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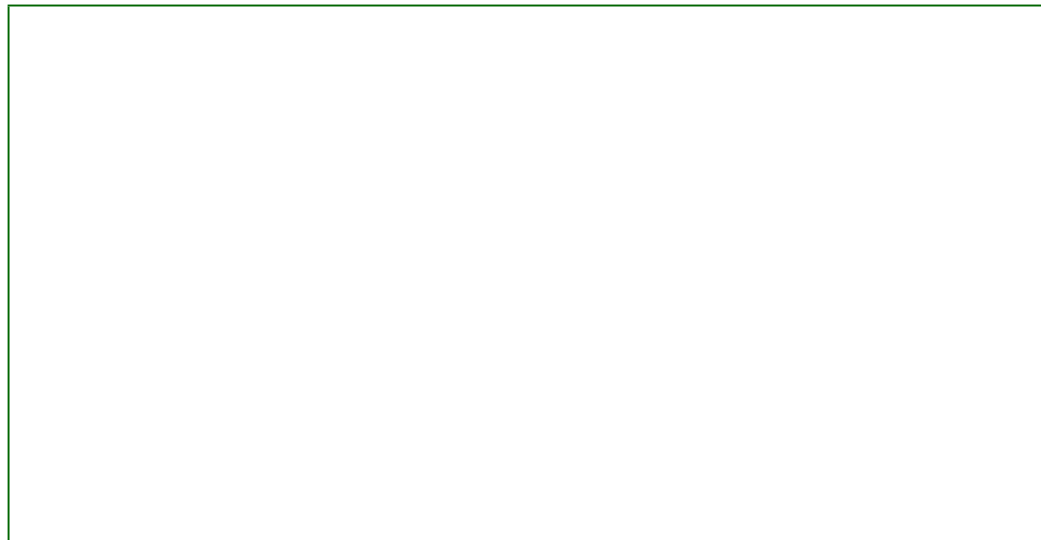
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"Our Stories"

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.





"The Railroad Building" by Christopher Woods; <http://christopherwoods.zenfolio.com/>

For The Sake Of The Neighborhood

By Thomas Sullivan

Every neighborhood has one house where people display holiday decorations for far longer than anyone else on the street. A month after Easter the plastic bunny and colorful eggs are still nestled together on the front porch. Two months after Halloween has passed, goblins still inhabit the front windows and pumpkins, soft and decomposing, still sit in the front yard. This extended timeframe for holiday displays is usually accompanied by an intensity and scale that dwarfs the neighbors. The Santa's are bigger, the Halloween spider is large enough, once inflated, to drive a car under, and the yard is filled with reindeer up to the full carrying capacity of the land.

In most places this is a non-issue. But in an upper class neighborhood full of lawyers, doctors, and other types of professionals, these “over-decorators” constitute a threat. They outwardly challenge the visual harmony and order of the place. But they are actually defenders of liberty, people who refuse to be intimidated by the stern, uptight customs of the people surrounding them.

My neighborhood in New England was no exception. Two houses down from us lived a family that approached the holidays with gusto. Over the years the front porch and yard played host to a growing army of elves, reindeer, ghouls and goblins. The week before any holiday, the house would buzz with activity as the father, occasionally accompanied by family members, set out the proper accoutrements. You’d see him going to and from the garage for hours, carrying animals or strings of lights.

Large scale holiday displays were an anomaly in my neighborhood. People decorated windows with a single candle and hung an attractive, red wreath on the front door. Through the living room window at night you’d spy a tree lit up with bright bulbs. But that was it. Anything plastic or inflatable was strictly verboten.

But our neighbors two houses down didn’t play by these unwritten rules. I’ve since forgotten the family’s name, so I’ll call them the Smiths. Each holiday was a small festival for the Smiths, but Christmas was the true gala event. One year at Christmas two tall, illuminated candy canes appeared in the front yard, joined by a substantial creche scene. But the coup d’état was the large sleigh, with Santa and his reindeer, which appeared on their roof. People in the neighborhood might put small things in the front yard, but absolutely no one put things on their roof.

I loved the display. I often wondered what it would be like to come home from school and see something like that in the yard and on the roof. It looked like fun. This led me to two conclusions: first, the family obviously enjoyed holiday celebrations and, second, the Dad was willing to risk a plunge from the roof to make them happen.

My mother, however, did not love the display. It was none of her business, of course, and at first she tried to ignore it. However, as time moved on the sleigh and reindeer did not. When the decoration was still perched on the roof into late spring it somehow became her business. One night, unbeknownst to anyone in our family except my father, she typed up a

letter entitled "For The Sake of The Neighborhood." No one in our house ever saw the letter, but I imagine it politely requested that the owner dismantle the sleigh.

So my mother snuck over to the Smith house late one night and dropped the letter into the mailbox. The note, of course, was unsigned -- good counter-operatives never reveal their true identity.

Shortly before this stealth communication occurred, another event quietly rocked the neighborhood. The people across the street, whom I'll call the Joneses, finally grew tired of the jungle that had grown in the yard next door. This neighbor, a man we'll call Mr. Brown, commuted from our Connecticut suburb to Boston each day for work. His grass slowly grew out of control while he tried to sell his house and move to Boston. Yard work and neighborly relations were the last things on the guy's mind, for good reason.

One afternoon Mr. Jones marched next door with a lawnmower in tow. Setting the wheels on High, he hacked and gnawed through Mr. Brown's overgrown lawn. When he was done, large piles of grass lay scattered across the yard. The sidewalk was covered with clippings. The cutting wasn't pretty, but it got the job done.

The neighborhood had just witnessed a trespass onto a neighbor's property. In many American neighborhoods such an act would be enough to set loose the dogs or get the guns out of the garage. But in this conservative neighborhood, people just quietly shook their heads.

To the best of my knowledge, the two neighbors never discussed the event. I imagine Mr. Brown rolled in exhausted from his commute and didn't even notice the yard. However, the covert lawn job didn't go unnoticed in the neighborhood.

A few weeks later our family was sitting in our formal dining room, having dinner. The Santa and reindeer display had finally come down. Across the street, Mr. Brown's yard was defiantly returning to its lush, untidy state. Mrs. Cooley, another of our neighbors, was a guest at the table. Mrs. Cooley, it turned out, was friends with Mrs. Smith (spouse to the holiday decorator and co-recipient of one unsigned letter). My parents were talking

shop with Mrs. Cooley, exchanging questions and answers about their kids and general news of our town.

Mrs. Cooley suddenly changed the topic. She looked at my mom and said, “You’re not going to believe this. Bill Jones, you know, across the street...he goes and cuts Larry Brown’s yard. Then he puts a letter in Carla Smith’s mailbox, telling her to take down the Christmas decorations.”

Mrs. Cooley paused for effect, letting the gravity of this information sink in. My dad cleared his throat and gently nudged Mom under the table. She managed to hold a straight face.

Mom looked at Mrs. Cooley and said, “No...you’re kidding.”

Mrs. Cooley grabbed her wine glass, took a sip, and said, “Carla told me the letter was...unsigned. The gall of that guy. Who does he think he is?”

My mom nodded her head, silently agreeing.

Reflecting back on the episode a few years later, I realized something – you should never listen to people who try to tell you how to live, be it a neighbor, political party leader, church elder, family member, or whoever. It’s not your interests they have in mind, it’s their own. But to hide this fact, they’ll insinuate that you’re threatening The Good of the group that you’re a part of. That’s the secret to conformity and why people push it. It’s the oldest trick in the book, and it works far too often.

Bio- Thomas Sullivan is the author of *Life In The Slow Lane*, a memoir about teaching teenagers to drive. He is a regular contributor at HumorOutcasts.com and has a book of essays forthcoming in March, 2013 from Wayman Publishing.

www.thomassullivanhumor.com

Woman of Steel

By Chrys Fey

I was lying on my stomach, wrapped tightly in the thorny blanket of misery, as my mother massaged my back with her arthritis fingers to dissolve the

pain that held my spine in its clutches. She could clearly see the wide curve of my spine, the culprit of my agony. It was the summer before my ninth school year, a time when teenagers are testing their freedoms and excitedly anticipating joining the chaos of high school, but I spent my summer visiting doctors and fighting to relieve the pain I was in from day to night.

When I was fourteen, I was diagnosed with scoliosis, which is a curvature of the spine most often caused by a sudden growth, especially for kids between the ages of eleven and seventeen. My spine was at a forty-eight degree angle and it was twisted. To fix it and relieve the constant pain I was in, my doctor had to rotate and straighten my spine. Fusion, a substance that becomes similar to bone, went in-between several vertebrae, and a steel rod was screwed into my spine.

The day after my fifteenth birthday, I woke up hours before the sun had opened its eyes. Wishing I could dive into bed and pretend it was not the day of my surgery, I groggily climbed into my mother's car. On the way to the hospital, I watched the dove-gray sky lighten degree by degree. Slowly, as if its muscles ached, the sun stood up in the sky.

I followed my parents into the hospital as my heart pounded in my chest and my knobby knees quaked. With each step, I silently hoped we would get lost. Unfortunately, we found the right area and sat down in uncomfortable chairs to wait for the inevitable. I hugged my backpack to my chest and tried to calm my racing heart.

The woman sitting behind the receptionists' desk saw me and called me over. I watched her heft a giant garbage bag off the floor and dig inside it, oddly resembling Santa. She pulled out a brown teddy bear with silky hair and a blue ribbon tied around its furry neck.

"You look like you need to hug something," she said as she handed the bear to me. Normally I would have turned my nose up at such a childish gift, but at that moment that teddy bear looked like a life preserver to me. I took the bear and embraced it with all my might.

A few minutes later, a woman behind a plastic partition called me over to sit in a chair. She passed me a clipboard of papers beneath a small opening at the bottom of the plastic divider. I knew the papers said that paralysis and death were risks of having this sort of surgery, and I signed them. I was aware of what was happening, but I didn't fully comprehend it. I had

enough sense to be scared and yet I was naive enough to believe that it wouldn't be a hard surgery. I was wrong.

The operating room was brightly lit and full of people in scrubs. I lay on the gurney and glanced over at where my three doctors were examining my latest x-ray. They didn't look at me though. In fact, no one in the entire room acknowledged that I was there. This made me feel as if I was in a dream, but then a nurse stood over me, put the gas mask on my face, and disappeared. I wasn't even told to breathe deeply or to count backwards from ten. I was scared, nervous, and utterly alone. And that was the very last thing I remember before the anesthesia pulled me into the darkness of my mind.

My operation lasted about four hours. During that time, my doctors successfully straightened my spine and only ran into a slight problem when one of my lungs collapsed.

Upon waking up the first time all I saw was red, blood red. It seemed as though the walls, the floors, the people; everything was drenched in this scary red. I fell back to sleep seconds later.

When I opened my eyes the second time, noise washed over me like a tidal wave.

I could hear people moaning and crying.

Where am I?

I had no idea. All I knew is that those cries were not coming from me. I felt paralyzed. I couldn't flinch, let alone open my mouth to make a squeak.

Suddenly I was knocked out again with the great fist of Morphine, and when I opened my eyes once more I was still in the same place, but the room wasn't red and the noises weren't monstrous anymore.

I managed to turn my head slightly and a few feet away I could see my parents talking to one of my doctors. When they noticed I was looking at them they all came over, their faces like blank canvases.

I was so confused that the first thing I said in a soft voice was, "When is my surgery?"

Even after pulling myself out of unconsciousness many times, I still thought I was waiting for the surgery to begin.

“You already had it, sweetie,” my father told me.

I didn’t even have the strength to say, “Oh”. I merely closed my eyes and went back to the black world where all drug-induced patients in the hospital go after surgery.

The next thing I recall is waking up on a hard, cold metal surface with a bright light hanging above my head. I peered around, feeling as though my head was going to roll off the table. There were shadows all around me. I almost thought that I was on a slab in the morgue. Clearly, there was a mistake. I was alive!

I wasn’t in the morgue though. I was just in a freezing cold x-ray room. It seemed as though I was there for hours when finally I noticed someone sitting in the dark room next to me. They looked at me and said, “Oh, you’re awake.”

I thought, *Well, duh*, just before I went unconscious yet again. Then I woke up in my hospital room with my family all around me, smiles pasted onto their worried faces.

That night, the man who made my back brace came to take my measurements again. He rolled me around as I cried helplessly. My doctor had just cut open my body, twisted, pulled, and screwed into my spine, and here this man was rolling me back and forth like a lump of dough.

When he finally finished tormenting my surgery-battered body, he announced that I was two whole inches taller than I had been that morning.

The next day, I was brought down to what appeared to be the bowels of the hospital to have the tube in my side replaced with a bigger one, because my right lung was full of fluids and I couldn’t breathe. This procedure felt as though someone was slowly penetrating a stick of molten metal through my flesh and into my body. I cried hot tears and squeezed a nurse’s hand who told me, “I know it hurts. Just keep squeezing my hand!”

Even after I could breathe easier, I didn’t want to move because I was in so much pain. When two nurses helped me into a sitting position for the first

time, I took slow breathes and remained perfectly still, fearing that any movement would break the rod screwed to my spine.

Five long days later, my doctor released me from the hospital. Every dip, every bump, and every turn in the road on the way home made me hold my breath against the jarring pain.

For two months I lay in a bed in my living room, wore a back brace that I hated, and used a walker like an old granny. I remember taking a shower for the first time by sitting on a stool, and when the gentle spray from the hand-held showerhead touched my back, I flinched so badly that pain rippled up and down my spine.

Pain. There was so much pain that I started to depend on pain medications. I even wanted them when I didn't need them. Fortunately, I was able to recognize what was happening and I stopped taking the pills prescribed to me even when I was in pain. To this day, I still don't like taking a pain reliever for a headache.

Recovering was no easy feat. I had to teach myself how to sit, bend, and walk with a rod in my back, which was harder than I expected. I had to practice sitting up in a chair, just five minutes in the beginning, and walking the halls of the house. Then I pushed myself to walk to the mailbox. Many people take that little act for granted, but I remember the first time I attempted it and those steps down the driveway and back again was physically taxing, but I eventually got strong enough to walk down to the end of the street. My steps were slow, my back stiff, but I didn't give up.

Healing self-consciously was another story. When I opened my eyes in my hospital room, engulfed in pain, I realized that my presumption that the surgery wouldn't be a big deal was a lie. Lying there, surrounded by my concerned family, I privately thought that I wasn't going to make it through. I carried that thought with me during the whole five days I was in the hospital and even for the first month after I was released. I lay in the hospital bed in the living room, barely moving and almost always in tears, and I wanted to give up. It was weeks later when I told myself that I couldn't give up, that I had to push through because there was no other option. I stopped taking the pain medications right at that moment and began to fight back.

Four months after my surgery I was finally back to normal. I was skinnier, with dark shadows around my eyes, and I needed a pillow in my backpack to cushion my spine, but none of my friends could even tell that I had surgery, which is exactly what I wanted. I didn't want anyone to know about the struggles that I endured while they had spent their summers at the beach. They never even knew that a pillow was hidden in my backpack. In the beginning, I was ashamed of it, ashamed that I needed it. I wanted to keep my surgery a secret and pretend as though it never happened, but it did happen and that was another thing I had to face. I had surgery. I went through a hard recovery and survived it. I realized then that I wasn't just a girl who had spine surgery; I was a warrior who had defeated spine surgery!

Even though I have healed I am left with a souvenir that won't ever go away. My scar is a foot long and runs diagonally from the back of my side to my right hip. Of course, I didn't view it as a souvenir when I first got it. For a long time I hide my scar under shirts, never wanting anyone to see it. Five years after my surgery, I questioned why I was so self-conscious about my scar. After all, a scar doesn't make a person ugly and my scar certainly doesn't make me ugly. I looked closer at my scar and I didn't see a hideous mark anymore but a sign of my own strength. I conquered spine surgery, triumphed through the recovery, faced my own self-consciousness, and my scar is proof of that. It is a reminder of my strength, the same strength that is with me every single day.

Seven years have passed since my surgery. I cannot bend my back or rotate at the hips because the rod will not allow me to. If I sit in one place for a long time, I experience bad back pain, and if I stand for a long period, I get muscle spasms. However, if I were fourteen again and faced with the decision of needing spine surgery I would do it because I gained so much more than just a straight spine. I found strength and courage that I didn't possess before. I learned that I am capable of a lot more and can handle any pain that is thrown at me. I also discovered love for myself, which is priceless.

I know now that overcoming spine surgery made me infinitely stronger than I ever would have been without it. I am not the same girl who first walked into the hospital clutching her backpack; I am a woman who doesn't tremble in the face of surgery, as I have had two other surgeries since then. I am a woman who can help others because of what I endured. I am a

woman who found herself through thick layers of pain. I am a woman of steel! Not even Superwoman has a metal spine.

Bio- Chrys Fey has published a supernatural-thriller titled "Fallen" with *Freedom Fiction Journal* and her inspirational poem "Falling Feather" is featured on the e-zine *Long Story Short* for the month of August 2012. She is a member of the Florida Writer's Association.

The Gift

By Beth McKim

My friends, Gina and Larry, bought and decorated their first Christmas tree that year. Larry was Jewish and Gina had never cared much for Christmas festivities. The tree marked quite a departure from their usual ignoring of the season during their five-year marriage. They even decided to buy a few gifts for each other, friends, and family for display under the authentic looking artificial tree from Lowe's.

About two weeks before Christmas, a wrapped package from New York City arrived at their door. Gina noted with pleasure that it was addressed to her from her best friend, Patty. She and Patty grew up together and completely understood each other's tastes, so she knew she would like the gift even before she opened it.

Gina smiled when she saw the beautiful colors of grape purple and lavender blue. Patty knew well these were her favorite colors. She pulled it out of the box with a puzzled look on her face as Larry watched expectantly. "It's really pretty," they both said at once. Much like a well-rehearsed choir, they next questioned in unison, "But what is it?"

As they took a closer look, they noticed the material was primarily the grape color with a wide lavender trim at the bottom. The underside of the garment was also made of the lovely blue. When Gina saw the covered buttons and a big hole in the middle, she was sure she was looking at a cape or poncho and immediately put it over her head. A fairly small woman, she found it to be very long, even touching the ground, when worn that way.

Next, Gina put it around her shoulders to see if it might be a shawl of some sort, but it seemed very long and bulky that way as well. She felt a little

irritated at that point, and Larry remarked that it didn't look like something she would wear and he didn't understand Patty buying something like that for her.

At that point they began to experiment. Gina wrapped it around her like a sarong, and they simultaneously burst into laughter. To carry the joke a little farther, she left the room and came back topless wearing her present as a long skirt wrapped around her several times to help it fit. At that point they went into amused hysterics, holding their stomachs while they laughed. Gina gave up on her gift and put it back into the box, determined not to let Patty know she hated the thing and probably would never wear it. She decided it was Patty's thought that counted.

A week later, while shopping at Crate and Barrel, Gina noticed a display with the same material as her mysterious cape. As she picked it up to look at it, she thought again how pretty the material was and at the same time wondered to herself when Crate and Barrel started to sell clothing. And then she saw the tag that her gift had been lacking. At the very bottom of it, she saw the words "Xmas Tr Skt."

Gina realized immediately that her thoughtful friend Patty had sent her a gorgeous fabric skirt to go around the bottom of her very first Christmas tree and was finally ready to thank her.

Bio- Beth McKim lives in Houston with her husband Buddy and their Labradoodle, Lucy. In addition to writing, she enjoys acting, training medical students, studying Spanish, traveling (including a recent trip to Cuba), practicing Yoga and spending time with her young grandchildren.

In addition to *The Write Place At the Write Time*, Beth's works have appeared in publications such as *Della Donna*, *Cell2Soul*, *Front Porch Review*, *Mayo Review*, *Airplane Reading* and the *Birmingham Arts Journal*.

50 Kisses

By Denise Bouchard

"Dare me?"

"No stop asking me that."

“It’s just a question. If I jump off this wall into the courtyard, will you give me fifty kisses?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Anyway, my father is coming to pick us up!”

“Not for awhile, they let us out early tonight.”

‘They’ referred to the teachers at the driving school. We were alone, this boy and I, in the once busy downtown section right near where the Bishop lived. I was what Billy Joel would’ve called an uptown girl, our house actually being in the country, surrounded by stone walls and a park and in that house, there were rules about how one should conduct themselves. One did not kiss on city streets- especially not a city where history carried the family name.

“Come on dare me!” It wasn’t really a question this time but an invitation to a dare while he weighed my response. Something had happened earlier that night even before this moment that had already changed me. I was walking back to my seat in class and I noticed the top button on his shirt was undone and the dark hair against his olive chest was peeking out over his shirt. He looked like a young Andy Garcia and this look stopped me in my tracks. Until that moment, I didn’t even know that I would prefer such a thing, but there I was noticing and he knew that I noticed, for perhaps a moment too long and now I was being tested.

We’d met only a month before at a summer fair. He was funny and attentive and when he couldn’t get a ride, he’d walk to our house, not a short walk but one from the city to the suburbs, just to spend a few hours with me. I liked him but thought he was a bit dangerous. He could be reckless, crude at times. I found his differences intriguing though, exotic. That September, I had long, golden, sun-kissed blond hair and blue-green eyes and I was just a waif of a girl with porcelain skin. I had an innocence of life that might have held me back had he not pushed me to learn to drive, to play, to not be frightened of things such as the cow giving birth at the fair on the night we met, it’s eyes bulging, seemingly frightened and left alone looking as if she might be dying. He summoned for help, then diverted my attention back to the fair, the cotton candy, the flirting.

“Come on, dare me.”

If he jumps, I thought, *I'll be spared his insistent comments*. "Fine, yes, I'll give you 50 kisses if you jump. OK? So jump!" It wasn't like we hadn't ever kissed before. He jumped, then held out his arms for me to follow.

"Come on, I'll catch you."

My thoughts ran to how foolish this was- how we'd be trapped in this low and deep courtyard, surrounded by wrought iron fencing, how I didn't really know of a way to get us out, and what would happen if my parents caught us...and in the cathedral's courtyard, what's more... So...I jumped.

He took me into his arms. I loved the smell of his leather jacket; I sank into it safe, warm. Unfortunately, he was a chain smoker so I wasn't exactly enamored in those first few quick kisses; as always, it was like kissing an ashtray but a promise was a promise. I thought, *I'll just have to get through these continuous soft kisses*, but as he kissed me more slowly, deeply, the ashtray disappeared leaving just the sense of leather and sandalwood cologne. I started to kiss back and suddenly I didn't care if the bishop himself showed up. 34, 35, 36...we counted in our heads. We were, as Stevie Nicks sings in her famous song, "on the edge of seventeen" and he awakened me in those 50 kisses as I'm sure he knew he could. We would continue to kiss and argue for four more years before we would go our separate ways.

He taught me about life and love, passion and anger and hope chests that are emptied of their contents in preparation for someone else. It would be emptied, I would come to understand, of things that were foreign to me – colors that were not mine – vestiges of someone else's life. The afghan his grandmother knitted for me in orange and brown, might have covered up a young girl as she waited for someone who was out late, distracted and drinking with friends. These things were slowly replaced by Egyptian cotton sheets with embroidered birds and lavender blankets which my husband always covered me with if I fell asleep on the couch; the kind of man who would not turn away, distracted, even if I fell. I packed in silver picture frames, the colors of soft mauve, sage green, hopes of thoughtfulness, loyalty and the dream of a child who would look like me, vanity be damned.

The man in the silver frames gave me those things. And the house we moved into one November day, gave way to the surprise of spring and summer flowers, of hydrangeas, lavender bushes, hostas, and beach roses,

echoing what was inside, including a child who did indeed look like us and who was a blessing from the day she was born.

Still, I sometimes think back to the boy who taught me to leap with joy and to the few who came after him preparing me for the rest of my life, showing me all that I would and would not want and need in order to fulfill my dreams.

See Bio for Denise Bouchard on our About Us page

Second Chances

By George M. Flynn

*The childhood shows the man,
As morning shows the day*—John Milton (1608-1674)

It was another ordinary day in Mrs. Little's fifth-grade math class—or so I thought.

"I'm returning your tests," Mrs. Little announced. "Some excelled, while others, well, need improvement. Everyone must have a parent sign the test and bring it back to class tomorrow."

"George Flynn," she pursed her lips, "where were you when I was teaching percents?" She handed me my test. I scored a dismal 50%--5 out of 10 correct.

"Good grief," I whispered under my breath. I glanced over at Mario Azzanati's test—he had a big fat zero, a goose egg. "You mean someone actually scored worse than I did?" I mumbled.

"I'm subtracting ten points from your test for each day it's returned late," she continued.

Mario's eyes widened bigger than grapefruits at the prospect of a grade lower than zero. Both of us worried how our parents would react.

Since Mario lived near me, we both walked home together.

“Maybe we should sign our parent’s names,” Mario suggested, looking for the easy way out.

“You mean forge their signature?” I asked.

“Yep, who’s going to ever know?”

“Sounds too dishonest,” I said. “Besides, they throw people in jail for forgery.”

Mario’s eyes widened again as he pictured himself doing time behind bars, or worse, digging ditches on the chain gang.

“Mario, look, I’m going to have my dad sign my test and you should do the same. Tell your dad it was a hard test. He’ll understand”

“Understand a zero?!” Mario howled.

After dinner that night, I held my breath, pulled out the test, showed my dad the grade, and asked him to sign it.

My dad adjusted his glasses. “Well, George, you got five out of ten problems correct,” he emphasized the positive. “That’s a good start. Next test see if you can score seven correct, then eight, until you finally ace the tests.” He signed the test. Boy, was I relieved! I got off easy, but I wondered how Mario fared.

The next day Mrs. Little directed us to take out our signed tests. She strolled up and down the aisles, scrutinizing each signature as she collected the tests. She gave my dad’s signature an extra look. Then she glanced across the aisle to Mario’s test. “Where is your parent’s signature?” she thundered.

Suddenly, Mario had a complete meltdown. “Mrs. Little,” he blubbered, “my dad would be so disappointed if he saw this test. He never had an education and expects good grades. I thought of signing his name, but that would be dishonest. Plus, I don’t want to go to jail. Please, Mrs. Little, I’ll do anything...anything!”

Mrs. Little quickly reacted with a box of tissues and some comforting words. “Mario, I have a gift for you for being so honest. Stay after school today to receive it.”

I was dying to find out what the gift was. I waited outside school until 4:20 when Mario finally appeared.

“What took so long?” I complained.

“Mrs. Little tutored me in percents and let me retake the test.”

“What was her gift?” I asked.

“A second chance,” he replied, smiling. He displayed the new test’s 100% grade. “I keep the 100% if I get the paper signed and returned by six o’clock. Mrs. Little said she’d wait for me.”

Mr. Azzanati signed Mario’s test and drove him back to school. The two raced into the building together, just making the six o’clock deadline.

“Here’s my signed test, Mrs. Little,” an out-of-breath Mario panted, waving it high above his head like a flag.

“My son’s pretty good with numbers, don’t you think?” Mr. Azzanati bragged.

“Certainly is,” Mrs. Little agreed, as she winked at Mario.

I lost touch with Mario after high school, but I heard he graduated college, law school, and became a judge in the inner city. I also heard that first offenders hoped to be arraigned in the Honorable Mario Azzanati’s courtroom because he had a reputation for giving second chances. Game-changing, life-changing, second chances.

Bio- George M. Flynn is a freelance writer and a retired English teacher. His stories have appeared in many magazines and books, including *Organic Gardening*, *Greenprints*, *Birds & Blooms*, *Vermont Ink*, *Catholic Forester*, and four different *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books, the latest being *The Wisdom of Dads*. George and his wife, Carole, live way out in the country, near Newton, NJ.

The Silver Service

By Carol Smallwood

The sterling coffee and teapots, creamer and sugar on a footed tray whispered cucumber sandwiches, lemon slices in steaming tea, white linen, and muted conversation in a library with leather covered books to the ceiling with a marble fireplace.

It was when the kids were in high school I first saw it in a Ross-Simons catalog sent by some fluke when buying doughnuts as a divorced mother was an extravagance. I kept the catalog open to the page when I walked by to devour the curve of its handles, the way the tray's feet were as discrete as a lady listening to *Tales from the Vienna Woods* in a gown of pink tulle, so pale it was almost the white of pearls matching her satin shoes- magnolias in one hand, tasseled dance card in the other. My figure was as graceful as the curves of the silver, my chignon as thick as the heavy scrolls, feet oval, slim, as those holding the oval tray. Each time I passed the picture it became more a part of me till I knew where my reflection would appear, the sound the sugar lid would make. The tall coffee and shorter teapots faced each other like a couple in conversation, the sugar and creamer at their feet. The shorter teapot had a matronly bulge. The hum of conversation, the polite world, became quite real- a world where I belonged.

It was after the kids graduated that I bought the set as an heirloom. They could tell their children it was mine and my grandchildren would connect me with that world. I'd taken a long time to own it.

The set arrived and I waited a few days in anticipation to make a ceremony of it on Sunday. It was heavier than I imagined and where to put it?

It was a pleasure to own but somehow it didn't look as elegant as in the catalog but when I was in another house it would. A silver polish was ordered that was a natural cleaner- a cow with a bell had fallen in a bog and when it came out its bell was shiny and so it was the beginning of the silver cleaner company. I found it had to be cleaned often to keep its gleam.

People did admire it. It had a solid feel, something to enjoy and something I could pass on.

The years passed, the kids married and it was time to move. I'd given it to one of them when they got their own house but after their children came they gave it back. It rattles when I walk by in my new stick built house- what the realtor called a house made in a factory and then constructed on site. Perhaps one of the grandchildren will want it; but until then, it is a solid delight.

Bio- Carol Smallwood co-edited *Women on Poetry: Writing, Revising, Publishing and Teaching* (McFarland, 2012) on the list of "Best Books for Writers" by *Poets & Writers Magazine*; *Women Writing on Family: Tips on Writing, Teaching and Publishing* (Key Publishing House, 2012); *Compartments: Poems on Nature, Femininity, and Other Realms* (Anaphora Literary Press, 2011) received a Pushcart nomination. Carol has founded, supports humane societies.

Severed Roots

By Chanel Brenner

"It's just his baby teeth. He was going to lose them anyway," my mother-in-law says as we walk across the parking lot from the dentist's office to my car. I am holding Riley's hand. He is three years old and yes, he would lose his baby teeth, but not for another three or four years. It is a loss I am not yet ready to bear.

My arm is being yanked down and pulled in the opposite direction as we navigate through parked and moving cars. I am looking forward to the age when he will hold my hand voluntarily and walk with me instead of against me. The afternoon sun is piercing through my black shirt. "It's almost Halloween," Riley has been saying since the end of August when they first started putting Halloween decorations in the stores. But now, it really is almost Halloween. Next week. He has already been wearing his fireman costume for weeks. We have taken many pictures of his smile, with his two front teeth intact.

I am in shock and the dentist's words are engraved in my brain, "The roots are completely severed in both of his front teeth. He will lose them both sooner rather than later."

I want to go back in time. Take it all back. If I just hadn't been playing tickle mommy with him. If I just hadn't been pretending to chase him. If I just hadn't put the hooded giraffe towel on him. It was hard to believe that this could happen from a fall on the rug in our bedroom. The lump in my throat begins to loosen its grip, and I feel my tear ducts letting loose.

"I don't know why you're so upset about this. It's not the end of the world. They're not his permanent teeth," my mother-in-law says. She is wearing silver sandals and her toenails are painted pink. She has told me, more than once, that she wants a facelift and would get one if she could afford it. Sometimes she puts her hands on her face and pulls back the loose skin for photographs. She has three grown children.

I take my cell phone out of my purse and dial Lee's number. "The dentist says he is going to lose both of them," I say, as I feel the first tear sliding down my right cheek.

"What? How?" my husband asks with the appropriate level of shock.

"The roots are completely severed. He will lose them both sooner, rather than later," I say, repeating the dentist's fated words.

Three weeks later, I find out I am pregnant. I am standing in our master bathroom, staring at the two precarious pink lines in disbelief. "What Mommy? What?" Riley asks. I realized I had let the words, "holy shit," slip out of my mouth.

"I'm pregnant," I say.

"What, Mommy? What did you say?"

"I have a baby in my tummy."

"Yay! Woo hoo!" Riley says, while jumping up and down.

I look at my son with his two temporary front teeth and then back at the two pink lines, feeling a new sense of balance, the imminent loss of those two sacred baby teeth diminishing in its power and fury.

His first tooth fell out the next month while he was at school. He brought it

home in his pocket and we put it under his pillow that night for the tooth fairy. He came running into our bedroom with his one-dollar bill, "Look at what the tooth fairy gave me!" The second one, he swallowed with a hunk of cheddar cheese. He cried when he saw the blood. We put a note under his pillow that he dictated, "Dear tooth fairy, I swallowed my tooth with cheese. Can I still please have some money?"

It didn't take long for us to get used to his trademark toothless smile. Eventually the idea of teeth in the space seemed unnatural and the wait for the permanent teeth didn't seem quite so long.

The first one came in when Riley was six and a half years old, about a year earlier than normal. I discovered it while I was helping him brush his teeth one night. Its white jagged edges poking out like a treasure waiting to be discovered. I watched it grow, over the next week, trying to imagine what he would look like with front teeth again.

The last night I brushed it, was the night Riley died. It was about a third of the way out. Teasing me with its presence. We were so close, I could almost see it.

Bio- Chanel Brenner is a writer living in Los Angeles with her husband and their four-year-old son. She studies method writing with poet Jack Grapes and is a member of his Writers and Poets Collective.

Her work has been published in *Cultural Weekly*, *Forge*, *L.K. Thayer's Poetry Juice Bar*, *The Coachella Review* and *Memoirs Ink*.

She has written a collection of poems and essays about the death of her six-year-old son, Riley, called *The Christmas Boy Will Not Disappear*.

She won a nationwide contest for her poem "What Would Wislawa Szymborska Do?" and, as a result, it was displayed at the James Whitcomb Riley museum in Indianapolis, Indiana.

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