. Or was the gesture just a manifestation of his Parkinson's disease?

* * *

A friend who recently lost her own mother wrote me, "The best metaphor I have heard for this rite of passage is that it's like having the roof of the house yanked off, and suddenly you're looking up at the sky, exposed to the elements."

I find this metaphor rich and suggestive, as it hearkens back to the maternal ideal as intermediary, shelter, protector. I picture the black sky, pricked by stars. I feel the cold wind. But I don't feel the same way that my friend does.

I feel an emptiness, but it isn't the vastness of space. It is more like a physical sensation in my body, located at the pit of my stomach. It can't be relieved, or explained away. It's just there.

Instead of a roof, it was as if walls came down for me when Mom died. From the time I was young, my mother had erected walls to try to separate us from each other. Her idea was to divide and conquer. With walls, she controlled us, confined us, defined us. The walls were metaphorical, and they were also real. Sometimes they were the misunderstandings she liked to stir up between us, the way she talked about us to each other behind our backs and goaded us with what others said about us, or how she interrupted when two of us began to have a conversation that wasn't about her.

Now she is gone, the walls that she put up are gone, too. Each one of us sisters had spent years without speaking to the others, but now we find common connections in our shared griefs, our worries about our father.

We are trying to reach across the void my mother left when she died, and hold hands.

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