

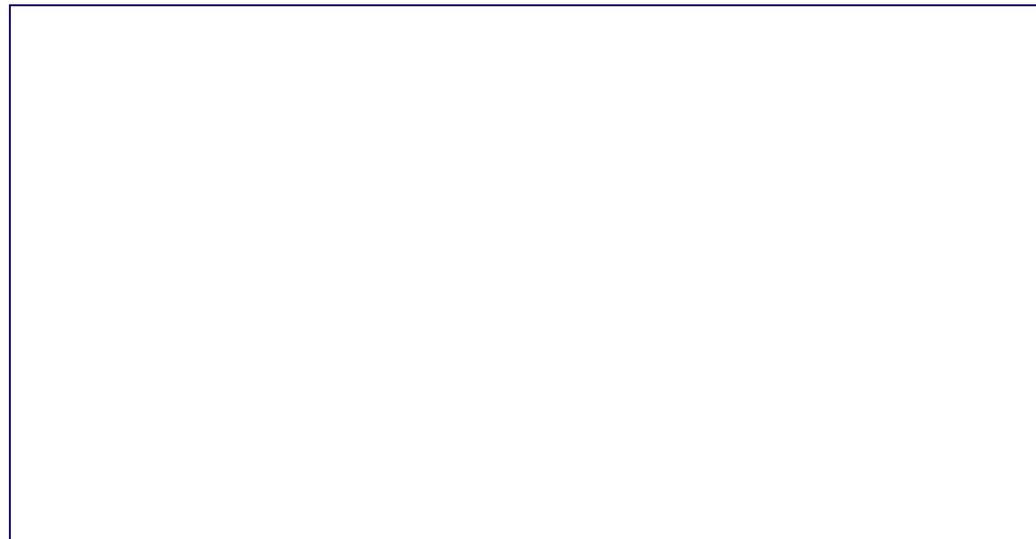
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"Our Stories"

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.





"Winter Bog" by Jan Collins Selman; <https://jancollinsselman.com/home.html>

About this image: *The bog is a favorite subject of mine because it's constantly in change, even in winter. In the winter the flooded bogs freeze over to protect the cranberry plants. In spring the water is removed and the berries grow. Contrary to what some folks think, when the bogs are green (and they look like a field of weeds) is when they are laden with berries.* —Jan Collins Selman

Our Stories non-fiction

With gratitude, we dedicate this page to 2017 WPWT Arts Patron, Michael Tidemann. Michael writes from Estherville, Iowa. His author page is [amazon.com/author/michaeltidemann](https://www.amazon.com/author/michaeltidemann).

Unclaimed

by Toti O'Brien

When the ambulance picked up my son at the skate park I did not hear the sirens, of course. I was miles away.

Full blast, they must have deafened a few pedestrians, sent a chill down the spine of the most sensitive. Cars must have pulled on the side and waited for the ambulance to go by, while inside—my son later said—a paramedic stuffed him with the maximum dose of morphine. They brought him to the nearest hospital. A message was left on my cell. Concise and essential, devoid of superfluous detail. Something to the effect of: “You should go join your son at the Emergency Room, Madam.” Stuck in traffic, frantic, confused, and quite desperate, I played back the recording, trying to make sense of its telegraphic contents. I should have noticed neither the word “corpse” nor “morgue” had been used. I didn't.

In the following days, the siren thing haunted my brain. The idea was disturbing...of that call for help gone to waste, sound waves aimlessly dispersed in thin air, spreading havoc where it wasn't needed. Since the boy's first day of preschool, every siren I heard had made my ears bleed. Every one spelled my name, and said: “Run, Mom! Run!” But I missed the only one meant for me.

Surgery lasted a large chunk of the night. The anesthesia wore off in the morning. Pain surged rapidly and didn't let my son sleep. I didn't either. When fatigue was about to win, and we both thought we could nap, they discharged him. I raced to the pharmacy to fill his prescriptions—it took time, and so did bureaucracy, but we finally made it home.

After a couple of hours, though, my son said his pain had become intolerable. I was at his bedside—I saw him shiver and sweat, clench his teeth, bite his lips, get paler and paler. While I can't guess his thoughts, feelings, or intentions, I can read my son's body language, no doubt. I was on the verge of exhaustion, but I would have carried him on my back if needed. I knew something was absolutely wrong.

We returned to the Emergency Room at midnight. My son's face looked

grey. He tried not to cry—a matter of dignity, or just weariness. But he sighed: “I can’t stand it, Mom, please do something. I can’t stand it.” I had seen him ill many times. I had seen him fractured or wounded, many, many times. All the way from the crib, through teenage years, to the sill of adulthood. I knew how he reacted to pain. I knew he was strong. I had never seen him like this.

I had also heard or directly witnessed stuff happening. A well-known orthopedic surgeon was sued for operating on a patient’s wrong side (the non-injured one). Another, equally famous, left a scalpel into a patient’s ribcage. I had known of many cases of death because of post-surgery infections. And, of course, I had heard of wrong casts blocking blood circulation, pressing on nerves. I was worried, but the worst was witnessing my son’s hurt morphing into despair, and my being helpless.

It took from midnight till six in the morning for the doctor in charge to intervene. A nurse, on the chatty side, came in sooner and said: “It’s the cast! We will cut it open and you will feel better, I promise!” But her sympathy rapidly faded. She must have been distracted. She had mentioned a shot of morphine she never administered. Maybe she had been too enthusiastic. Maybe it wasn’t up to her to decide.

The ward was very quiet—just a couple of patients, each curtained in his room. Nurse and doctor leisurely strolled in and out, disappeared into thin air, or sat for hours in the corridor, languorously typing on their desktops.

Yes, I know there are rules about pain. Many patients exaggerate it or fake it, seeking attention. If they get too demanding, letting them marinate is the policy. I could guess the motive behind the doctor’s and nurse’s detached attitude. Only, in this case they were wrong. Since they weren’t busy otherwise, more prompt care would have been appropriate. But they took it easy.

Son, forgive me... The worst was the helplessness. Knowing he was under torture, and being stuck. He asked me to seek help when fits stabbed him more sharply. I complied, being aware each request for assistance would simply irritate the staff, turning to our disadvantage. He understood it as well, changed his mind, begged me to be quiet and stay put. Then he begged for help once again. His moods kept excruciatingly switching. I hoped the pain itself would wear him out enough to cause him to doze, but it didn’t

happen.

When, hours later, they opened the cast, the mess was impressive. Ridges of plaster had scorched the wound, blood was copiously flowing, tissues swollen and bruised. The doc said the painkillers weren't properly working. Doses had to be adjusted, and a new cast made. It all could have occurred six hours earlier.

My son lying on the cot. On the passenger seat, then. Swamped, he had become a frail bundle. Something delicate, easily torn, like a paper doll I hadn't been able to protect from rough, inattentive, uncaring hands. I felt his exhaustion. It was mine.

His pain wasn't, alas.

Back at home I helped him to bed, gave him water, set alarms to make sure I'd deliver painkillers on time. I helped him find a posture he could stand for a little while. Then I staggered towards the sofa in the adjacent living room. Daylight came in through the curtains I had pulled on arrival, seeking some kind of penumbra. Tiredness must have blinded me, though, because I hit the coffee table full force. The iron frame left a notch in my shin.

Something briskly loosened in my chest. All the torture of the previous hours blew out—a sort of hemorrhagic release. The pang in my muscle and bone was sudden and sharp. A good hammer-like shock on your shin makes you see the stars. The pain was concentrated, intense, then it spread into waves. I knew it was nothing—just a bump. I'd forget it as soon as I would lie down. But it was the pain my son had borne at the umpteenth potency, while I watched him and aimlessly twisted my hands. Now I had gotten a small sample. A token.

The dams broke. My anguish poured out, washed all over me, rippled away. A stone wall crumbling down. I was feeling some of what the boy had felt, and what I had not been able to alleviate. I had been locked out—now the door had slammed open. I could breathe, now. I could sleep, perhaps.

Then I wondered if doctors and nurses should periodically do the same.

Take a needle, discretely poke the back of their hand. A quick sting. Wake up. This is what it's like.

Bio: Toti O'Brien's work has most recently appeared in *Gyroscope*, *The Birds We Piled Loosely*, *Indicia*, and *Wordland*.

Sorority

by Lois Greene Stone

Rush week. Rush, to me, once was the caning of seats in a trolley car. Rush meant in-a-hurry. As an undergrad, it concerned sororities.

That time span, that was later defined as the "Happy Days" generation, was post-World War II and the then-ongoing Korean War. It was commonplace to "rush" as these organizations would allow members to be with other girls of the same religion and present an opportunity to mingle with fraternity males also of the same denomination.

I attended the party of the two possible places that I could join, and found the first friendly, but full of forced-smiles and a promotional atmosphere that spoke of why it was better than its competitor. I then went to the next and the members seemed to come from a cookie-cutter which had replicated one individual as they were a blurred group of co-eds with the same hairstyle, pleated skirts that appeared to be an unofficial uniform, and facial makeup to cover post-adolescent acne. Then I was quite literally told that if I pledged, I was not to then, nor ever, date men who were not in its brother fraternity.

With never any more make up than a pale pink lipstick and straight natural blonde hair that required me sleeping in metal rollers (before hair dryers or curling irons) but was never sprayed or "perfect," my preferring wind to blow it and rain to moisten it, the second place was no option. My philosophy was inclusion; sororities seemed to say exclusion.

I did not sign up to potentially be considered a member of either. On the day the "results" came out, there were girls in my dorm literally sobbing about rejection. What was wrong about an acceptance that didn't come? It wasn't about the individual, but the distraught dorm-mates could not see

that. We, in the dorm, were mixed religions and races; we were fine together. Yet the word “sorority” seemed to be very important to many.

At a dorm meeting, I proposed that we initiate our own non-sectarian, interracial unit, and ask the school to support our idea and give us housing. Such a concept had never been realized. The university approved. We also agreed that there would be no pledging, no excluding someone by a negative vote (then called the blackball system), and any female who agreed to live with kindness and consideration with women of any religion and race would be a member; that she must agree upon before moving into the dorm. Since we couldn't fill the space for 66 co-eds, the university housed independent women with us and many became members and wore the sorority pin. Others who were uncomfortable with our premise, say being given a roommate of a different skin color for example, moved out as soon as was possible.

I hand-typed individual letters to colleges and universities across the nation; there were no computers or printers or any duplication machines except for mimeographs. I proclaimed our values with the key strokes on a Remington Rand typewriter, before electric typewriters made touching keys easier, and I naively believed this group would become a recognized national organization. I received letters from southern schools that were hateful. At my northern New England university, I had no idea that the South at that time differed regarding religious or racial tolerance. This was before integration. Other mail came back to me with "no" and statements about how the idea was quite awful, and those words surprised me from northern and mid-western places.

My grandfather, a photographer who photographed U.S. Presidents from Taft through Truman, gave me an idea to telephone Eleanor Roosevelt, whom he personally knew, and she allowed my grandfather to give me her personal home phone number. I called her in New York and explained my frustration with “society,” and said maybe if she could take the train to Connecticut and meet us and speak, it might acknowledge why our concept was important. She agreed; I bought her a corsage of her favorite flower, a camellia. There were no bodyguards when she got off the train, and she ate in our dorm's dining room, accepted an honorary pin, and I so expected society would suddenly change.

Of course it didn't. But Mrs. Roosevelt gave us reason to continue with our rebellious-for-the-time sorority house fully integrated in race and religion and we girls became adult women accepting others for their personalities and outlook—not what pews they sat in or whether their skin tones matched. Of course we all didn't get along like some big friendship circle; we were people first, and our likes and dislikes were based on personality clashes or petty jealousies or such, but never on racial or religious differences.

Rush week still happens. And girls will slump in hallways looking at rejection slips and still sob and feel despair. "Sisters" can blackball a potential pledge, and dictate to an initiate. Despite that, there are now dorms of both men and women in the same building, curfews don't exist anymore, dress codes are obsolete, and fraternal organizations are no longer specifically for one religion—at least on paper, as far as I know.

We have improved. Eleanor Roosevelt would be pleased with the 21st century's advancements in technology and humanity. The South began integrating its schools in 1957. In 2008, the country elected a black President who held office for eight years. Our country has gone through numerous progressive movements since the 50s, and society has changed views and legislation for same-sex marriages, transgender bathrooms, and so forth. We are better than the "Happy Days" generation.

I see society the way I see the change in postage stamps. We no longer have to endure the bitter taste of a postage stamp to affix to an envelope but merely press it and it adheres with ease, and the stamps are *forever* so a rate raise doesn't mean extra postage to use. We all make a difference and don't need a bitter taste of life left in our mouths to try and make something stick; with a direct, simple yet solid effort, the newly affixed stamp of belief or support can stay in place, delivering us into new territory. While none of us can live forever, I want my time to still be helping shape values that will endure.

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

The Mountain

by Robert Joe Stout

Near timberline the mountain was very quiet. I found a place in a clearing out of the wind to stretch out and look at the horizon. For a few minutes all I could hear was my heart pounding in my chest from the climb through the thin air and my lungs gasping to bring more oxygen through my system. I was both tired and exhilarated; my body seemed to sink into the ground while my eyes remained open.

Despite being physically exhausted, I felt mentally alert. I could hear the lisp of pine needles rubbing in the wind and the crackle of twigs as some small animal darted through the brush. Stretched-apart clouds striated the sky's thin, blue dome.

The longer I lay there, the more distinct the sounds around me became. What had seemed, at first, to be a peripheral droning separated into hundreds of individual movements and murmurs. No longer could I hear my own breathing, or my heart's receding timpani. The perception that I was part of the mountain—and it was part of me—gradually enveloped me. I could see, and hear, and feel, but I lay as though my senses magically had been transported to some other realm of existence that was greater and more encompassing than the physical body lying exhausted on the slope.

As my awareness expanded I realized that it was not just the mountain I was aware of. Without losing clarity of sight and sound I became aware of images that seemed to move into and through me from the mountain itself. Each time I tried to focus on them, bring them closer, make them more distinct, they seemed to fade away. Realizing that I couldn't force them—they were not mine to judge or control—I let my intuitions open and accept them.

Among them I sensed the presence of my mother, lying tranquilly the last time that I'd seen her, a tiny woman, shriveled by strokes and paralysis, her veined hands resting motionlessly on the sheet that covered her, a distant, relaxed, wistful smile pulling at the corners of her mouth as she'd quietly inhaled and exhaled. And I remembered that, as I had stood in the doorway to her bedroom, I had felt a quiet contentment flood over me, as though she, from somewhere deep in her sleeping being, had been thanking me for being there.

I hadn't known as I'd tuned away that that would be the last time that I would see her alive. She had been old, and frail, and ready to go, and I had been thankful that no longer would she endure more pain. Lying there on the mountainside, filled with the sense that that moment before her death and this moment somehow were connected, I reached out for her. Reached out without moving, for the earth was moving—or it seemed to be—pulsing slowly as I breathed, as though it were breathing and I merely reflected its greater rhythms.

And I sensed a dependence that was a oneness with it, sensed my mother, not as she had been those last years of her life, bent and blind and frail, but as she had been before I had visual memories of her, rocking me and singing to me in her soft musician's voice. And I realized that she and the mountain somehow were linked, as we all are linked back through ourselves to the primordial rhythms of the air, the earth and the sea.

And I slept, I think, for my mind went away, and I awakened hours later, relaxed, refreshed and fulfilled.

Bio: Journalist, poet and onetime theater director, Robert Joe Stout has *Monkey Screams*, a collection of poetry, available from Amazon and FutureCycle Press. He lives in Oaxaca, Mexico where he writes nonfiction for such publications as *New Politics*, *America*, and *The Monthly Review*.

A Friend so Long Ago

by Ginger Peters

Fermin lived with us, seasonally, for the first eight years of my life. He was from Mexico, an illegal immigrant; however, no one I knew called him that in the late 50s and 60s. He was called a "wetback" which, was the crude term used in rural areas of Texas at that time. It didn't matter what anyone called him, he was my friend. A friend so long ago.

I think now that I learned an immeasurable amount of wisdom from him. I learned about racism, equality, and compassion for all human beings, no matter the skin color, no matter the accent, no matter the sexual orientation, and no matter the traditions or religion of a particular person.

Fermin, unknowingly taught me these first lessons of life, that have stayed in my heart and mind for my whole life.

Fermin arrived in the United States after walking across the border to El Paso, TX in the early spring. He walked, he hitched rides, and he even rode a bus now and then if he had the extra money, to get as close to my father's farm as possible. Then, he would call our home collect, from a pay phone, per my dad's instructions, and let us know where he had landed. My dad usually had to drive about a hundred miles to pick him up in some remote little town in Texas. He was tired, his shoes had holes in them, his pants and shirt were worn and frazzled, but he had a smile on his face and was eager to go to work for my father for the next several months.

Once on our farm, my mother would usually cook extra food that night for our supper. Fermin only had one small bag, that carried minimal items he needed. There was no aspirin, no toothbrush, no soap. Just an old shirt, an extra pair of underwear, and a single comb. He stayed in an old, tattered trailer house, behind our nice, new 3 bedroom, 2 bath brick home. He would eat the supper my mother made for him and go to bed.

The next morning, Dad and I would drive him to town to get his groceries for a month. My dad and I usually bought him a new pair of good work boots, a new pair of jeans, a shirt, some good socks, and sometimes a hat, to ward off the scorching west Texas sun in the summer. I was only a little girl, but I would stand up in the seat of our 1962 green Chevrolet Pickup and ride over 20 miles to town. My dad was driving of course, but the entire time Fermin would have his left arm stretched out in front of me, ready to block me from falling head first into the dashboard of the pickup, from a sudden stop or large bump in the road, as so many children did back then, because seat belts were not the "in-thing." Just that one act taught me that Fermin loved me and didn't want me to get hurt. I wasn't his child and I wasn't his responsibility. I was not part of his job description.

His job description was to help my dad on the farm, by working 8-12 hour days preparing the land for the new cotton crop that would be planted. It had to be watered by hand-moved pipe, plowed, and hoed. We had cows and horses, and dad would turn the feeding and tending of all the animals over to Fermin. The summers in west Texas were hot, 106 degree days were not uncommon throughout the season, and tornados and thunderstorms were prevalent in the late spring and early summer months.

My favorite part of the day was early mornings. I would get up, probably around six o'clock, and head outside to Fermin's small mobile home. He mixed up the ingredients—mostly lard, water, cornmeal, and salt—from scratch and had a little gas stove. He would form the tortilla by hand and flip it over the open flames of the stove until it was done. He would lift me up and sit me on the counter, which was about six inches wide, and butter the hot tortilla before handing it to me to eat. It was the most delicious food I ever remember tasting, except for maybe chocolate cake. He would laugh at how fast I would eat it and be ready for corn tortilla number two.

Many times I would look out the back door of our home and see Fermin out trimming the horses' hooves and I would just take off out the back door and run barefoot across the old rough, sandy ground. Of course, this didn't work well at all. For one thing, the ground was hot, because it was summer, but the other big thing, was the number of goat heads and stickers that were mingled in the dirt that I didn't see. They would stick in my small feet and I would suddenly freeze and not move. I wasn't much of a crier, but I would yell and Fermin would look up from under the horse. He knew instantly I was in trouble. He would run from the corrals and pick me up. He would sit me on top of one of the hay bales or the wooden fence posts and pick all the stickers out of my tiny feet, the whole time, saying, "Gingerly, Gingerly, you must not forget your shoes before running outside. Stickers are everywhere."

I heard him, but I remember it happening many times a week, so I must not have been that good of a listener or that quick of a learner. But, it didn't matter, because Fermin took care of it no matter how many times a day I got those stickers in my bare feet.

One time I was sitting on the wooden post of the fence and acting silly while Fermin watered and fed the livestock. I was trying to pet the cows, rocking back and forth on this very small base of a post. I fell of course, and the top of my leg caught the barbed-wire fencing and ripped my leg open all the way down. Fermin, knowing that was a rusty old wire, picked me up and ran me all the way to the house. Mom knew I had to get a tetanus shot, so Fermin, unable to drive in the United States, held me all the way with a rag over the bleeding wound, while my mom drove to town to the doctor's office. He didn't like doctors much; matter-of-fact, he seemed kind of scared of doctors, so, he sat in the car while my mom carried me in the doctor's office. They patched me up with a clean wound and a shot to avoid

infection. I still have part of that scar today, and every single time I see it, while dressing or putting on lotion, I smile and think of Fermin.

Several days out of the summer the border patrol helicopters would periodically fly over our place and other area farmers. My parents knew what this meant. Soon, white vans with cages in the back of them would be driving up to our house and the other houses, to see if they could find the illegals working for them. It was against the law at that time to have illegal immigrants working for you without a green card or visa and if they caught someone, that farmer would lose their cheap labor. As soon as Mom or Dad would hear the helicopters, they would get Fermin out of the field as quickly as possible. Mom would drive Fermin to the house and hide him in the cupboards of the kitchen or utility room, and sometimes under the beds. The border patrol would come in and look around, and my mom would just outright lie and say we had no “wetbacks” working for us. They would leave, looking rather suspiciously at us, but they would disappear, and Fermin would stay in our house the rest of the day, just in case. He would eat with us and finally, after dark, he would go back to his trailer house to sleep.

Fermin had his own wife and children back in Mexico. That is why he came to America, for a better opportunity to provide for his family. Plus, the farmers wanted all “Fermin’s” to come to America. They were able to get dedicated, hard workers. Some of the farmers actually treated the illegals very poorly. I was lucky in that my father did treat Fermin like a human being and even fairly respected him. I learned then, we are all human beings. I believe that the people coming here now as they did then, are seeking to not only improve their own lives, but to help improve their children’s lives. I think they are coming here because we are still calling to them, seeing the ways in which they add to, rather than diminish, our country. Fermin could be dead by now or still alive in Mexico. He would be about 83 years old. He braved all the elements to come to the United States of America every single year, so that he might make a better life for himself and his family.

I will never forget this friend so long ago. I didn’t care what ethnicity he was. I loved him because he was a good, hard-working individual that cared about us and about his own family so far away. That was all that counted.

Bio: Ginger Peters is a freelance poet and writer living in Santa Fe, NM. She has sold poetry and non-fiction to a variety of magazines over the past twenty-five years. She enjoys family, friends, walking, yoga, and is a member of the Thubten Norbu Ling Buddhist

Center in Santa Fe. She tries to live by the philosophy of loving kindness, compassion, and growing in wisdom.

Editor's Note: Piece originally published three years ago in the winter-spring 2014 issue. There are some terms in the story used in the context of the time it portrays to connote race; it also examines issues of gender equality. The story is about coming of age, coming together, finding common ground and the necessary progress and change that took place to pave the way for a better future.

The Upside-Down Year

by Anita Solick Oswald

Was it me? Or was it everybody else? At twelve going on thirteen, I wrestled to understand myself and the changes that were going on around me. *Mad Magazine* had proclaimed it so and 1961 definitely felt like an upside-down year to me.

The year started out very well for me when Jack Kennedy was inaugurated. My younger sister Barbara and I volunteered with Kennedy's election campaign and I watched the young President take his oath of office. I was personally excited by the prospect of transformation and his words as he called the nation to service in his inaugural address.

But my euphoria was short-lived. Daily, the *Chicago Tribune* headlines shouted the news of a world in tumult. The United States severed relations with Cuba, Patrice Lumumba was assassinated, and the Bay of Pigs was a failure. The Cold War raged and plans on how to build a bomb shelter were published in the paper. There were air raid drills. I examined the map that the *Trib* published detailing the devastation if an A bomb were dropped on Chicago and made a plan. Unable to tolerate a blanket when I slept, I knew I would not like to be trapped under a pile of bricks in the restaurant basement. I read books about the devastation after Nagasaki and Hiroshima and I knew what I must do. I secretly plotted to run in the street if the air raid was real and become a shadow on the sidewalk.

While 1961 offered some glimmers of hope, like Kennedy's establishment of the Peace Corps, every day brought ominous news that frightened or disturbed me. I worried about whether I would live to be eighteen. It seemed a long way off.

In my small corner of the universe at Madison and Keeler, the world was changing, too. My neighborhood had been in transition all through the 1950s, and, for the first time, Black and Puerto Rican families settled in our neighborhood and integrated our school. The topic of conversation with the adults always seemed to turn to integration, property values and fears that the neighborhood would turn into a slum. Adults used phrases like “the colored” or worse when they talked about my classmates and friends and their families.

It was an awkward time for me and no one noticed it more painfully than I did. I was younger than the rest of my classmates, prepubescent, but precocious. While some kids who had not yet entered the chaos of adolescence played on, unaware of the pain and ecstasy that awaited them, I had a mature head on a small body, and, saw it all ahead of me. I read voraciously—maybe that was my problem. I’d read all the new releases Dad brought home from Bantam Books for me. I made short work of *Franny and Zooey* and decided I would eat nothing but cheeseburgers and Cokes. *The Carpetbaggers* held no interest for me; it was too long to sustain my attention, even if it was a potboiler with steamy passages. My curiosity about sex could not be satiated by steamy best-sellers but I was too young and gawky to experiment.

When I looked around me I saw my friends becoming young women. But I still saw a skinny child in the mirror, with too short hair. I wanted to look like Audrey Hepburn, but with that cowlick I thought I resembled Alfalfa.

It was still warm and brilliantly sunny that first day of school in September 1961. The leaves had not yet started to turn, but I felt that crispness in the wind that whispered of fall soon to come. In eighth grade students were to prepare for high school and that meant a new uniform. I was grateful that hot day to trade in the old blue serge jumper, shiny from wear, for a blue skirt and white blouse.

I surveyed myself in the mirror of the dresser I shared with Barbara. The reflection had its drawbacks. I was so skinny that the uniform blouse collar gaped around my neck. The red nylon scarf, branding me as an eighth grader, hung loosely under the collar, like a yoke around an emaciated horse. I tried to tie the scarf tighter to take up the slack, but the collar bunched up. The Elizabethan look was not going to be acceptable to the nuns, so I left the collar and scarf slack.

I thought I looked like I was wearing someone else's clothes. I smiled. My eyes and teeth looked to me to be too big for my long face. The short cut of my dark brown hair seemed to exaggerate this effect. Most aggravating to me was the cowlick that kept my thick bangs from staying flat on my brow. No matter what I did the night before to try and calm the beast—tape, hair spray, and Dippity Do smeared like wallpaper paste on my forehead—the infuriating cowlick always won the battle. Dismayed, I decided to give up and head to school.

The first week of school was lost in a lot of administrative officialdom. Announcements from the principal, Sister Veronica Ann, rang out over the public address system. Eighth graders were given a homeroom teacher and would rotate classes with assigned groups for English, Math, Science, and History. This new arrangement was supposed to prepare us for the high school environment.

My homeroom teacher was Sister Bernard—a tall thin, tomboyish young woman who wore wire-rimmed glasses. Enthusiastic and athletic, she would need every ounce of energy she could muster that year with a homeroom of 62 boys and three girls. The nun thrived on challenge and had a special place in her heart for the students who struggled most with their studies. One of the vanguard—a new breed of nuns, socially committed, working in depressed communities—more confidante than disciplinarian, she encouraged her students to think and to ask questions. I had a million of them.

Sister Bernard liked to get the children involved. The first day of class she ticked off a list of volunteer opportunities, and a reward system for participation.

“Class, I'd like your attention. There are many areas where St. Mel's and the community need your help. I'll have a signup sheet at the front of the room and you can earn merits for your participation.”

My ears pricked up. I expected to rack up a few demerits that year and thought I would hedge my bets and avoid detention by signing up for as many activities as possible. Besides, I enjoyed volunteering and the notion of me, a young girl, being able to make a difference really appealed to me.

After school, Mary Lennon, Ray Gerardi and Michael Gaffney walked home via Monroe Street. Mary and I had become friendly with the two boys, who

were seminary-bound after eighth grade, when we walked the same route after school. They both had a vocation, which made them seem sort of neutral to adolescent girls and worthy of our confidence. We'd stroll home after class, gossiping and complaining about friends, schoolmates, and classes.

"Are you going to the sock hop they announced at school today?" Mary asked the two boys.

Ray piped up, "Why not?"

"Well I thought maybe since you are going to be a priest..."

"Hey, I am only thirteen, I'm not dead yet!"

We all laughed; at thirteen, death, like being eighteen, seemed a long way off.

Once back in my apartment on Madison Street, I gave Mom the rundown on the day's events.

Her eyes lit up when I mentioned the sock hop. Mom loved dancing and fancied herself a great dancer. I had to admit she was pretty good.

She leapt up from the kitchen chair and announced, "I'm going to teach you the latest dance. All the jet setters are doing it. It's called the Twist."

Barb and I groaned and rolled our eyes. The Twist was last year's fad. If Mom was doing it, we knew it was really passé.

"Mom, nooo. No one does that dance anymore. Only old people."

"No, you girls are wrong. Frank Sinatra and the jet setters do it, and Andy Williams does it. I saw it on TV. Look, watch me. Here is how you do it. Round and round and up and down." Mom gyrated in her housecoat demonstrating her best moves.

"Mom, exactly. Frank Sinatra is old."

"Girls, the bobby soxers all loved Frank when I was in high school. I climbed out a window of Providence High School to go see him. The girls all swooned over him."

“Mom, yeah, we know. That was a long time ago.”

Mom was then thirty-seven.

To further my righteous pre-teen chagrin, the news delivered by Sister Bernard that week dealt an unexpected blow.

“Can’t you find some other mom?”

“Anita, your mother said she wanted to help and this is where we have the greatest need. We need an English tutor for the Spanish-speaking children.”

The Lives of the Saints and a bloody martyrdom for the nun flashed through my mind, when, over my strenuous objections, she asked my mother to volunteer tutoring the new students from Puerto Rico in English.

“Sister Bernard, how could you?” She should die like Saint Agnes; I’ll yank out her ribs myself. I groaned. A budding adolescent, I was fiercely protective of my privacy. I had little enough of it as it was living with three younger siblings and only one block from school. I did not want my mother hanging around all day, spying on me. I wanted the classroom to be my separate place, away from parental expectations. But Sister Bernard had a nose for another do-gooder like herself and soon, although she did not speak Spanish, Mom was installed in the cloakroom, tutoring the kids several times a week.

She connected with the kids, especially the boy. He loved baseball and so did Mom. Using comic books and baseball magazines she purchased herself, Mom proved an able tutor, and soon the kids were speaking their first English phrases. An advocate for higher education, she pushed them to think about high school and college, and helped one of the girls, who had been destined for a young marriage, to secure a scholarship to Providence High School, Mom’s alma mater.

By nature I was a child who questioned authority and I began to feel even more skeptical about the status quo. When the orientation for Sacristy custodians was announced, I was interested. At last I would have a look at the inner sanctum behind the altar where the priest donned his vestments and prepared for the Holy Sacrament of Mass. Girls could not serve at Mass; there were only altar boys then. I imagined being initiated into

ancient secret rituals. As it turned out, there were no secret rituals and no custody of precious relics. Sister Petronella told us we would be allowed access to clean, dust, vacuum, and wash the floors, and this was a great honor. She began to show us around the ante room, but I interrupted.

The young feminist in me was outraged. I sputtered, “Why? I don’t even do this at home. You mean you want us to be maids?”

Truth was, Mom didn’t like housework or anything to do with homemaking and she had taught me well. We argued over my doing chores around the house and I was usually derelict in my duties. I’d had many a screaming fight with Mom about housework. I wasn’t about to sign on for more. Why didn’t they have boys cleaning up after themselves? And I didn’t know those priests smoked cigarettes!

Sister shushed me with just a look and I said nothing more. When we left the chapel, I announced to my friends that I was not a cleaning lady and wouldn’t be going back. I told them I thought it was unfair. In my mind, I questioned the nun’s role and wondered how she felt about being assigned clean-up duty.

Until then, I thought of the nuns as authority figures in the Church who had a good life. They ruled the school with iron hands. Even as a small girl, I could see the priests had a lot more freedom and perks, riding around in Cadillacs, getting free meals at all the restaurants, ski vacations and boats at their disposal and questioned the disparity. But Mom said the nuns had it made—many came from large, poor, Catholic families and would never have had the money to go to college. In exchange for a life of service, they got an education and meals and lodging for free. They never paid for anything. They were taken care of for life.

Now—I could not imagine teaching a bunch of bratty kids all day, but I thought Mom had a point. And Mom was not big on marriage and family. In fact, she never said anything to us about getting married and having children. She talked about where we would go to college and our careers, but never marriage. I grew up thinking the convent wasn’t such a bad deal, but now I had my doubts. What kind of an honor was it to clean up after a bunch of sloppy men and some boys? I felt it appropriate to storm out of the sacristy and tell my friends I would never be back for more.

Planning for the dance interested me more, although I had already determined I would not be sticking around for the clean-up committee. I decided I would help organize the committees and volunteered to recruit the volunteers. I pictured myself as more of an executive type anyway. I drafted a list of committees and posted a handwritten sign-up sheet with a brief description of responsibilities at the front of the room.

Copping a line from my President, JFK, I made a pitch to my homeroom, urging the students to give back to the school and to ask their parents to participate as chaperones. I asked for five people to sign up for each committee. Sister Bernard added an incentive by promising 10 merits for anyone who signed up, so I got plenty of volunteers.

At that moment, a tall figure in sun glasses swaggered into our homeroom, snapping his fingers. “Duke, Duke, Duke, Duke of Earl, Duke, Duke, Duke of Earl...” John “The Duke of Earl” Lee heralded his arrival every day with a serenade for Room 21. The class broke into laughter and applause, as Sister Bernard put a halt to his signature song with, “Mr. Lee, take off those sunglasses and take your seat.”

Block by block, our neighborhood was becoming integrated. The Civil Rights movement was the national topic of conversation and our neighborhood was no exception. And while parents may have seethed about integration and its impact, their children were more accepting.

John Earl Lee was one of three black students—one boy and two girls—that joined my homeroom that year. Towering over the rest of the students, John Earl Lee immediately established his reputation as King of the Cool, the classroom comic, and a favorite of teachers and students alike. His knack for impersonations cracked us up. Instantly popular, he hung out with the hip kids, the kids who barely acknowledged my existence. By contrast, the two girls, Anne and Rhonda were serious types who excelled at their studies, and they fit right in too, making friends with the other “smart” kids.

Barbara’s class, two years behind mine, welcomed many more minority students, mostly black and biracial students. All Baptists, they were excused from religion class unless they exhibited an interest. Instead, they went to breakout classes. I fantasized about what they were doing. After nine years of study, memorizing catechism was not my favorite subject. St. Mel’s

Church, hoping to rope in some converts, would sweeten the deal for non-Catholics and offer a discount on tuition if the families attended Sunday Mass where the priests would peddle salvation. Amazingly, many families took advantage of the offer, attending both Mass and the Baptist services on Sundays.

Barb became good friends with most of the black girls when they all tried out for cheerleading. Barb's new friends had attended public school before coming to St. Mel's and they knew all the latest cheers. She was so tiny and athletic that she was instantly selected for the squad. Because of her size, she was the perfect choice to top the human pyramid—so easy to hold her up! The black girls befriended my sometimes shy little sister, taught her all the hot routines, and elected her captain of the team. Barb was blossoming and developing her own circle of pals.

And, while adults fretted about declining property values, blockbusters, and the impact of integration on their neighborhood, the kids were indifferent to their fears. All we could think about was the big dance.

I knew Mom would let me buy a new outfit to wear. I had my eye on a pleated skirt and a mohair sweater in the showcase in front of Madigan's Department Store and I was sure I could persuade her to buy it for me. Or maybe Gram and Gramps would get it for me. I thought the bulky mohair sweater would make me look less skinny.

The sock hop committees were meeting after school several times a week and would report back to the Executive Committee. Plans were going well, I thought, and I hung around after school one day to fill Sister Bernard in on our progress. Very officious, I'd prepared a report on the little Remington portable typewriter my parents had given me for a Christmas present the year before.

Sister Bernard listened to my report, but she seemed more distracted than usual. "Ah, Anita, I wanted to let you know that we will be having some guests at the sock hop."

"Oh really, who, Sister? Bishop Hillinger? The Cardinal?"

"No, no, nobody like that. We are going to have some students from neighboring schools attending the dance."

“You mean the kids from Tilton? Sister, we are going to need a lot more chairs and refreshments.”

“No, not exactly. Well, some of the guests attend Tilton, but there won’t be that many. We’ve told the Negro students that they may bring guests to the sock hop. They will be bringing friends from other schools.”

“OK, well, can anyone bring a friend? Because I need to know what the headcount will be.”

She hesitated, “No, only the Negro students will be bringing friends.”

“I don’t understand.” I thought maybe this was another thinly disguised effort to recruit Catholics, but Sister Bernard set me straight.

“We told the Negro students they could bring friends, because we were concerned that no one would dance with them.”

“Now I really don’t get it.”

They are the best dancers in the school, I thought. They know all the new dances. Why wouldn’t people want to dance with them? “I know why they don’t want to dance with me. I am not a good dancer, I have big feet, and I am a brain. But why not them?”

Sister Bernard sighed and explained, “Because they are Negroes.”

“Sister, I don’t think so. Those kids know the latest dances from their old school. They’ve been showing us in the playground. You are wrong.”

“Well, the decision has been made, so add three more to your count of attendees.”

After school, when I told Mom about my conversation with Sister Bernard, she brushed it off with, “Some parents must have complained to the school. They’d throw a fit if they found out their kid was dancing with a colored kid.”

Then she told me something she’d never mentioned before.

“You know, when I was young, most of the men were at war, but Negroes weren’t yet allowed to serve in the military. The men registered but they

were passed over by the Selective Service Boards. All our boyfriends had shipped overseas, and, well you know how I love to dance. So we girls would head to the south side clubs to go jitterbugging. These clubs were all owned by colored people. They had the best music and dancers. Sometimes, some big stars even showed up, like Billie Holiday or Lena Horne. The Negro men came dressed to the nines; lots of them wore zoot suits. They'd ask the white girls to dance, especially me because I was the best, and we'd jitterbug until the wee hours. There were some great dancers there; I picked up a lot of new steps. But we couldn't tell anyone and they could never come to the white clubs. It was taboo. If anyone had found out we would have been in trouble. And the guys risked getting beat up or worse by dancing with us."

"What? Doesn't seem very fair. If someone wants to dance."

"You don't understand. Men were fighting and dying to make the world safe. There was resentment."

"Well, it wasn't their fault if they weren't allowed in the Army, was it?"

"Yes, well, people were prejudiced and Truman changed that. A lot of things are changing, but some people aren't ready for it. They feel threatened."

"Mom, I don't get it, these kids are our friends. Why would anyone feel threatened by them? They are kids."

Mom cut right to the chase. "It's a long story. People are afraid of anything they are unfamiliar with. Maybe they're afraid if kids get too friendly they will marry their children and their grandchildren will be black."

"Oh, Mom, nobody wants to get married. We want to dance. Anyway, some of Barb's friends' parents are negro and white, so the girls are both."

"People call them mulattos. And that's what I am talking about. Those girls will never be accepted by either Negroes or whites." Mom sighed, "They are pretty girls."

"What, Mom, that's stupid. Why not? Yolanda and her sister, Barb J—they are the cutest girls in her class and the best cheerleaders."

"That's the way it is now, honey. People are not ready for it."

“Well, Mom. You can’t stop progress.”

This conversation had a profound effect on me; a curtain parted; I wasn’t a child anymore. At once, I saw the inequities, the cruelty, and the sexism—everything that seemed to be holding us humans back from being the best we could be. I felt sad and angry. I wanted my classmates to bring their friends—all of them. I wanted everyone to be welcomed at our dance. My enthusiasm dampened for the sock hop, but I went on, if half-heartedly, performing my volunteer duties... I never made promises I didn’t keep, but I did not care as much about the dance.

The night of the dance arrived. Mary Lennon and I agreed we’d walk together as usual to the school that night. Mom gave us the final once-over before we headed off for the dance. She retied the scarf Mary wore around her neck, and smoothed my unruly bangs.

“You both look terrific.”

I knew we must because Mom did not hand out compliments easily. You had to earn them.

Dad looked up from Peter Gunn. He beamed and motioned me over for a peck on the cheek. “You look beautiful, honey. Have fun. Don’t let Sister Mary Holy Water give you a hard time.”

Dad never liked nuns and called all our teachers, “Sister Mary Holy Water.”

“Daddy, her name is Sister Bernard.”

Dad shot me a mischievous grin, “Oh right, right. Have fun.”

That night the weather was cooler and my pink mohair sweater was not too warm as Mary and I walked to school before the dance. I wore a crystal necklace that Gramps bought for me and I thought I looked grown up. It was getting dark earlier now and as we hurried along Madison Street towards the school, I saw a big yellow harvest moon rising in the sky. Indian summer was usually one of my favorite times, but that night, I felt discontent growing in me. Things seemed off.

“I hope everything goes okay tonight. I spent a lot of time on the planning.”

Mary, who had inherited her mother's easy-going manner, tried to reassure me. "It'll all be fine."

As we turned on Washington, we saw the school lights were all on and the doors wide open. Parents stood in the vestibule, running interference for the nuns, checking students out and directing them to the basement of the school. Mary and I headed downstairs to the basement meeting room, called Sodality Hall. The committees were putting the finishing touches on the lunchroom which served as our ballroom that night. The decorating committee had done a great job transforming the room with paper streamers, balloons and banners with glitter that read, "Welcome, St. Mel's Class of 1962." I took one last look and decided we were as ready as we'd ever be.

Students arrived in pairs and groups. When the room was full, Sister Veronica Ann called us to attention. She never missed a chance to kick off an event and give a speech.

"Young ladies and gentlemen—your attention, please! There will be no close dancing. Gentlemen, you must stay an arm's length from your partner. Young ladies, there will be one Ladies Choice dance tonight. I will announce when you may ask someone to dance with you. There will be no leaving the dance tonight. Anyone who leaves the dance will not be permitted to reenter. If you are chewing gum, please spit it out in a napkin and dispose of it in the trash receptacle. We will have no gum on this beautiful linoleum floor. If I smell smoke on any of you boys, you will be ejected and sent home. Let the dance begin."

Then someone dropped the needle on the record player and the thunk rang out over the public address system which had been jerry-rigged to serve as an amplifier by Ray, who also handled the audiovisual requests for our homeroom. I thought he was an electrical genius. The first song was "Michael Row the Boat Ashore." I suspected this was Sister Veronica Ann's choice. She needn't have worried about kids getting too close. The kids just stood around and looked at one another. The black students all stood in a corner, talking with their dates. I felt inner terror—the sock hop was going to bomb. It would be a failure. All my hard work down the drain!

Mercifully, songs were only two minutes 13 seconds long then and Michael rowed his boat to shore quickly. My friend Ray took matters in hand. He grabbed a new 45 by Gary U.S. Bonds and plopped it on the spindle.

The song was like an anthem. “Well, doncha know that I danced, I danced ‘til a quarter to three...”

Someone let out a scream and everyone crowded the floor. Kids danced in a circle, they danced by themselves, they danced in a line. No one danced with a partner; we danced as if we were one person. Black and white and Puerto Rican, all celebrating our youth and our love of rock and roll. The mohair sweater stuck to my spine, my cowlick popped up with the humidity, and the garter belt that held up my stockings dug into my bony thigh, but I didn’t care. I was in ecstasy; the sock hop was a success!

Ray played joyous song after joyous song. "Tossin' and Turnin'," "Runaway," "Hit the Road Jack," the "Bristol Stomp," and "Shop Around." My fears receded with each note and I thought of something I’d heard a jazz musician say, “Music is a country where there is no color.” It might have been an upside-down year, but I felt like it had flipped over to the A side that night.

Bio: Anita Solick Oswald is a Chicago native. She’s written a collection of essays, *West Side Girl*, that are written from the point of view of her younger self and chronicle the colorful, diverse and oftentimes unpredictably eccentric characters and events that populated Chicago’s West Side neighborhood during the 50s & 60s. Her writing has appeared in *The Write Place at the Write Time*, the *Faircloth Literary Review*, *The Fat City Review*, and *Avalon Literary Review*.

Anita lives in Boulder, Colorado, with her husband, Ralph, and her cats, Figaro and Clio.

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