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Come in...and be captivated...

"Our Stories"

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



Linda Woods

"Cold Front" Linda Woods; www.moonbirdhill.exposuremanager.com/

MY 70s SHOW

by Ben Mattlin

It was shocking to behold. Not only a blatantly offensive stereotype, but it was me, at the impressionable age of 12!

To be sure, my family and I didn't know any better at the time. As I recall, it started as an innocent attempt to enliven a boring Sunday in early-autumn 1975. My parents had separated three years before, and Dad was still struggling to re-ingratiate himself with my brother and me, determined to make his weekends (which alternated with Mom's) as fun as possible. "Let's make a movie!" he suggested.

My big brother Alec, then 15, looked up from his *Doonesbury*. "Where? How?" he asked with a combination of suspicion and eagerness.

We were not in a film-making habit. YouTube was still decades off. But somewhere at the back of Dad 's closet in his new West End Avenue pad was an old Super-8 movie camera—the kind with blinding lights and no audio. He'd used it for our birthday parties when we were younger. We hadn't seen it in years.

"Silent movies are corny," I complained. But nobody listened to me, as usual (or so it felt at 12).

Dad suggested we start by sketching out a basic story arc, revealing his latent Hollywood aspirations. "It'll only be five minutes long," he said to temper our unrealistic hopes and outsized fears.

Sure enough, ideas started flying like sparks off a spinning film reel. At

length we came up with a story line. A simple crime drama, with a cynical New York twist.

After roping in a friend of my brother's—our story called for a cast of four, not three—we set out for Riverside Park. It was a lovely sunny day, and the natural light would solve the squinting problem.

To watch the clip today—which Dad, now 82, converted to VHS tape a few years ago and I'm determined to transfer to DVD, for my own kids—is to laugh at the bushy 1970s hairstyles and flowery, tight-fitting clothes. Also the hurried, half-baked costumes: specifically, my six-foot-three-inch father squeezed into my five-foot-two-inch brother's trench coat to become the Detective. Why Alec didn't play that part himself is a question lost to history.

To me, though, there's something even more disturbing on display.

Picture this: A park bench. All is peaceful. Enter the Mugger. He snatches a wallet and runs off. The Detective appears, scratches his head. In comes the Witness, pointing as if to say, "He went thataway." The Detective gives chase. A struggle ensues, during which the purloined wallet falls unnoticed to the ground. The triumphant Detective presents the subdued Mugger to the Victim for positive identification. But where is the wallet? The Witness has found it—and pocketed it! In the final shot the duplicitous witness walks off gleefully, leaving everyone else flummoxed.

Alec plainly relished being the thief, for reasons that would surely land him on the psychologist's couch years later. His friend Michael could win an Oscar for his portrayal of the double-crossing Witness. Leaving me as—what else?—the Victim. The mugee.

There I am with an afro of unruly blondish curls and huge Elton John glasses, sitting in my wheelchair utterly defenseless as my evil big brother in a bandanna mask seizes the wallet from my lap. All I can do is shake my

head, wiggle my fingers and open my mouth in a pantomime scream. It'd be funny if it weren't so pitiful.

You see, I was born with a neuromuscular disability—a form of spinal muscular atrophy. I've never walked or stood and have very little use of my hands. I had a 50-50 shot of making my third birthday. I'm now 47—a married Harvard graduate with two kids. So much for limited expectations. Or so I thought.

No doubt I owe my determination to beat the odds to my pioneering—dare I say "maverick"?—parents, who insisted on integrating me in regular schools a decade before "mainstreaming" became law. Which is why this revelation of familial disability stereotyping was so startling.

I may have wanted to be the mugee. I don't remember. I'm certain we all assumed I had no choice. Physically, I couldn't reach out to steal the wallet and run away, couldn't chase after and tackle the bad guy, and couldn't bend down to pilfer the forgotten wallet from the bushes, pocket it and walk away.

We didn't think about how we were perpetuating a kind of bigotry. We hadn't connected the patronizing dots between, say, Laura Wingfield, the physically and emotionally damaged young woman of *The Glass Menagerie*; the old woman cast down the stairs—wheelchair and all—by Richard Widmark in *Kiss of Death*; bedridden Barbara Stanwyck during a break-in in *Sorry, Wrong Number*; the struggling, blind Audrey Hepburn in *Wait Until Dark*, and so forth. (Male "crippled victims," for some reason, are generally so frustrated and embittered they turn into another stereotype, crippled villains—Quasimodo, Richard III, the Phantom of the Opera, captains Ahab and Hook, or any number of Batman bad guys, to name a few.)

I'd like to think we had some realization of the cliché at least. I'd like to think we were riffing on people's misconceptions about me, lampooning a prejudice we were aware of but hadn't actually identified as such. But that's

probably revisionist history.

It's just one event, of course. Yet seeing the clip after so many years, I couldn't help wondering if it reflected a larger pattern--a subtext of my upbringing.

I phoned my dad to ask. He merely laughed. Like me, he has only a vague recollection of a pleasant, lighthearted afternoon together. Indeed, we were blissful in our ignorance of the larger political repercussions of my portrayal.

I showed my wife the clip, for a second opinion.

"You didn't have to be the victim," she said. "You could have been the detective, rolling after the bad guy and tripping him with your foot rests. Or the thief, perhaps a criminal mastermind with henchmen. Or the witness, tucking the wallet into the crevices of your wheelchair. You could have been anything!"

Why hadn't any of us thought of that?

Even in my nostalgic haze, two undeniable facts came into sharp focus: Perceptions of people with disabilities, though still far from perfect, have surely evolved. After all, you now see us everywhere--on the bus, in shopping malls, at voting booths. Secondly, I married well.

Welcome to Japan

By Don MacLaren

My childhood memories of growing up in Michigan are filled with looking for something more in life than the life I saw, and for as long as I can

remember I'd wanted to travel beyond the shores of the Great Lakes.

The Navy offered me the only way out, and in the 1980s the Navy ship I was stationed on visited Japan. I'd always been impressed by Japan's rich history and what I thought of as a beautiful culture. Then, when I finally visited the country, the Japanese I met seemed friendly, hard-working and sincere. My respect for Japan blossomed and I became a Japanophile.

However, many Americans - especially those in my home state - felt economically threatened by Japan because of Japan's auto exports to the US. I felt differently. I thought Americans should study Japan as the Japanese studied the US. So, when I was offered a chance to work in Japan after graduating from college I jumped at the chance, and prepared to cross the Pacific as if I were making a trek to the Promised Land. But I was to find that the road to the Promised Land is a long one, that it is laden with danger, and that even upon reaching it one is likely to experience as many trials as tribulations.

It was raining when the plane I'd boarded in Los Angeles landed at Narita Airport, outside of Tokyo, on Saturday, March 16th, 1991. The \$100 in US bills in my pocket was all the money I had to my name, and I changed those bills into yen when I got off the plane. I then boarded a bus and headed for Utsunomiya - about 100 kilometers north of the airport - driving past huge factories and small plots of rice fields. I was exhausted and still hung-over from the drinking I'd done my last night in the States - finishing just a few hours before my plane took off from San Francisco to LA, for my connecting flight across the ocean I'd traversed four times previously while on an aircraft carrier in the Navy.

When the bus got to Utsunomiya it was nighttime and snowing. Mr. Yokoyama, the man who had interviewed me on the UC Berkeley campus a few months earlier, just before I had graduated, greeted me in front of the Utsunomiya JR (Japan Railways) station, and helped me with my bags as we walked to the International Club's main school, about a block away. I sat

in the office with a terrible headache as Mr. Yokoyama went somewhere to do something about getting me a place to sleep. Finally, after about an hour he came back and we set out for the apartment I would be staying at. While driving me there he asked me if I had an international driver's license, which he had told me to get before I came to the country. "Hai," I answered him.

*

We got to the apartment and Mr. Yokoyama and a slightly chubby Japanese woman, who had come with us in another car, gave me eating utensils, some food, a blanket and a Japanese futon.

"A present from the International Club," Mr. Yokoyama said, as he handed the items to me, the preoccupied expression on his face breaking into the semblance of a smile under his receding hairline. I was very happy to get the food since I was so low on money. He told me I would be moving to Oyama, a city about 30 kilometers south of Utsunomiya and 70 kilometers north of Tokyo, and that the apartment I was going to stay in that night would only be temporary.

It's unusual to get snow in March in Utsunomiya like we did my first night there, and the snow added to the cold atmosphere of my induction. I tried to turn on the kerosene heater in the apartment to keep warm, but it was out of kerosene. After unwrapping the futon and blanket Mr. Yokoyama had given me, I devised a system in which I kept from freezing by wrapping a towel around my head and breathing into it. I rolled the blanket around the rest of my body. Wrapped up thus, neither my breath nor body heat could escape the combination of blanket and towel, and I was therefore able to keep myself warm.

I woke up the next day about 4:00 AM and couldn't get back to sleep, which

I attributed to jet lag. I lay down until the sun came up, then lifted my body off the floor, got dressed and took a walk outside. There were frozen puddles of water I stepped on just to hear them crunch and crack like I used to do when I was growing up in Michigan. I had about a half a pack of cigarettes left from the pack I'd bought in San Francisco the night before leaving for Japan, and lit one while I went for a stroll in the freezing cold. The neighborhood I was in seemed to be far away from the center of the city because there wasn't much around. Some bare plots of land I assumed were high with rice and other crops during the summer. A few houses here and there. Train tracks about 50 meters away. A few ugly apartment buildings, like the one that I was staying in. Not very pretty, but in a completely different context from the "not very pretty" neighborhood in Oakland I had come from. It was also in the country at the opposite side of the Pacific that I'd wanted to live in for years – ever since having visited it while in the Navy nine years earlier.

After my walk I came back to the apartment and cooked breakfast. Later, after eating it and taking a shower, I opened up the Japanese textbook I had brought with me and reviewed verb conjugation and memorized vocabulary for a few hours. After that I turned on the radio in the apartment, tuned it to an English-language station and listened to a British journalist speak about Japanese trade policies and the problems they created with other countries.

Later in the day I decided to try to find my way to the International Club with the car that Mr. Yokoyama had lent me. The car had a huge sign on top of it that advertised "International Club English Conversation School" written in Japanese and noting the school's phone number. The sign made me feel a little self-conscious.. Nevertheless, I got in, started it and drove, trying to find the main road Mr. Yokoyama had driven me in on the night before.

After spending two or three hours driving around I finally found the International Club - getting lost several times and asking several people

directions in my poor Japanese in the process. The last person I asked was a guy practicing his golf swing in the middle of a side street. He took a swing and told me it was where his golf ball would have landed. His daughter, about five years old, said "hello" to me. I thanked them, waved and drove off into the sunset.

*

A few days after I arrived in Japan Mr. Yokoyama drove me to Oyama, where I was to live. I looked around the apartment. The tatami covering the floor was old and cut up, and the walls throughout the apartment were caked with a film of dirt. And on top of all this there was no running water. Japan seemed so clean and orderly from the outside, while looking at its surface. But in fact there was dirt inside that you couldn't get rid of no matter how hard you scrubbed, while at the same time something so basic to life as water was turned off.

Because I didn't have any water in the apartment the first few days I was living in it, I couldn't attempt to clean the film of dirt that completely covered the kitchen and bathroom walls, and I had to bathe in a public bath next to the International Club school in Oyama.

After the water in my apartment came on I scrubbed and scrubbed the walls, but to no avail. The walls seemed to be painted with a coat of dirt that spoke of despair. And alas, despair was not to be outdone by my attempts to overcome it and wipe it away. The dirt and despair seemed to come from something deep within the walls, and at the foundation of life in Japan.

A couple days after the water came on Mr. Yokoyama came to my apartment with a large bottle of sake. "A present from the landlord," he said "for all the trouble you've had with your apartment." I was happy to have the sake. I certainly needed it, but I needed money more, so I asked Mr..

Yokoyama if I could borrow some. He lent me 50,000 yen (about \$400 at the time) and later subtracted it from my paycheck.

*

I was determined to make my stay in Japan productive, and from the day I arrived in Japan I spent nearly all of my free time in my apartment alone, studying Japanese obsessively (except for the time I invested in taking karate classes, which I began a few weeks after arriving in Japan).

Nevertheless, despite my desire to learn Japanese, most Japanese assume foreigners in their country are incapable of attaining fluency in their language, and tend to expect foreigners to speak English with them. I refused to allow this to dissuade me in my studies though, and reasoned that if I attained a sufficient level of fluency in Japanese I could get a better-paying and more respectable job in the country than teaching English.

*

Shortly after arriving in the country I sat down and calculated my debts from student loans and all the credit cards I had. The debts added up to over \$20,000. Thus, I couldn't afford to go out much, and in fact though I paid as much as I could every month to the credit card companies it was never enough. By the time I was in Japan a couple months, all my credit cards were canceled, and I began getting nasty letters from my creditors telling me I was seriously delinquent in my payments.

*

I spent many sleepless nights my first years in Japan fretting over my debts. I was often invited to parties, but almost always declined in my first years in the country. "We're going to karaoke after work on Saturday. Are you going

to come?" was a common invitation I received. The conversation generally progressed by my saying "No, thanks. I'm going to study Japanese all weekend. Besides, I don't have much money." "What the hell do you spend your money on, Don?" another teacher would say. "I'm paying off debts - credit cards and student loans," I would answer. "Student loans! Do you take those seriously? Just don't pay them. I don't," is what a teacher from Connecticut said to me one day. His words were echoed by many other gaijin I knew in Japan. (Gaijin - sometimes considered pejorative - is the most commonly used word in Japanese for "foreigner" or "foreigners.") I would have been a lot better off financially if I had followed the advice of many people and just stopped paying student loans and credit cards, but I felt that because I'd borrowed money I had an obligation to pay it back. Instead of listening to the advice they gave me, I scrimped and lived like an ascetic monk for the greater part of six years, and dug my way out of debtor's prison.

*

After the International Club went bankrupt in the summer of 1995 I moved to Tokyo, where initially, I slept outside in parks, or sometimes, when it was raining, at a public bath (where at that time you could sleep on a Japanese futon for a couple thousand yen (about \$15-\$20) or inside cheap, all-night porno theaters. Sometimes though, I would sleep sitting up in a seat on the Yamanote train that runs in a big circle around central Tokyo. At least once every couple days I tried to do a job of bathing myself in a public restroom in a park, by rubbing a washcloth over my face and torso. But this wasn't satisfactory. By chance I found that one of the high-class department stores in the Shinjuku district has a sink inside one of the bathroom stalls. I would lock the stall door, brush my teeth, shave, and then strip and bathe by running a wet washcloth with a little soap over my body, then later, wipe the soap film off. I did the whole operation thoroughly and quickly, never taking more than ten minutes. I made sure to leave the stall clean for the next person by drying all the water that had collected around the sink and on the floor with paper towels before I left.

I lived outside for a little over a week, then got a room in a "gaijin house" (a residence that caters to foreigners) in Sugamo, a neighborhood known for the large number of elderly people living there. My room was next to streetcar/tram tracks, one of a set of only two such tracks in all of Tokyo. The train rattled my windows in the afternoon and night when I was working on my resume, writing cover letters, reading or trying to sleep. I had bought a portable word processor from a friend when I was living in Oyama, and was using it to write with. The writing paid off because soon I got a job at an English school in Kanda, one of the business districts in Tokyo. I taught seven hours of classes a day, five days a week. However, by this time my Japanese speaking and reading skills were sufficient to work for a company other than an English school, so I continued to look for another job. I felt the next phase of my life, beginning with a new job, was meant to be a new dawn, and a promise of brighter horizons. However, the fates had conspired for the sun to rise upon a dark landscape.

I am not sure if I have it in me to relate the rest of the story, as it is one of the most unpleasant and agonizing I could have conceived of in my darkest nightmares. Suffice it to say that this new dawn ushered in a Kafkaesque journey of three years navigating a twisting labyrinth of cultural truths and contradictions, struggling to keep what I knew of myself at the center of the maze. Perhaps someday, after I open a bottle of wine, courage will come to me to put pen to paper and finish the tale of my odyssey. Or perhaps the story, like the story of my life and yours, is still incomplete, and thus when it does end, I will not be alive to write the final chapter.

What I do know, is this - that somewhere along the way, as I traversed the path to the light at the end of a dark tunnel, I found myself bound and married till death, for better or worse, to the country I had crossed the Pacific to live in.

Miss Althea

By Noelle Sterne

We met at the cottage cheese. I lived on cottage cheese these days—a dietary stab at reclaiming my look of twenty years ago.

As I bent to claim my cartons from the refrigerated case, her elbow touched mine and she peered into the case, eyes squinting.

“Where’s the sour cream? I need the smallest—smallest—sour cream!” She glanced at me with pleading eyes.

I bent lower to search, arm chilly in the low cold.

Without preamble, she burst out, “I’m 88. It’s awful. I can hardly see, can’t do anything. I can’t even have . . . you know.” Her thin lips rose in a sly smile, teeth long and awry. I was surprised she thought of sex at her age.

“But no man would want me now.” She waved a frail, self-deprecating hand, then changed subjects. “My family—all those outlandishly young nieces and nephews—they’re coming over Sunday. I want to make that sour cream dressing they like. I hate being the matriarch, but everyone else has died. You’re so sweet to help.”

I was used to following such fragmented thoughts. Here in Florida, the refuge of the retired, I often helped older people in the market, shops, and malls—reading a label, holding a door, finding a price or a product.

Helping them made me feel vital, full of energy, ever-young. I made sure to walk briskly, got perky haircuts, and wore hip-cut jeans and plunging-neckline knit tops. As the lines on everyone else’s faces deepened, I fooled myself that mine were not and lived on cottage cheese. Where was that low-fat carton?

She gripped my arm. “Where’s the sour cream? I can hardly see.”

I turned toward her. Her face was skeletal, accented by threads of brown-gray hair pulled back behind her ears. Her skin was crosshatched but tight, straining to cover what it had to. Her small eyes, although watery, darted sharply, and, despite her disclaimer, I was sure missed nothing. Her faded tiny-flower print dress hung on her frame. Her arms were twig branches, and I felt the bone of her finger at her touch.

I moved a few feet over. “Here it is. Do you want regular or low-fat?”

“At my age?” She laughed, wheezing slightly. “Do you think I care?”

And here I was, valiantly cottage cheesing.

I picked up a container—regular sour cream—and handed it to her. She put it in her basket and stopped, looking me up and down.

”You’ve kept your figure. With your flat stomach and cute little ass in your white jeans. You’re . . .” she leaned nearer, almost touching my nose with hers, “you’re adorable!”

Shocked, I giggled in reflex.

“And you have beautiful teeth! What a smile!”

I smiled broadly and thanked her. “You’re pretty terrific yourself,” I said, meaning it.

“Oh, no! I’m used up and thrown away. At 65, they got rid of me. And I was so bright.”

“What did you do?”

She formed the words proudly. “I’m . . . a . . . Ph.D. I was professor of descriptive and inferential quantitative statistics.”

Wow, I thought. “Where?”

“At Mercy American College, Washington, DC. But they love you one minute and throw you away the next. Yes—“she poked an emphatic twig finger at my eyes— “I’m Doctor Althea Hunsecker.”

I wondered, in the budding camaraderie, if I should tell her about my own doctorate and academic consulting, and even about my articles and fiction writing. But it was her moment. “Fantastic,” I said.

“Oh sure,” she replied, “what good does it all do me now? I can’t do anything anymore, got no friends, can’t get out. I live only a block away, in a condo—and I hate it. Always had my own home, and with a garden—“she spread her hands as if nurturing flowers—“but my last husband left me this.” Her lips curled down.

I started to praise her independent living, but she wouldn’t hear it. Instead, she stepped closer and whispered, “He was, you know, seeing someone. Bought a home for that tart, and I get this beat-up condo with no garden.”

In all the high-rises in the area, many people grew flowers, trees, almost jungles on their terraces. They used vases, bowls, pots, pails, and planters from the market garden sections and home improvement emporiums.

As I suggested a hardy plant the market sold, she jumped again. “Oh, men are treacherous! He was jealous of my doctorate and my smart friends. I married him on the boulder—what do you call it—after my real husband died. Never should have. I hope you have a good man.”

I thought of my blessedly supportive, positive, non-degreed husband. “I do,” I said, ready to show her that, like her “real husband,” a few other good men still existed.

But she exclaimed. “Where are the blue cheese crumbles? Never there when you want it. They love this dressing.”

I led her a few feet away, rummaged in the case, and handed her the package. She dropped it into her basket. “You’re so sweet. Call me Miss Althea.”

I bowed slightly, and she smiled, the skin across her cheeks stretching like sun-baked canvas.

She looked down at her cart. “So expensive.” Another swerve. “I can’t get a job. No one will hire me at this age. Can’t even read anymore.”

Finally, I succumbed. “What about a senior center? I think there’s one a few blocks away. People there will read to you, whatever you want.”

She made a hissing sound. “Tried it once. With my education, I’m so far above

those people—nothing at all in common.”

I bit again. “How about adult education courses? The local colleges have classes in archeology, literature, history, everything, by well-known, intellectual lecturers.”

“I couldn’t. Don’t drive. Don’t want go out alone at night. There are rapists out there, you know.”

I knew most of the courses were held in the afternoons, and people often went together in one car. Should I try again?

As if to head me off, she added quickly, “But I help at church. I volunteer for Father. I’m a good Catholic.”

“That’s good,” I said. “It helps to get out among people.”

“I can only do so much.”

I nodded, instantly regretting my helpful observation.

She touched a finger to her eye. “I wish the Lord would take me. I’m ready. I wouldn’t force it—you know what I mean—but I’m ready.”

I’d renewed my exercise regimen and added to the cottage-cheese diet daily affirmative thoughts and expectance of unabated energy, believing the proliferating articles on the secrets of healthy longevity. My copious current projects chafed in all stages of completion, and stacks of scribbled-note writing plans waited. I could never imagine being ready.

She swerved again. “You’re so cute and helpful, so kind. Now take care of yourself, you hear.” I was being dismissed. “Keep that figure now. So you won’t be alone, like me.”

I thanked her and held up one of my five low-fat cartons of panacea, moving slightly away.

To my shock, she suddenly reached out, seized my hand, and kissed it.

We locked into each other's faces, connecting across the years. Despite her refusal to take any advice, spontaneously I hugged her, circling her bony frame with care.

Then, as abruptly as she had first started talking, she turned away and headed for the checkout. I pushed my cart down the aisle into the salad greens.

For a moment, I wanted to run after her, walk her home, carry her bag, become a friend. I'd visit once a week. I'd take her to concerts, museums, lectures, the market. We'd share naughty Father-disapproving jokes. But instead, I wheeled into the watercress.

But the image of Miss Althea lingered. The world had done her wrong, of course, and nothing anyone said or did could make it right. She'd probably frustrated many, including her real husband, with her refusals to admit to anything positive. Yet her energy and animation belied her self-defeatism. I could even forgive her disingenuousness—couldn't see but saw enough to give me extravagant compliments, hating her matriarch role but going out of her way to make a special salad dressing to please her token-visiting relatives, unable to leave the house but faithfully volunteering at the church.

Cottage cheese isn't my only strategy. I collect role models— the 84-year-old woman who does yoga, the 90-year-old marathon runner, the 100-year-old man who paints and exhibits his shows, the many and increasing musicians, artists, sculptors, writers who continue to create, getting better, through mounting decades. Miss Althea, life surging through her disparagements, now joined them.

So, whether I'm wearing tight jeans or baggy slacks, plunging jerseys or buttonhigh blouses, however time has clawed my face, I'll bless Miss Althea. Her unremitting vivacious grievances renew my conviction to reject the society-soaked dire predictions of escalating numbers. Miss Althea reminds me, instead, to live a zealous, glorious, creative life.

A Secret Garden

By Nicole M. Bouchard

When I think back to some of the most enchanting moments of my childhood, I remember a place of sanctuary on cold afternoons. To take you there, I must first describe it before telling the reason why it was so dear to me.

We're sitting in a greenhouse with a ceiling of snow above our heads. The winter has cloaked the glass panels thickly as if to conceal us inside. An aged wooden table sits between us as we lean forward from our wrought iron chairs and discuss our dreams. The hutch stocked with tea seems more like a Victorian cabinet of tinctures, one for every ill. I choose the Raspberry tea which I highly recommend you try. A bit of hot water makes the tea bag spring to life in the cup as herbs swirl, spiraling upward to flush your face warm with the aroma. It's a taste and smell I've never forgotten. It brings to mind the perfect rosy red with just a hint of purple. I can only describe it as a color because the tea is so powerful that it brings on a temporary case of synesthesia—a condition which confuses the senses so that one might hear color or feel taste. And this soft glow is a memory of all sacred childhood things. It is the scent of mulberry in my mother's desk drawers, the berry-red Victorian coat I was surprised with one Christmas, the burgundy button-down shirt my father was wearing when he appeared in a doorway the moment I needed him, the room of a childhood best friend. It is this tea that unlocks my mind and heart, setting the atmosphere adrift as though this sanctuary is a world apart from every concern I've ever had.

Beautifully hand-crafted items, golden mirrors, stone sculptures, greenery and an elevated platform seeming nearly holy with the draped white gossamer twined round the arch over it make this place seem enchanted. The floor is made up of small smooth stones so that our feet sink a little as we talk. Stone walls and steps surround the outside. There is an enclosed shop at the front with delicate treasures. The building doesn't look of this time. Across the way there are tall iron gates and delightful patches of trees covering still, sacred ground. There is no fear that comes of knowing that this space across the street is part of a grand cemetery. The spiritual peace is nearly palpable in every season.

Once inside the shop with its dark cherrywood paneling and Victorian décor, we look at the items that have come from all over the world; the sweet vanilla oil in a bottle with an impressionist painting of the young woman I wished to be... the Provence lavender soap wrapped in soft, fragrant paper... the silk ribbons dyed with artistic delicacy... the hand-painted box, hunter green with gold detail,

topiaries and small red blossoms with handsomely fragrant wood- a veritable treasure chest...

The proprietor always dresses in white- a contrast to her ebony hair as she comes down to greet us.

Now that I've brought you with me, I can tell you why this simple Victorian garden shop and greenhouse is a place so firmly entrenched in the wonderment of my younger years.

At that rustic wooden table we visited earlier, I'd sit with my mother after school. We didn't feel it necessary to bring our cares with us. It was a perfect sanctuary where creativity reigned, where it was never cold, never bare, never even winter despite the snow. In the perfectly gray shadows, every dream came alive, growing first from one seed of thought. For years we visited that secret place of eternal spring. I would free my shoulders of the school bag whose weight increased each year both upon my back and my heart. Flinging it into the car while the icy rain came down, there it and its burdens would remain until I was ready to reclaim them.

So much of life is seeing the beauty in each day, salvaging sweetness through moments, people and places.

Though the shop is no longer, its charms are linked on a bracelet of memories my slender wrist wears. Amongst many other precious times with loved ones, this blossom bursting through the pavement is a constant reminder of what we make of the days that could've otherwise been rued.

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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.



Linda Woods

"Cold Front" Linda Woods; www.moonbirdhill.exposuremanager.com/

MY 70s SHOW

by Ben Mattlin

It was shocking to behold. Not only a blatantly offensive stereotype, but it was me, at the impressionable age of 12!

To be sure, my family and I didn't know any better at the time. As I recall, it started as an innocent attempt to enliven a boring Sunday in early-autumn 1975. My parents had separated three years before, and Dad was still struggling to re-ingratiate himself with my brother and me, determined to make his weekends (which alternated with Mom's) as fun as possible. "Let's make a movie!" he suggested.

My big brother Alec, then 15, looked up from his *Doonesbury*. "Where? How?" he asked with a combination of suspicion and eagerness.

We were not in a film-making habit. YouTube was still decades off. But somewhere at the back of Dad 's closet in his new West End Avenue pad was an old Super-8 movie camera—the kind with blinding lights and no audio. He'd used it for our birthday parties when we were younger. We hadn't seen it in years.

"Silent movies are corny," I complained. But nobody listened to me, as usual (or so it felt at 12).

Dad suggested we start by sketching out a basic story arc, revealing his latent Hollywood aspirations. "It'll only be five minutes long," he said to temper our unrealistic hopes and outsized fears.

Sure enough, ideas started flying like sparks off a spinning film reel. At

length we came up with a story line. A simple crime drama, with a cynical New York twist.

After roping in a friend of my brother's—our story called for a cast of four, not three—we set out for Riverside Park. It was a lovely sunny day, and the natural light would solve the squinting problem.

To watch the clip today—which Dad, now 82, converted to VHS tape a few years ago and I'm determined to transfer to DVD, for my own kids—is to laugh at the bushy 1970s hairstyles and flowery, tight-fitting clothes. Also the hurried, half-baked costumes: specifically, my six-foot-three-inch father squeezed into my five-foot-two-inch brother's trench coat to become the Detective. Why Alec didn't play that part himself is a question lost to history.

To me, though, there's something even more disturbing on display.

Picture this: A park bench. All is peaceful. Enter the Mugger. He snatches a wallet and runs off. The Detective appears, scratches his head. In comes the Witness, pointing as if to say, "He went thataway." The Detective gives chase. A struggle ensues, during which the purloined wallet falls unnoticed to the ground. The triumphant Detective presents the subdued Mugger to the Victim for positive identification. But where is the wallet? The Witness has found it—and pocketed it! In the final shot the duplicitous witness walks off gleefully, leaving everyone else flummoxed.

Alec plainly relished being the thief, for reasons that would surely land him on the psychologist's couch years later. His friend Michael could win an Oscar for his portrayal of the double-crossing Witness. Leaving me as—what else?—the Victim. The mugee.

There I am with an afro of unruly blondish curls and huge Elton John glasses, sitting in my wheelchair utterly defenseless as my evil big brother in a bandanna mask seizes the wallet from my lap. All I can do is shake my

head, wiggle my fingers and open my mouth in a pantomime scream. It'd be funny if it weren't so pitiful.

You see, I was born with a neuromuscular disability—a form of spinal muscular atrophy. I've never walked or stood and have very little use of my hands. I had a 50-50 shot of making my third birthday. I'm now 47—a married Harvard graduate with two kids. So much for limited expectations. Or so I thought.

No doubt I owe my determination to beat the odds to my pioneering—dare I say "maverick"?—parents, who insisted on integrating me in regular schools a decade before "mainstreaming" became law. Which is why this revelation of familial disability stereotyping was so startling.

I may have wanted to be the mugee. I don't remember. I'm certain we all assumed I had no choice. Physically, I couldn't reach out to steal the wallet and run away, couldn't chase after and tackle the bad guy, and couldn't bend down to pilfer the forgotten wallet from the bushes, pocket it and walk away.

We didn't think about how we were perpetuating a kind of bigotry. We hadn't connected the patronizing dots between, say, Laura Wingfield, the physically and emotionally damaged young woman of *The Glass Menagerie*; the old woman cast down the stairs—wheelchair and all—by Richard Widmark in *Kiss of Death*; bedridden Barbara Stanwyck during a break-in in *Sorry, Wrong Number*; the struggling, blind Audrey Hepburn in *Wait Until Dark*, and so forth. (Male "crippled victims," for some reason, are generally so frustrated and embittered they turn into another stereotype, crippled villains—Quasimodo, Richard III, the Phantom of the Opera, captains Ahab and Hook, or any number of Batman bad guys, to name a few.)

I'd like to think we had some realization of the cliché at least. I'd like to think we were riffing on people's misconceptions about me, lampooning a prejudice we were aware of but hadn't actually identified as such. But that's

probably revisionist history.

It's just one event, of course. Yet seeing the clip after so many years, I couldn't help wondering if it reflected a larger pattern--a subtext of my upbringing.

I phoned my dad to ask. He merely laughed. Like me, he has only a vague recollection of a pleasant, lighthearted afternoon together. Indeed, we were blissful in our ignorance of the larger political repercussions of my portrayal.

I showed my wife the clip, for a second opinion.

"You didn't have to be the victim," she said. "You could have been the detective, rolling after the bad guy and tripping him with your foot rests. Or the thief, perhaps a criminal mastermind with henchmen. Or the witness, tucking the wallet into the crevices of your wheelchair. You could have been anything!"

Why hadn't any of us thought of that?

Even in my nostalgic haze, two undeniable facts came into sharp focus: Perceptions of people with disabilities, though still far from perfect, have surely evolved. After all, you now see us everywhere--on the bus, in shopping malls, at voting booths. Secondly, I married well.

Welcome to Japan

By Don MacLaren

My childhood memories of growing up in Michigan are filled with looking for something more in life than the life I saw, and for as long as I can

remember I'd wanted to travel beyond the shores of the Great Lakes.

The Navy offered me the only way out, and in the 1980s the Navy ship I was stationed on visited Japan. I'd always been impressed by Japan's rich history and what I thought of as a beautiful culture. Then, when I finally visited the country, the Japanese I met seemed friendly, hard-working and sincere. My respect for Japan blossomed and I became a Japanophile.

However, many Americans - especially those in my home state - felt economically threatened by Japan because of Japan's auto exports to the US. I felt differently. I thought Americans should study Japan as the Japanese studied the US. So, when I was offered a chance to work in Japan after graduating from college I jumped at the chance, and prepared to cross the Pacific as if I were making a trek to the Promised Land. But I was to find that the road to the Promised Land is a long one, that it is laden with danger, and that even upon reaching it one is likely to experience as many trials as tribulations.

It was raining when the plane I'd boarded in Los Angeles landed at Narita Airport, outside of Tokyo, on Saturday, March 16th, 1991. The \$100 in US bills in my pocket was all the money I had to my name, and I changed those bills into yen when I got off the plane. I then boarded a bus and headed for Utsunomiya - about 100 kilometers north of the airport - driving past huge factories and small plots of rice fields. I was exhausted and still hung-over from the drinking I'd done my last night in the States - finishing just a few hours before my plane took off from San Francisco to LA, for my connecting flight across the ocean I'd traversed four times previously while on an aircraft carrier in the Navy.

When the bus got to Utsunomiya it was nighttime and snowing. Mr. Yokoyama, the man who had interviewed me on the UC Berkeley campus a few months earlier, just before I had graduated, greeted me in front of the Utsunomiya JR (Japan Railways) station, and helped me with my bags as we walked to the International Club's main school, about a block away. I sat

in the office with a terrible headache as Mr. Yokoyama went somewhere to do something about getting me a place to sleep. Finally, after about an hour he came back and we set out for the apartment I would be staying at. While driving me there he asked me if I had an international driver's license, which he had told me to get before I came to the country. "Hai," I answered him.

*

We got to the apartment and Mr. Yokoyama and a slightly chubby Japanese woman, who had come with us in another car, gave me eating utensils, some food, a blanket and a Japanese futon.

"A present from the International Club," Mr. Yokoyama said, as he handed the items to me, the preoccupied expression on his face breaking into the semblance of a smile under his receding hairline. I was very happy to get the food since I was so low on money. He told me I would be moving to Oyama, a city about 30 kilometers south of Utsunomiya and 70 kilometers north of Tokyo, and that the apartment I was going to stay in that night would only be temporary.

It's unusual to get snow in March in Utsunomiya like we did my first night there, and the snow added to the cold atmosphere of my induction. I tried to turn on the kerosene heater in the apartment to keep warm, but it was out of kerosene. After unwrapping the futon and blanket Mr. Yokoyama had given me, I devised a system in which I kept from freezing by wrapping a towel around my head and breathing into it. I rolled the blanket around the rest of my body. Wrapped up thus, neither my breath nor body heat could escape the combination of blanket and towel, and I was therefore able to keep myself warm.

I woke up the next day about 4:00 AM and couldn't get back to sleep, which

I attributed to jet lag. I lay down until the sun came up, then lifted my body off the floor, got dressed and took a walk outside. There were frozen puddles of water I stepped on just to hear them crunch and crack like I used to do when I was growing up in Michigan. I had about a half a pack of cigarettes left from the pack I'd bought in San Francisco the night before leaving for Japan, and lit one while I went for a stroll in the freezing cold. The neighborhood I was in seemed to be far away from the center of the city because there wasn't much around. Some bare plots of land I assumed were high with rice and other crops during the summer. A few houses here and there. Train tracks about 50 meters away. A few ugly apartment buildings, like the one that I was staying in. Not very pretty, but in a completely different context from the "not very pretty" neighborhood in Oakland I had come from. It was also in the country at the opposite side of the Pacific that I'd wanted to live in for years – ever since having visited it while in the Navy nine years earlier.

After my walk I came back to the apartment and cooked breakfast. Later, after eating it and taking a shower, I opened up the Japanese textbook I had brought with me and reviewed verb conjugation and memorized vocabulary for a few hours. After that I turned on the radio in the apartment, tuned it to an English-language station and listened to a British journalist speak about Japanese trade policies and the problems they created with other countries.

Later in the day I decided to try to find my way to the International Club with the car that Mr. Yokoyama had lent me. The car had a huge sign on top of it that advertised "International Club English Conversation School" written in Japanese and noting the school's phone number. The sign made me feel a little self-conscious.. Nevertheless, I got in, started it and drove, trying to find the main road Mr. Yokoyama had driven me in on the night before.

After spending two or three hours driving around I finally found the International Club - getting lost several times and asking several people

directions in my poor Japanese in the process. The last person I asked was a guy practicing his golf swing in the middle of a side street. He took a swing and told me it was where his golf ball would have landed. His daughter, about five years old, said "hello" to me. I thanked them, waved and drove off into the sunset.

*

A few days after I arrived in Japan Mr. Yokoyama drove me to Oyama, where I was to live. I looked around the apartment. The tatami covering the floor was old and cut up, and the walls throughout the apartment were caked with a film of dirt. And on top of all this there was no running water. Japan seemed so clean and orderly from the outside, while looking at its surface. But in fact there was dirt inside that you couldn't get rid of no matter how hard you scrubbed, while at the same time something so basic to life as water was turned off.

Because I didn't have any water in the apartment the first few days I was living in it, I couldn't attempt to clean the film of dirt that completely covered the kitchen and bathroom walls, and I had to bathe in a public bath next to the International Club school in Oyama.

After the water in my apartment came on I scrubbed and scrubbed the walls, but to no avail. The walls seemed to be painted with a coat of dirt that spoke of despair. And alas, despair was not to be outdone by my attempts to overcome it and wipe it away. The dirt and despair seemed to come from something deep within the walls, and at the foundation of life in Japan.

A couple days after the water came on Mr. Yokoyama came to my apartment with a large bottle of sake. "A present from the landlord," he said "for all the trouble you've had with your apartment." I was happy to have the sake. I certainly needed it, but I needed money more, so I asked Mr..

Yokoyama if I could borrow some. He lent me 50,000 yen (about \$400 at the time) and later subtracted it from my paycheck.

*

I was determined to make my stay in Japan productive, and from the day I arrived in Japan I spent nearly all of my free time in my apartment alone, studying Japanese obsessively (except for the time I invested in taking karate classes, which I began a few weeks after arriving in Japan).

Nevertheless, despite my desire to learn Japanese, most Japanese assume foreigners in their country are incapable of attaining fluency in their language, and tend to expect foreigners to speak English with them. I refused to allow this to dissuade me in my studies though, and reasoned that if I attained a sufficient level of fluency in Japanese I could get a better-paying and more respectable job in the country than teaching English.

*

Shortly after arriving in the country I sat down and calculated my debts from student loans and all the credit cards I had. The debts added up to over \$20,000. Thus, I couldn't afford to go out much, and in fact though I paid as much as I could every month to the credit card companies it was never enough. By the time I was in Japan a couple months, all my credit cards were canceled, and I began getting nasty letters from my creditors telling me I was seriously delinquent in my payments.

*

I spent many sleepless nights my first years in Japan fretting over my debts. I was often invited to parties, but almost always declined in my first years in the country. "We're going to karaoke after work on Saturday. Are you going

to come?" was a common invitation I received. The conversation generally progressed by my saying "No, thanks. I'm going to study Japanese all weekend. Besides, I don't have much money." "What the hell do you spend your money on, Don?" another teacher would say. "I'm paying off debts - credit cards and student loans," I would answer. "Student loans! Do you take those seriously? Just don't pay them. I don't," is what a teacher from Connecticut said to me one day. His words were echoed by many other gaijin I knew in Japan. (Gaijin - sometimes considered pejorative - is the most commonly used word in Japanese for "foreigner" or "foreigners.") I would have been a lot better off financially if I had followed the advice of many people and just stopped paying student loans and credit cards, but I felt that because I'd borrowed money I had an obligation to pay it back. Instead of listening to the advice they gave me, I scrimped and lived like an ascetic monk for the greater part of six years, and dug my way out of debtor's prison.

*

After the International Club went bankrupt in the summer of 1995 I moved to Tokyo, where initially, I slept outside in parks, or sometimes, when it was raining, at a public bath (where at that time you could sleep on a Japanese futon for a couple thousand yen (about \$15-\$20) or inside cheap, all-night porno theaters. Sometimes though, I would sleep sitting up in a seat on the Yamanote train that runs in a big circle around central Tokyo. At least once every couple days I tried to do a job of bathing myself in a public restroom in a park, by rubbing a washcloth over my face and torso. But this wasn't satisfactory. By chance I found that one of the high-class department stores in the Shinjuku district has a sink inside one of the bathroom stalls. I would lock the stall door, brush my teeth, shave, and then strip and bathe by running a wet washcloth with a little soap over my body, then later, wipe the soap film off. I did the whole operation thoroughly and quickly, never taking more than ten minutes. I made sure to leave the stall clean for the next person by drying all the water that had collected around the sink and on the floor with paper towels before I left.

I lived outside for a little over a week, then got a room in a "gaijin house" (a residence that caters to foreigners) in Sugamo, a neighborhood known for the large number of elderly people living there. My room was next to streetcar/tram tracks, one of a set of only two such tracks in all of Tokyo. The train rattled my windows in the afternoon and night when I was working on my resume, writing cover letters, reading or trying to sleep. I had bought a portable word processor from a friend when I was living in Oyama, and was using it to write with. The writing paid off because soon I got a job at an English school in Kanda, one of the business districts in Tokyo. I taught seven hours of classes a day, five days a week. However, by this time my Japanese speaking and reading skills were sufficient to work for a company other than an English school, so I continued to look for another job. I felt the next phase of my life, beginning with a new job, was meant to be a new dawn, and a promise of brighter horizons. However, the fates had conspired for the sun to rise upon a dark landscape.

I am not sure if I have it in me to relate the rest of the story, as it is one of the most unpleasant and agonizing I could have conceived of in my darkest nightmares. Suffice it to say that this new dawn ushered in a Kafkaesque journey of three years navigating a twisting labyrinth of cultural truths and contradictions, struggling to keep what I knew of myself at the center of the maze. Perhaps someday, after I open a bottle of wine, courage will come to me to put pen to paper and finish the tale of my odyssey. Or perhaps the story, like the story of my life and yours, is still incomplete, and thus when it does end, I will not be alive to write the final chapter.

What I do know, is this - that somewhere along the way, as I traversed the path to the light at the end of a dark tunnel, I found myself bound and married till death, for better or worse, to the country I had crossed the Pacific to live in.

Miss Althea

By Noelle Sterne

We met at the cottage cheese. I lived on cottage cheese these days—a dietary stab at reclaiming my look of twenty years ago.

As I bent to claim my cartons from the refrigerated case, her elbow touched mine and she peered into the case, eyes squinting.

“Where’s the sour cream? I need the smallest—smallest—sour cream!” She glanced at me with pleading eyes.

I bent lower to search, arm chilly in the low cold.

Without preamble, she burst out, “I’m 88. It’s awful. I can hardly see, can’t do anything. I can’t even have . . . you know.” Her thin lips rose in a sly smile, teeth long and awry. I was surprised she thought of sex at her age.

“But no man would want me now.” She waved a frail, self-deprecating hand, then changed subjects. “My family—all those outlandishly young nieces and nephews—they’re coming over Sunday. I want to make that sour cream dressing they like. I hate being the matriarch, but everyone else has died. You’re so sweet to help.”

I was used to following such fragmented thoughts. Here in Florida, the refuge of the retired, I often helped older people in the market, shops, and malls—reading a label, holding a door, finding a price or a product.

Helping them made me feel vital, full of energy, ever-young. I made sure to walk briskly, got perky haircuts, and wore hip-cut jeans and plunging-neckline knit tops. As the lines on everyone else’s faces deepened, I fooled myself that mine were not and lived on cottage cheese. Where was that low-fat carton?

She gripped my arm. “Where’s the sour cream? I can hardly see.”

I turned toward her. Her face was skeletal, accented by threads of brown-gray hair pulled back behind her ears. Her skin was crosshatched but tight, straining to cover what it had to. Her small eyes, although watery, darted sharply, and, despite her disclaimer, I was sure missed nothing. Her faded tiny-flower print dress hung on her frame. Her arms were twig branches, and I felt the bone of her finger at her touch.

I moved a few feet over. “Here it is. Do you want regular or low-fat?”

“At my age?” She laughed, wheezing slightly. “Do you think I care?”

And here I was, valiantly cottage cheesing.

I picked up a container—regular sour cream—and handed it to her. She put it in her basket and stopped, looking me up and down.

”You’ve kept your figure. With your flat stomach and cute little ass in your white jeans. You’re . . .” she leaned nearer, almost touching my nose with hers, “you’re adorable!”

Shocked, I giggled in reflex.

“And you have beautiful teeth! What a smile!”

I smiled broadly and thanked her. “You’re pretty terrific yourself,” I said, meaning it.

“Oh, no! I’m used up and thrown away. At 65, they got rid of me. And I was so bright.”

“What did you do?”

She formed the words proudly. “I’m . . . a . . . Ph.D. I was professor of descriptive and inferential quantitative statistics.”

Wow, I thought. “Where?”

“At Mercy American College, Washington, DC. But they love you one minute and throw you away the next. Yes—“she poked an emphatic twig finger at my eyes— “I’m Doctor Althea Hunsecker.”

I wondered, in the budding camaraderie, if I should tell her about my own doctorate and academic consulting, and even about my articles and fiction writing. But it was her moment. “Fantastic,” I said.

“Oh sure,” she replied, “what good does it all do me now? I can’t do anything anymore, got no friends, can’t get out. I live only a block away, in a condo—and I hate it. Always had my own home, and with a garden—“she spread her hands as if nurturing flowers—“but my last husband left me this.” Her lips curled down.

I started to praise her independent living, but she wouldn’t hear it. Instead, she stepped closer and whispered, “He was, you know, seeing someone. Bought a home for that tart, and I get this beat-up condo with no garden.”

In all the high-rises in the area, many people grew flowers, trees, almost jungles on their terraces. They used vases, bowls, pots, pails, and planters from the market garden sections and home improvement emporiums.

As I suggested a hardy plant the market sold, she jumped again. “Oh, men are treacherous! He was jealous of my doctorate and my smart friends. I married him on the boulder—what do you call it—after my real husband died. Never should have. I hope you have a good man.”

I thought of my blessedly supportive, positive, non-degreed husband. “I do,” I said, ready to show her that, like her “real husband,” a few other good men still existed.

But she exclaimed. “Where are the blue cheese crumbles? Never there when you want it. They love this dressing.”

I led her a few feet away, rummaged in the case, and handed her the package. She dropped it into her basket. “You’re so sweet. Call me Miss Althea.”

I bowed slightly, and she smiled, the skin across her cheeks stretching like sun-baked canvas.

She looked down at her cart. “So expensive.” Another swerve. “I can’t get a job. No one will hire me at this age. Can’t even read anymore.”

Finally, I succumbed. “What about a senior center? I think there’s one a few blocks away. People there will read to you, whatever you want.”

She made a hissing sound. “Tried it once. With my education, I’m so far above

those people—nothing at all in common.”

I bit again. “How about adult education courses? The local colleges have classes in archeology, literature, history, everything, by well-known, intellectual lecturers.”

“I couldn’t. Don’t drive. Don’t want go out alone at night. There are rapists out there, you know.”

I knew most of the courses were held in the afternoons, and people often went together in one car. Should I try again?

As if to head me off, she added quickly, “But I help at church. I volunteer for Father. I’m a good Catholic.”

“That’s good,” I said. “It helps to get out among people.”

“I can only do so much.”

I nodded, instantly regretting my helpful observation.

She touched a finger to her eye. “I wish the Lord would take me. I’m ready. I wouldn’t force it—you know what I mean—but I’m ready.”

I’d renewed my exercise regimen and added to the cottage-cheese diet daily affirmative thoughts and expectance of unabated energy, believing the proliferating articles on the secrets of healthy longevity. My copious current projects chafed in all stages of completion, and stacks of scribbled-note writing plans waited. I could never imagine being ready.

She swerved again. “You’re so cute and helpful, so kind. Now take care of yourself, you hear.” I was being dismissed. “Keep that figure now. So you won’t be alone, like me.”

I thanked her and held up one of my five low-fat cartons of panacea, moving slightly away.

To my shock, she suddenly reached out, seized my hand, and kissed it.

We locked into each other's faces, connecting across the years. Despite her refusal to take any advice, spontaneously I hugged her, circling her bony frame with care.

Then, as abruptly as she had first started talking, she turned away and headed for the checkout. I pushed my cart down the aisle into the salad greens.

For a moment, I wanted to run after her, walk her home, carry her bag, become a friend. I'd visit once a week. I'd take her to concerts, museums, lectures, the market. We'd share naughty Father-disapproving jokes. But instead, I wheeled into the watercress.

But the image of Miss Althea lingered. The world had done her wrong, of course, and nothing anyone said or did could make it right. She'd probably frustrated many, including her real husband, with her refusals to admit to anything positive. Yet her energy and animation belied her self-defeatism. I could even forgive her disingenuousness—couldn't see but saw enough to give me extravagant compliments, hating her matriarch role but going out of her way to make a special salad dressing to please her token-visiting relatives, unable to leave the house but faithfully volunteering at the church.

Cottage cheese isn't my only strategy. I collect role models— the 84-year-old woman who does yoga, the 90-year-old marathon runner, the 100-year-old man who paints and exhibits his shows, the many and increasing musicians, artists, sculptors, writers who continue to create, getting better, through mounting decades. Miss Althea, life surging through her disparagements, now joined them.

So, whether I'm wearing tight jeans or baggy slacks, plunging jerseys or buttonhigh blouses, however time has clawed my face, I'll bless Miss Althea. Her unremitting vivacious grievances renew my conviction to reject the society-soaked dire predictions of escalating numbers. Miss Althea reminds me, instead, to live a zealous, glorious, creative life.

A Secret Garden

By Nicole M. Bouchard

When I think back to some of the most enchanting moments of my childhood, I remember a place of sanctuary on cold afternoons. To take you there, I must first describe it before telling the reason why it was so dear to me.

We're sitting in a greenhouse with a ceiling of snow above our heads. The winter has cloaked the glass panels thickly as if to conceal us inside. An aged wooden table sits between us as we lean forward from our wrought iron chairs and discuss our dreams. The hutch stocked with tea seems more like a Victorian cabinet of tinctures, one for every ill. I choose the Raspberry tea which I highly recommend you try. A bit of hot water makes the tea bag spring to life in the cup as herbs swirl, spiraling upward to flush your face warm with the aroma. It's a taste and smell I've never forgotten. It brings to mind the perfect rosy red with just a hint of purple. I can only describe it as a color because the tea is so powerful that it brings on a temporary case of synesthesia—a condition which confuses the senses so that one might hear color or feel taste. And this soft glow is a memory of all sacred childhood things. It is the scent of mulberry in my mother's desk drawers, the berry-red Victorian coat I was surprised with one Christmas, the burgundy button-down shirt my father was wearing when he appeared in a doorway the moment I needed him, the room of a childhood best friend. It is this tea that unlocks my mind and heart, setting the atmosphere adrift as though this sanctuary is a world apart from every concern I've ever had.

Beautifully hand-crafted items, golden mirrors, stone sculptures, greenery and an elevated platform seeming nearly holy with the draped white gossamer twined round the arch over it make this place seem enchanted. The floor is made up of small smooth stones so that our feet sink a little as we talk. Stone walls and steps surround the outside. There is an enclosed shop at the front with delicate treasures. The building doesn't look of this time. Across the way there are tall iron gates and delightful patches of trees covering still, sacred ground. There is no fear that comes of knowing that this space across the street is part of a grand cemetery. The spiritual peace is nearly palpable in every season.

Once inside the shop with its dark cherrywood paneling and Victorian décor, we look at the items that have come from all over the world; the sweet vanilla oil in a bottle with an impressionist painting of the young woman I wished to be... the Provence lavender soap wrapped in soft, fragrant paper... the silk ribbons dyed with artistic delicacy... the hand-painted box, hunter green with gold detail,

topiaries and small red blossoms with handsomely fragrant wood- a veritable treasure chest...

The proprietor always dresses in white- a contrast to her ebony hair as she comes down to greet us.

Now that I've brought you with me, I can tell you why this simple Victorian garden shop and greenhouse is a place so firmly entrenched in the wonderment of my younger years.

At that rustic wooden table we visited earlier, I'd sit with my mother after school. We didn't feel it necessary to bring our cares with us. It was a perfect sanctuary where creativity reigned, where it was never cold, never bare, never even winter despite the snow. In the perfectly gray shadows, every dream came alive, growing first from one seed of thought. For years we visited that secret place of eternal spring. I would free my shoulders of the school bag whose weight increased each year both upon my back and my heart. Flinging it into the car while the icy rain came down, there it and its burdens would remain until I was ready to reclaim them.

So much of life is seeing the beauty in each day, salvaging sweetness through moments, people and places.

Though the shop is no longer, its charms are linked on a bracelet of memories my slender wrist wears. Amongst many other precious times with loved ones, this blossom bursting through the pavement is a constant reminder of what we make of the days that could've otherwise been rued.

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