

New Beginnings

Volume 6 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies.

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Don McCann, Brian O'Hare, Rodney Page, Esma Race,
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And Prolog by Brian Bossetta

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A Soldier's Tale illustrated by Veronica Castle
Interview with a Ghost and *Not in Flower Yet* illustrated by Don Ford
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Where a charge is made for this book, all profit will go to
the child sexual abuse charity **Stop It Now!**

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A note on spelling: you will find either UK or US spellings employed according to usage in the country of origin of the author concerned.

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FOREWORD

By **Lisa Beere**

Greetings Readers!

I was thrilled to learn that **Stop It Now!** would be the designated charity for receiving the proceeds from **New Beginnings**, volume six of the Crimson Cloak Publishing anthologies-for-charity program.

Stop It Now! is a charity which actively combats child sexual abuse by treating it as a preventable, public health problem. Check out the website to learn more about how **Stop It Now!** provides advocacy, tools, resources, consulting and training services. <http://www.stopitnow.org/our-work>

Child sexual abuse is unfortunately something that AFFECTS US ALL. Whether we have gone through it personally or we know someone who has. It is a problem that we must address *together*, as a society. By learning what to look for in children and teens that are abused, we will be in a better position to protect and support the health of the next generation.

Your purchase of **New Beginnings** will help people to find their own new beginning, through **Stop It Now!**

Thank you for your support.

~o~

PROLOG

By **Brian Bossetta**



“**W**hy is this tree so important to you?”

“It’s a dogwood. You know about the dogwood tree don’t you?”

“I’ve heard of it, but ...”

“The cross was made out of this tree. And I ain’t talking about the cross you burned here.” He lifted a petal in his hand. “See how it blooms in the shape of a cross? See the holes in the petals? Know what that signifies? They represent the holes in the hands and feet from the nails. You look closely you can see a touch a’ red, which is the blood from the nails.” He released the flower and slapped the trunk of the tree. “This used to be the sturdiest and strongest of all trees. But after it was used to make the cross God would never let them grow big and strong again. That’s why they’re so skinny and frail now. But still, this tree represents life and rebirth. It may not be strong enough to hang a man, but it’s strong enough to reflect the divine.”

Taken from his book The Piano Keys, published by Crimson Cloak Publishing

The Family Quilt

By Lisa Beere

Slowly, I move forward
Approaching the bed
Her prone frame lies waiting there
Softly breathing
Looking up
But no longer seeing
Draped over her hands
Is the green and white quilt
She has been creating
Since I was a child
I used to watch
Her nimble hands
Working the thread
Tying together
Each special square
With a significant meaning
Carrying stories
From one generation to the next
She would retell these stories
Often enough
That we all knew them well
And watching
We'd see
Each
Interwoven
Into the quilt
Now
It was time
To let it be
Her hands so frail
Blue veins lumping across
And the bony bumps
Of unforgiving arthritis
Distorting what was once
Beautiful
Yet, on the quilt shall go
As I gently take it from her hands
The mantle now passed
I will continue
Providing the service
My hands will add
Future links
And stories will be retold

As she goes into her final slumber
I'm certain
That somehow
She knows

[Sing Me a Song Tonight](#)

By [Eva Bell](#)

Gina stood at her attic window gazing up at the starlit sky. Sleep was evasive. In fact, she hadn't slept well for the last four days. Her tired limbs ached for respite, but her mind refused to shut down for the night.

Why has the music stopped? she wondered. *It was like a lullaby that put me to sleep every night. It made me dream dreams of a better tomorrow when a father and mother would claim me as their own.*

The melodious voice that wafted down from the bungalow which overlooked Brake Hill Farm, was the highlight of her miserable and lonely life. She had never seen any of the occupants, but every night unfailingly someone would light up her dark world with the passion of his voice. His enchanting melodies lulled her tired body to sleep.

Four days today... Has the singer left home? Is he ill with a sore throat? Life is going to be difficult if I don't have something to look forward to at the end of a hard day's work.

She lay down on the hard wooden cot with its lumpy mattress, and pulled the patchwork quilt over her slender frame.

At least it's warm in here. And for that I need to be thankful. They could have made me sleep in the sty with its smelly, grunting sows.

Gina was nine years old. She had been with an Adoption Agency for the last three years, but no parents had come forward to adopt her.

Why? she wondered. *Children who have come to the Agency much later have all found homes. Most of the couples look at me, mutter among themselves and turn away.*

Three years ago, the gypsy caravans had rolled into Anglia and parked on a caravan site on the periphery of Norfolk. People hated these nomads from Romania who lived by their wits, begging, stealing, cheating and getting into drunken brawls with the locals and with each other. They were the pariahs of the European world, despised and feared by the general populace.

No one knew who had torched the caravan that belonged to Gina's family. Her father had many enemies within the troupe. His rude behaviour and caustic tongue became intolerable when he had a drink or two. So some believed a member of the troupe might have set his caravan on fire. But most were convinced that it was the work of the local mafia who hated the gypsies. Gina's entire family had perished in the flames. She too had suffered burns on her body and extremities. One of the gypsies had rushed her to the hospital. Then considering their duty done, the caravans had rolled out of Norfolk with lightning speed.

"The police are just waiting to pin something on us. Let's be gone before that."

Gina's burns were not too deep. But they had taken over two weeks to heal.

"Where are my parents and brothers?" she kept asking the nurses, "I want to go back to our caravan."

No one had the heart to tell her that she was left an orphan and abandoned by the other gypsies.

The Child Welfare Department shifted Gina to an Adoption Agency, hoping some kind couple would take her as their own. Gina herself hoped that the gypsies would come back for her.

There were many reasons why she was rejected.

“A gypsy child? Good Grief! She would have inherited all the bad qualities of her tribe. We’re not prepared to take the risk,” one couple said.

“She’s too big and probably already well versed in the tricks of her community. It will be a difficult job getting her to toe the ‘straight and narrow,’” another said.

“The girl is good looking, but the burn mark on her cheek spoils everything. The scars on her body and legs also reduce her chances of adoption.”

And so when Cynthia and Jack Rivers offered to take Gina into foster care until she found suitable parents, the Agency thought it was very kind of them. They had been registered as foster parents for many years and were dependable and deeply concerned about the welfare of such children. They always opted for older children.

“Besides, they are wealthy and not doing this for the allowance we give,” thought the Director, “They are religious and God-fearing people, well respected in the community. They can be good role models for Gina.”

Brake Hill Farm was primarily a potato farm. But they also had a thriving piggery with healthy sows that were always in the process of reproducing. The farm was far out in the countryside and the social workers rarely visited to check on the children under the care of this family. They merely made enquiries over the phone from time to time, and were given glowing reports of Gina’s progress.

“I’ve been home schooling her,” assured Cynthia, “And though she’s not too intelligent, she is making good progress.”

Two full months had gone by. Gina had become a shadow of her former self. There was no respite from work morning till night. Cleaning out the piggery and feeding the pigs was hard work. Each sow was twice the weight of Gina. The offensive stench of the sty clung to her body no matter how many times she washed herself. Besides, the timing of her arrival at Brake Hill farm had been well planned to coincide with potato harvesting time. So Gina had to help pick the potatoes, gather them into baskets and empty them into the tractor which Jack drove back and forth between the fields and the store house.

I could work better if my stomach didn’t growl so much with hunger, thought Gina, it makes me very uncomfortable. Sometimes I feel I have no strength in my arms or legs. Even the pigs are better fed than I.

For breakfast, it was always a bowl of gooey porridge with a pinch of sugar. Sometimes when Cynthia was not looking, Jack would pass her a slice of bread. For lunch and dinner she was served two boiled potatoes with a thin sliver of meat. The hateful sour rhubarb custard was forced on her for dessert.

It makes my insides burn, Gina thought, One of these days I’m going to drop down dead. If only I could contact the Agency. But I don’t know how to use the phone nor do I have the number of the institution.

However on Sundays, Cynthia Rivers made allowances. Gina was permitted to wear one of the clean dresses she had brought from the Agency. Her hair was combed and tied with a ribbon. With her socks and shoes on, she looked respectable and rode with the couple to church in their all-purpose jeep.

Cynthia herself looked different in her old fashioned dress with its puffed sleeves. With her black straw hat perched on her head and her Bible tightly clutched against her ample bosom, she looked a paragon of saintliness.

“Oh dear,” said her friends, “Is this the child you are fostering? She’s a lucky girl. You do look after her like your own. She seems happy and contented.”

“Blind fools!” cursed Gina under her breath, *Can’t they see I’m just skin and bones? If they sit next to me they’ll hear the angry growling of my stomach.*

“Your rewards will be great Cynthia. Looking after a gypsy vagrant is no joke. Did you say no one was willing to adopt her?”

None of them could see the sadness in the eyes of the child and the desperation in her demeanour. She wanted so much to be loved. But hope refused to die.

“I wonder if one of these couples will adopt me,” Gina thought, as her eyes travelled over the pews. Each Sunday she came expecting a break but went back sorely disappointed.

The pious souls in this congregation had no room for such sentiments. Adopting a gypsy child was furthest from their minds as they sang, “Happy the home when God is there and love fills every one ...”

The Sunday after the singer had stopped singing, Gina begged off from church. She had spent a sleepless night tossing and turning on her lumpy mattress.

“Aunty Cynthia, I have the runs. I had to go to the toilet several times during the night and feel very weak. Please can I stay home?”

“We can’t have you running to the loo and disturbing others, can we? Okay you can stay home today. But be sure to clean out the pig sty and feed the pigs. Some prospective buyers will be coming tomorrow.”

Gina breathed a sigh of relief. She waited for a good fifteen minutes after they left, then ran to the periphery of the farm.

If I climb on to our boundary wall which isn’t too high, I can make it to the neighbour’s wall from there, and then jump down, she thought.

But it was a deep drop and she wondered if she would hurt herself.

“I have to take the risk. I must find out what happened to the singer and why he doesn’t sing any more. Help me God,” she cried as she jumped down.

I’m in good shape, she thought, feeling her legs, *No bones broken, no ankles twisted. Only a slight graze on my palms.*

She ran towards the front door of the house and knocked. A middle aged woman opened the door.

“My, my, look who we have here,” she called to her husband, “A visitor on Sunday morning!”

She asked Gina, “Are you looking for somebody?”

“Yes, I’m in a hurry. I want to meet the singer. Is he unwell? I haven’t heard his song for the last four days and I’ve come to beg him to sing me a song tonight.”

The lady’s dark eyes sparkled with mischief.

“Come in and meet the only occupant of this house and I’ll be surprised if he can sing.”

“I must rush back. Can’t stay long. Besides, I must smell of the pigs.”

“Oh, you can come in for a moment dear. We’re not too fussy,” she said, inviting Gina in.

Gina addressed the middle aged man who stood up as she entered.

“Are you the man with the golden voice? Why have you stopped singing?”

He shook his head. “Not me, dear. You’ve got the wrong man.”

“I couldn’t have imagined it. I have heard someone singing every night. It was his voice that lulled me to sleep after a tiring day.”

“Let me get you some coffee and then we’ll talk,” said the lady, Vera. Turning to Harry her husband she said, “Dear, you keep her entertained.”

She was soon back with a plate of pancakes straight off the griddle, topped with golden treacle. There was a cup of coffee too. Gina felt herself salivating in anticipation. She could barely keep herself from grabbing a pancake and stuffing it into her mouth.

As Gina ate, Vera began to talk.

“The singer you heard was my son. It is recorded music we play every night to make us feel near to him.”

“Where does he live?”

“We don’t know if he’s alive,” said Harry gulping back a sob. “Our boy was in the Army and his battalion was sent off to Iraq during the war. We were told that he was missing in action. But we hoped he was alive somewhere. So we kept playing his songs every night just to keep hope alive in our hearts. He loved music and had a wonderful voice.”

Then Vera continued the story.

“But just a few days ago we received information from the Army that they were closing his file as he was presumed dead. We didn’t have the heart to listen to his voice after that.”

Vera dabbed her moist eyes.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Gina said, throwing her arms around Vera, “I never thought it was recorded music. The voice seemed so clear and real. I wonder how I will ever fall asleep each night? Now I must go. Cynthia and Jack will be home soon.”

“No, don’t go yet. Are you our neighbour’s daughter? In all these years we’ve never got acquainted. I guess it’s the high wall that separates our properties. You look very thin and undernourished. Have you been ill? And what is that mark on your face?” Vera asked.

Gina poured out her story between sobs. There was no holding back. She told them of her ill treatment and near starvation and her loneliness and longing for love.

“No one wants to adopt me because I’m a gypsy’s daughter and because I’m not pretty with these burn marks on my face and body. Ma’am, I beg you do me a favour. Could you please contact the Agency and tell them to take me back before I die of exhaustion?”

“Now I must run along ... Thank you for those yummy pancakes.”

She had just reached home when she heard the jeep turn the corner. Soon Cynthia’s voice bawled from the drive way: “Gina, where are you? Have you finished all the chores I set you?”

That night, Gina heard a song again. But it was a woman’s voice and it was a hymn. She had heard it sung during prayer hour at the Agency.

*“There’s a friend for little children above the bright blue sky,
A friend who never faileth, whose love can never die.”*

But every night after that, she heard the recorded voice of the couple’s son. As she slipped into sleep, she prayed that God would take away their sorrow.

A few weeks later, a social worker from the Agency called unannounced. Even before she could enter the house, she heard Cynthia’s high pitched voice.

“You lazy girl, where are you? Have you emptied the slough and washed out the troughs?”

“Yes Auntie. I’m working as fast as I can.”

The social worker’s eyes filled with tears as Gina came into view. She was no better than a scarecrow.

If only I hadn't shirked my duty and missed out on my visits, she thought, I could have saved Gina a lot of misery.

"Gina," she called, "Come here. I've come to take you back. I'm sorry I didn't do this earlier."

Cynthia was out in a flash.

"What? Taking her back without giving me notice? You can't do that."

"We can Cynthia and I should have come earlier. I see you've been treating her like a servant in spite of the generous remuneration we pay you for her upkeep. The girl is just a shadow of her old self."

Turning to Gina she said, "Get your things together, dear. I have good news for you but it must wait till we get back. You've waited so long and another hour won't hurt."

"A real Mama and Papa for me?"

There, awaiting her on the steps of the Agency were Vera and Harry.

"Don't be afraid, child," Vera assured, drawing her close, "We'll love you with all our hearts. We have found a daughter to fill the vacuum in our lives."

Out of Control

By Janice Clark

The sun rose, its beams spiking through the blinds to stab at her closed eyelids. Phyllis awakened with a start, her heart pounding. She must have forgotten to set the alarm; they'd be late to work. Jim would be furious.

A quick glance at the other side of the bed brought her back to reality. It's Saturday, she realized. Jim left last night for a weekend fishing trip with his buddies. She sank back on the pillow, catching her breath. She snuggled down in the warm blankets, relishing the rare moment of self-indulgence.

Habit soon forced her out of bed, but she deliberately lingered in the hot shower and took her time dressing. She worked yesterday's crossword puzzle while enjoying a peaceful, unhurried breakfast.

The house was clean, as always. Jim insisted on cleanliness, but didn't like her doing housework on weekends—that was *his* time, when she was supposed to do whatever *he* wanted—as if she didn't do that the rest of the week.

She mentally tallied up a list of outside chores to be done, but noticed with guilty pleasure that it was raining. It would have been nice to go somewhere—even grocery shopping by herself would be a treat—but Jim had the car and it was miles to the nearest little town. There was probably something she could do indoors. Write to her mother, or maybe do a load of laundry. On the other hand ... did she dare? She did.

Feeling like a child playing hooky, she settled down in an easy chair and opened the book she had started reading...how long ago? Months, perhaps. Too long to remember the details. She started over from the beginning, and was still reading when she realized it was time for lunch. Past time, in fact, but Jim wasn't here to complain. As she thought of Jim, she found herself absent-mindedly rubbing the scar on her forehead.

A simple lunch, and back to the book. She didn't even wash the dishes, although she felt a pang of anxiety and guilt as she turned her back on the sink. She was still reading when the telephone rang.

Probably a telemarketer, she thought. They didn't have any friends, and the kids rarely called. But the State Patrolman on the line had disturbing news. Jim's car had gone over a cliff. His friends, in the car behind, had seen the car accelerate suddenly before leaving the road, and called the police.

Phyllis' voice shook as she asked "Is he...Is he in a hospital somewhere?"

"No, ma'am. I'm sorry. Is there someone, a family member maybe, you could call to sit with you a bit? I'm sure this is a great shock."

"Yes, of course; I'll call my neighbor right away." Her hand shook as she jotted down all the information.

In a daze, Phyllis returned to her chair. Her head was spinning. She should call the insurance company, she thought. And the funeral home. There would be so many things to deal with. It was all so overwhelming; she didn't know where to start. She sat, her body tense, trying to grasp that Jim was gone. She was a widow.

It took a while for the idea to sink in. As she gradually relaxed, a smile spread over her face. No more being yelled at or shaken until her teeth rattled. No more fits of jealousy. No more being afraid, knowing if she left him she'd likely wind up on the front pages of the paper as just another stalking victim. No more. She'd have to

call the children, but they had all left home as soon as they were old enough. Maybe now they'd be willing to visit more often. It would be heavenly to spend time with the grandchildren.

She leaned back and sighed. Her conscience was clear; she had reminded Jim only yesterday that they needed to take the car in for the recall repairs. Years of fantasies didn't count.

She picked up her book and began to read again, just as the sun went down.

[The Family Park](#)

By [T. W. Embry](#)

The neighbors peered out their windows and clucked their tongues again; the neighborhood crazy man was back. Six months ago, the crazy man and his wife had a huge giveaway and then moved out; donating what was left and disappeared without a word to any of their longtime neighbors.

He was standing under the huge oak tree in the back yard, behind that old ramshackle house, the eyesore of the block. He was talking to that tree again. He spoke to it as if it understood him and he could understand it. Unknown to them it was his tree-friend, Father Oak, given to him by his father and precious to the crazy man, for to the nosy neighbors it was just another tree with weeds around it.

Yet here he stood once again. The self-appointed lawn police of the neighborhood had no idea what was coming. What they did not know was that he was waiting on the first of the equipment to arrive.

First to come would be the wrecking crew to demolish what had been in its day the best house on the block. In fact, it was the oldest house in the neighborhood. Hard financial times had hobbled the owners and the house had fallen into a state of disrepair. The nosy neighbors were happy to see the eyesore come down. Patting themselves on the back: their complaints had finally won.

The next day the survey crew showed up as if to build a new house. *At last, our property values will increase*, they thought quite greedily. *At last, we will be rid of that huge, ugly bougainvillea by the road we all hate so much*, they all cheered. Imagine their surprise when the crew begins to survey behind the nosy neighbor's house. *What could this be?* the forked tongues cluck.

They know not of the wilderness-designated area they thought was vacant land, their hobbies built behind the new orange lines. So deliriously happy it made the crazy man to think that first would come the bobcats, with their noxious exhaust and their noisy trucks and trailers. If only they would come on an early Sunday morning, that would be the icing on the cake. He imagined how mightily they would toil to uproot the twisted mass of invasive Brazilian pepper trees that have overgrown the wilderness area, strangling out the native vegetation. A duty long neglected by the city leaders. A duty of which the crazy man happily reminds them.

A pretty penny it cost the crazy man to get the city's approval, campaign donations to multiple accounts. Another to get the city planner on board, to his church the crazy man gives in the name of Jesus! The crazy man's plan was now almost complete. *Please, please allow me to restore this park! I will pay for it all!* he pleaded to any in City Hall that would hear. Unknown to the politicians, a web of deceit the crazy man spins, all in the name of his long awaited revenge.

Permits secured, then came the fertilizer trucks, each an odor to be reckoned with. Where was once a green, twisted mass of invasive pests now stood great piles of chicken shit waiting to be spread. The bobcats again worked their magic and in but a week black dirt covered that smell so foul.

Next came the backhoes, each with their own noisy truck and trailer, and the planting of pine, maple and cypress, an oak hammock now created. Thrilled were the neighbors, *this will make my house worth that much more!* The crazy man was not yet through, his thirst for revenge for all those years of torment still unquenched and burning bright.

Where once stood a nosy neighbor's garden now stands a picnic pavilion open to the public, the unpermitted fire pit now a concrete public bathroom. *Outrageous!* say the indignant nosy neighbors at the city council meetings. They demand a hedge be built to protect their privacy.

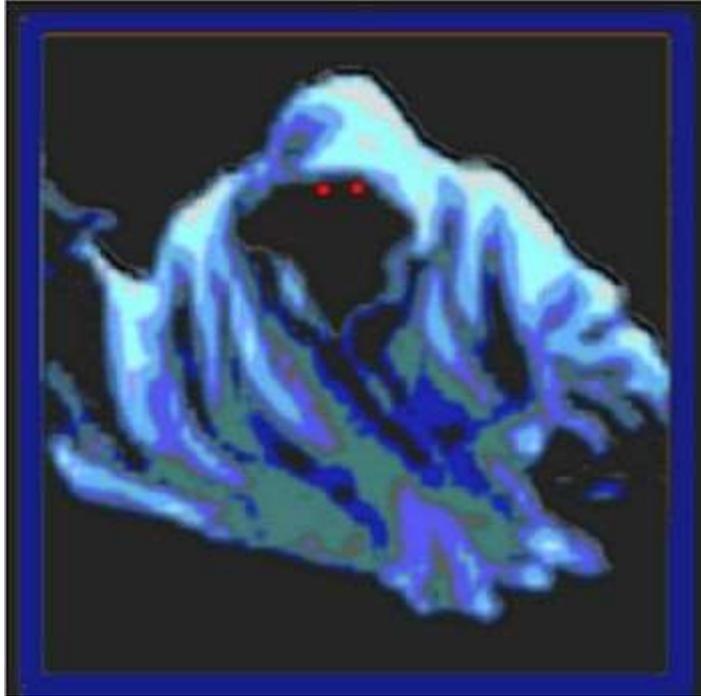
The crazy man gladly complies. For at last he has his revenge, that forbidden taste so sweet. Where once stood his house is now a parking lot for the park in his name. A constant reminder to his nosy neighbors of what they had done. Reminding them of the many mornings and evenings of the crazy man's solitude they shattered with the redundant use of lawn equipment. The crazy man remembered all those years of holding back despite the many anonymous calls to the city code enforcement. It was time for payback for all those many hours in the hot sun, being forced to live up to someone else's idea of what a proper lawn should look like. The neighbor's muscle, the city, as guilty as the nosy neighbors, for they allowed minding someone else's business to become allowed by law. Only a truly crazy man would fight City Hall.

A hedge the crazy man gleefully had planted, one of all the different shades of bougainvillea. The crazy man smiled once it was complete, his thirst for revenge quenched at last. For now Father Oak was protected, the cardinal, the jay and the mocking bird all have a place to sing, to call home. Neighborhood children have a place to play, families a place to gather.

The nosy neighbors are no longer the crazy man's concern; let them now complain to the city when the grass no longer suits them. For the crazy man had become a famous author. One who, despite the incessant intrusion of lawn equipment, finished his newest book; and it sold very well. They even made it into a movie. So now, the author finally lives in peace, no neighbors anywhere near. He and the love of his life enjoy the simple things like the birds singing on a cool spring morning. Or listening to the crickets and the frogs crying for rain at dusk on a warm and muggy summer's eve. Thankful is he for no more traffic, car alarms, ambulances or nosy neighbors. This is but another lesson in why things may not be as they seem and why you should not piss off a writer. For you will truly suffer on a page somewhere.

[Interview with a Ghost](#)

By [Don Ford](#)



You won't believe the following account. I have interviewed celebrities, and supposed vampires, even a werewolf who was retired. I never did get his retirement angle, but I didn't laugh when he told me either.

Look at me. Don't I look and sound normal to you? But I keep getting these wierdos approaching me to be interviewed. Like a magnet they are drawn to me. Today had to be my strangest day of all. I was hearing a voice in the room, but no one was there, at least not visible.

I finally got up the courage to ask a question. "Who exactly are you?"

"I've been in your worst nightmares, if that's what you were thinking. I have been there to haunt you at times. I'm the kid that won't go away in your head. I won't let you forget me. You're not sorry for what you did to me."

"Sorry, don't know you! Now get out of here."

"Or you will what, scare me? Remember, I'm the ghost here. I'm here to frighten you, not the other way around. I'm not leaving until you right this wrong."

"I'm not afraid, nor am I buying into all of these smoking mirror tricks of yours. This is a great Halloween prank, isn't it. You are going to come jumping out at any moment."

"I'm dead because of you. You bullied and picked on me so much that I couldn't take it anymore. You had no right pushing me to the edge."

"Is this Sean? You killed yourself."

"But you drove me to it. You put the thought in my head. First in school around my friends, and then on Facebook with everyone I knew. I kept telling you to back off; you just kept coming at me, ridiculing my weight.

"Pretty soon I had no friends left, and I thought even less of myself. I had no one who cared. You kept it up until I said to myself *what's the use*. I started believing your lie. Maybe fat people really don't deserve to live, so I ended it.

“My parents cry every night since that terrible act I performed. I have you to thank, and I’ll be around as your constant reminder. I notice you don’t have a guardian angel hovering over you as do most folks, so lucky me, I get to be your ghost up close and personal.

“The way I look at it, you don’t have too many friends after what you did to me. No one talks to you - but they know. As soon as I was found dead in my room with the suicide note pinned to my shirt, your friends all abandoned you.

“You see, your friends as you call them, were afraid of being bullied by you too, so they pretended to be your friends and laughed at me as well. Funny how things that come around go around. LOL.”

“Look, I’m Catholic and I went to confession. I told the priest how sorry I was and he forgave me.”

“He forgave you! Who is he? You didn’t do anything to him, you did it to me, you moron. I’m the one you should be asking to forgive you. Get it through your thick skull, the one devoid of much grey matter, I’m dead!

“Here is your chance to make amends and put this chapter behind you. I’ll just keep hanging around and haunting you until my demands are met. You have others to say you’re sorry to, such as my Mom and Dad, and my brother and sister. They all miss me and never teased me because I was overweight.

“In another week it will be Halloween and I assume a new identity. I’m a Zombie then and I go terrorizing the neighborhood starting at your place for sure. Everyone there will think it’s just a kid come for treats, not realizing I have tricks and mischief up my sleeve.”

“Look, you’re right. I want to tell you how sorry I am that I acted so poorly.”

“I can’t hear you! Speak up so others can hear you too.”

“I’m sorry, so very sorry for being a bully. I’ll go and tell your family too, right now.”

“If you do that, then I’ll let you off the hook and take your name off my haunting list for now. I’m going to hang around for a while longer to be sure you don’t find someone to replace me, if you get my drift.”

“I’ll go even a step further. I’ll go to our principal and ask to talk to kids in school about the harm that’s done to others when we bully them. It’s the least I can do to show you I mean business.”

“You do that and you may even gain back a few friends you lost earlier, but this time they will be true friends to you and not talking bad behind your back as before.”

My days of interviewing strange persons ended that very night. As a matter of fact my entire life changed, and I sleep good nights without any more nightmares.

[Not In Flower Yet](#)

By [Don Ford](#)



I feel a poem is soon to bud
An expression lying deep within

I don't, I can't, I won't
Why should I, or you, or any,
Be forced, or cajoled

To do it!

I'm sad, I'm mad, I'm angry
A Poem, a Story, in my own time
When I'm ready, I will share

And not before!

[The Trestle of Life: Bridging Generations](#)

A Fisherman's Story

By [Anthony J. Gerst](#)

Reminiscing is often a flippant exercise. A casual look into the past to uplift an individual's day or strengthen one's resolve in moments and times of struggle. Collectively it can be used to help unite people, be they a tribe, a club or a nation state, to endure troubling times and afford sacrifice for the destiny of their progeny. Reminiscing, however, can be a helpful tool when used with deep contemplative reflection as well. Reflections that strengthen resolve impose ethical character and cleanse the slate of history, offering a point of renewal on our pathway through life. Travel with me through a collection of outdoor recollections of the past as I deal with the issues of age and aging and explain what conclusions I have reached.

As a young child, I grew up in a big two-story white farmhouse that sat on top of a hill among one of Iowa's earliest settlements, a little place called Kossuth. My bedroom had windows facing south. The view looked out past the dirt lane running alongside the barns, through the hog lot and out into the fields. I can recall many a late summer night being awakened by a mournful wail or the light of a distant train coming up the tracks to the small town of Mediapolis.

You could hear the train for miles and see it coming for the last three. On some nights, the train sat on the tracks near the little community of Sperry, to the south. They were loading cattle or taking on coal, I would think, maybe they were delivering the mail to the local post office there. I never knew why the train stopped on the tracks, to be honest. The light from the train on those dark nights shone so bright into my room it would often awaken me. Quietly getting out of bed, I would move over to my little red hand-me-down desk in the quiet of the night and stare off into the distance waiting for the train to come down the tracks.

My favorite nights, however, were those with a full moon. You would have seen shimmering reflections off the train and heard the whistle let out its lonesome moan. The Burlington Northern still runs, although those tracks and that farmhouse I grew up in are now gone. They have disappeared from the landscape if not my memories.

Approaching my fortieth birthday, those magical moonlit summer nights have been brought back into focus lately, reinforced by tales of a railroad trestle. Throughout my family's history, stories of this bridge are told. The trestle itself is hardly impressive. It is just a mere remnant of the past now, the only indication of an old railroad line that has been gone since probably the early 60s if not the mid-50s. It spanned 100-150 feet in length across a creek that often during the summer didn't have a single drop of water in it.

This forgotten piece of land belonged to the now defunct Minneapolis/St. Louis line and skirted the lowlands of the Iowa River floodplains. I have finally made the trek to face my family's nemesis. However, before I relate my fishing tale, I must share stories of the past. Tales of victory, tales of defeat and tales of catfish some say were demonically possessed.

My Great Uncle Bob, another angler *extraordinaire* like myself, would regale me with stories of pre-depression era fishing. Before the Army Corps of Engineers ruined everything, as he was fond of pointing out. When he was a young man, the railroad line was still in use. He would reminisce about walking down the tracks to the

railroad trestle from an old abandoned house that sat just off the bluff road, about three quarters of a mile away from the crossing.

You see, the bridge actually crosses the creek less than 300 yards from the Iowa River. From the mouth of the river, the creek is more like a meandering trail of zigs and zags that stretches on for a mile and a half. The only time it is fishable that far back was and is during high water when the catfish run for the shelter and refuge of the trestle's deep honey-hole and circular pool.

My Great Uncle Bob spoke quite often of the times he had hiked there, a tin can full of nightcrawlers in one hand, his fishing pole and tackle in the other. At over six-foot tall he had that old Hollywood, Clark Gable, Errol Flynn look about him. The image of him making that trip is a Norman Rockwell painting etched permanently in my mind.

He told many stories about fishing that spot. His grandest story was of the time he spooked a behemoth from under the trestle. He claimed the fish's tail had hit the center support and the vibrations almost sent him tumbling off the bridge down into the murky waters. A wave no less than three feet high broke out from behind the pillar, heading for the river. Tracking the monster catfish down the creek he would almost be in casting range when another wave of retreat would leave the stream bed dry where he was just going to cast.

Finally, the fish had reached the mouth and rushed into the river, straight into the root system of an old cottonwood standing in the floodwaters. Never one to give up, my great uncle secured an old skiff, and headed out later in the day with some riggings: the old type of line, which looked like baling twine, and with hooks the size of a child's foot. For bait, he had caught and brought along a couple of two-pound bullheads or mud cats; whatever you call them.

Using a Blake hitch knot, he secured the line to the cottonwood and sank the bullhead as bait to the bottom of the river with an old windowpane counter-weight. He had put the other baitfish on a stringer, securing it in shallow waters as back up. Then he retreated to the safety of the shore to wait, watch, and listen. The next morning as he was approaching the tree, a thrashing commotion began at the root-bound end, which almost tipped over his boat. After several minutes of clubbing the monster with an oar, he brought aboard a 125-pound flathead.

Sounds far-fetched, doesn't it? However, I was fishing the mouth of this creek the other day, May 2003, when a wrinkly good ole boy, a real living fossil, in a boat, comes by and pulls up to the bank. We get to telling stories as only truly great anglers can do, about the fish that got away. Lo and behold, he tells a tale about an old gnarled up cottonwood with an exposed root system that looked like an entrance to the underworld that used to sit on the bank, only about ten feet further out in front of where I was sitting. As a teenager, he had tangled with a fish; one that he claimed must have come up from the river Styx, the gnarled root system being a portal to the beyond. He claimed that fish had dragged him, and his boat, upstream to the next creek. That creek is over a mile away folks, strange indeed!

My father, not an avid angler, used to work on the Minneapolis/St. Louis line back in the late forties, traveling from Oakville to Morning Sun, Iowa. He would have gone up and down the line on a motorized car, checking the tracks and making minor repairs, reporting any issues to the main office that could have become a major concern, such as the railroad bed being undercut from the floodwaters in the spring. I recall his story quite vividly, every time he told it his pupils would dilate and the spark in his eyes would dull, taking on a faraway expression.

It was only his second day on the job; he had been up the line the day before checking for breaks in the right-of-way. The floodwaters were everywhere and in spots seemed to go on forever. By far however, around the old railroad trestle it was the most inundated; as soon as his cart was on the trestle the water erupted with life.

Startled and gazing over the side into the murky waters, his hands came off the controls, stopping the cart in the middle of the bridge, just as the sun was going down. The flooded timbers and surrounding cornfields gave off an eerie feeling, like in the desolate backwaters of a marshy swamp.

He always repeated that the first thing he noticed was the area around him became unnaturally calm. Looking down the creek, he could see the trees were still swaying in the gusty breeze that had been blowing all day. Next, he mentioned how the air suddenly seemed to weigh him down, sinking his shoulders and pushing his head towards his chest, as if nature itself was compelling him to look down at the center pillar above which he was precariously perched.

He went on to explain that next it was as if a switch had been thrown, as the air about him became infused with a barrage of scents. Normally one smells the rich vibrant soils mixed with a brackish scent during high water near the major river systems in the Midwest. He told me, every time he repeated this story, there in the bubble of stillness, the air about him developed a moldy, if not an ancient smell. It was the type of smell one thinks an archeologist would encounter when entering a tomb for the first time. As if not all of these sensations to his senses were enough, an odd vibration started coming through the bridge, a faint thump. A rhythmic thump-thump-thump started to develop and come closer together.

My father, his eyes still transfixed on the center pillar, noticed ripples emanating from just below the surface. Then he saw it: a dorsal fin shot from under the trestle, headed downstream to where the pool gave way to the narrowing flow of the stream and spun around 180 degrees. A flathead catfish with a pair of red glowing eyes and a scarred head with marks like two lightning bolts cut into its skin rose to the surface. The head alone was the size of a 55-gallon drum. Then with a thrust of his tail, this monster fish was heading straight for the center support pillar. The resounding crash of catfish and timbers sent birds throughout the flooded plain heading toward the bluff and higher/dryer ground. My father claimed the resulting crash caused the bridge to start swaying. He quickly engaged the motor on the cart and left the scene behind. He claims to have never told this story to anyone but me. In the ten years since I first heard it, the story has been retold on several occasions, never with added flourish, always the same way, more like a memory recalled than a fishing tale. Once again, strange indeed.

My Great Uncle Harold always had an opinion on where the fish were. In one of his many stories, he recalled the high water flooding of the mid to late 60s, when he and his boys would run bank poles on the creek instead of trout-lines out in the river. He would fondly recall the times when all they brought out of this old honey-hole was 10 to 15-pound channel, big blue and yellow catfish. "The fish seemed to be waiting in line, you would remove one from the bank pole and another would jump out of the water to catch the bait as you tossed it back in," he would always say laughing. Like so many in the family, he too had a story to tell centered on the supporting pillar of that old bridge.

One evening after crossing the trestle, they had finished baiting the bank-poles and were heading back with a stringer full of catfish to basecamp, when his son noticed motion beneath the murky waves at the support pillar of the sturdy aging bridge. Having some extra line with them and bait to spare, they decided to drop some

bait behind the middle support. It looked to be the best spot in the entire honey-hole, and they just knew a good ole catfish was lurking there. Having attached a weight to the line, my uncle fed out the spool until it reached the water, some 16 feet or so away, and then continued to lower the bait until it slackened, having reached the bottom of the pool.

With the bait in the water, they secured the line to a railroad tie through a missing railroad spike, which had dislodged a knot in the bottom portion of the crosstie. They started back to camp but less than 100 feet away they heard a splash that echoed through the valley like thunder. Dropping the stringer of fish on the ground, they raced back to the bridge only to find an unnatural calm had settled over the area around the circular honey-hole. Too calm: something was wrong.

My great uncle noticed that the birds had gone silent, and then he realized the frogs and crickets were silent too. The air about them, he claimed, took on an eerie if not somewhat ancient, almost primeval quality. The atmosphere near the ground had a greenish hue, not unlike how the sky appears when a tornado is approaching. His son started pulling lightly on his pants leg, then almost in a frantic frenzy tried to get his attention, as my uncle realized that even the air refused to breathe life into the area around the railroad-trestle.

My cousin claimed the trees outside the area were still swaying in the breeze. It was as if everything encased within the spot was either afraid to move or paralyzed in a frozen moment of time. After being punched in the leg, my uncle finally glanced in the direction his son was pointing. Looking out to the middle of the bridge, toward the center pillar where less than fifteen minutes earlier they had secured their offering.

The line was gone, and not only that, looking up to where they had secured it, my Uncle realized the entire railroad tie was missing. Some splinters were stacked up against the actual rail where the timber had been ripped from its location, the only indication one had been there. Shaking his head in disbelief, my uncle claimed he stood there staring straight ahead unable to fathom a fish that could pull a crosstie from a bridge. He took his son's hand and they headed back to camp, picking up their earlier catch on the way. My cousin claimed my uncle's face had turned pale white and he moved slowly as if in a bewildered daze.

When they got back to the corner where the creek makes a sharp turn to the east, paralleling the Iowa River, one of his other sons who had been tending to the wild game soup, which was warming over the fire, asked what they had done down at the bridge to knock a tie into the water. The commotion had startled him so bad he almost knocked the kettle off the hook onto the ground, and several deer had bolted from the edge of the woods up the dirt road toward the cabins. He told them a railroad tie had come down the creek at a good pace, he was guessing the current at 15 to 18 mph and thought a bank must have busted down river to reverse the flow so quickly. It was then my uncle pointed out the current was still going upstream from the floodwaters. Something had towed that railroad tie behind it and not only that, the behemoth ripped that beam from the bridge a good 18 to maybe 20 feet above the waterline. Is it any wonder my Uncle always used fishing equipment the size of telephone poles and line the size of a barge's bowline?

Let us now fast forward to this past May 2003. I have been fishing the mouth of this creek for several years now but still have never been back to confront the great family nemesis. The other day while fishing, my Great Uncle Harold stopped by. He suggested I should make a basecamp at the bend in the creek, head up and try fishing at the family's secret honey-hole. The water was just the right level for picking up

several big cats. My friend and I were not doing so well at the mouth, so we decided to head out the next morning on a little fishing/exploration trip. Finally, the family nemesis and I would be face to center pillar.

We made base camp at the bend in the creek where the waters head straight south, about half-a-mile from the trestle. The area was well used; the dirt compacted after decades of use by my extended family and whomever else knew of that spot. You could take your pick of fire hearths built on the ground. Since the bend in the creek was there, deadwood always gathers there every spring making the chore of collecting firewood easy.

We soon had our camp set up and put out ditty poles around the undercut portion of the bank. We ran lines and sat vigil into the night, catching several nice fish. Knowing that toward sunup we would head to the bridge full of hopes and expectations of catching the biggest fish of our lives, we were confident, having brought modern equipment capable of light sea fishing, just in case the legends of behemoth catfish holding the spot were true. Who knew, perhaps a progeny of the fish my Great Uncle Bob claimed to have caught still held dominion over the location.

With the night slowly giving way to morning, we started out. We stayed up on the ridge in the field, about twenty yards back from the creek, because of the marshy water overflowing the banks in this lowland spot, as we headed toward the trestle of destiny. It was slow progress but we made our way back to the old railroad bridge. Breaking through the underbrush near the right-of-way, we arrived right as the sun was cresting the horizon. With a cascade of color flooding the pool and sunshine reflecting and casting shadows on and around the bridge, I felt like Cortez or Da Gama viewing the riches of a new world. Like a man poised looking backward and seeing into his future, all in one magical moment, frozen in time.

The bridge was not what I expected. It was better; half of the bridge had fallen off the trestle into the water. At some point in time, it had been set on fire and was a charcoal remnant of the past. Still it showed in all its glory a fishing hole that had to be the reclusive habitat of a majestic, grand old mister whiskers. The type of catfish dreams or perhaps nightmares are made of.

The layout of the honey hole was magnificent. The creek fed into a beautiful pool, complete with standing stumps, undercut banks, and in the center by the pillar of legend, a triangle of grassy tips stretched above the surface, adjacent to the deepest water in the pool.

While I was spellbound by my surroundings hearing the whispered voices from the past, I thought I heard a distant whistle blow, breaking my trance and returning me to the present. In the meantime, my friend had finished baiting up and sung off a great cast, right to the grassy spot where the behemoth most surely resided. I settled for a cast to an isolated stump. Then we nested down next to the bank and our poles, confident that we would return to camp with very freshly caught catfish to grill on an open flame for breakfast.

We had not been there more than ten minutes when I saw a twitch, tap and a tap. I was about to yell at my friend, since of course it was his pole getting the strike. When his rod tip did a two-foot snafu, in my mind's eye, a monster with a three-foot dorsal fin rose to the top. His drag started to scream off line silencing birds throughout the delta-like scene. I envisioned a tail fin six feet back from the dorsal.

This brief millisecond of my life gone, I looked up to see my friend. His arm was pumping up and down, line flailing in the breeze. His foot was stomping the ground as one expletive kept coming out of his mouth, over and over again. Now

folks, we are no strangers to big fish; a kind conservative estimate would have put that fish at 25-30 pounds.

Did I mention I was almost forty? This is a story about turning and contemplating forty. After all, it is just a number right? The reflections of our past are but a canvas of contemplation. The reviewing of these memories offers different lessons at different times on our journey through life, be they collective or individual in nature. They address the needs and concerns of the present, offering us a nexus point of new beginnings.

It sure would be nice to hear me tell this story when I was 60 or even 80. After all the telling, tales of generations are clouded in the memories of time, as each day dawns a new eternity.

[Healing with Crafts](#)

[Kathryn Howarth](#)

Women have been crafting since time began. Cooking, sewing, knitting, jewellery making, painting and all the other crafts, are, I believe, what makes us women. Crafting brings much joy, self-worth, self-confidence and relaxation.

Crafting has been a large part of my life - sewing and knitting for my children and grandchildren, making jewellery for myself and jams, soap and skincare products for an income. I even made a friend's wedding dress and cake as she couldn't afford to buy.

My husband Blane died very suddenly in August 2014. We had been married for 42 years, have five perfect children, their wonderful spouses and eleven of the best grandchildren.

Obviously I was devastated and distraught. I got very good at pretending I was fine and smiling at whoever asked but had no idea how I was going to go on. When I was alone I went to bed, pulled the blankets over my head and slept.

I eventually got fed up of my own company, and realised I needed to find an income as I had 7 years before I could retire and our income had died with my husband. The easiest thing to do would be to make jams and chutney and sell them on a market stall: this would not take much brain power as my brain was very spongy then. In October, while I was looking for a market to sell my products, my daughter in Cape Town called and invited me to spend Christmas with them. Suddenly, looking for a job moved down the priority list.

Six of my grandchildren live near me in England and I used the time before going to Cape Town to make Christmas decorations with them and help them make gifts for their parents. We had great fun making felt angels for the Christmas tree.



FELT ANGELS



You will need:

12cm x 12cm square of white or small amounts of coloured felt

2 small wobbly eyes

Pot scourers

Jewellery wire - 2 x 13cm and 1 x 10cm

Tube of clear glue

12 beads about 1cm across

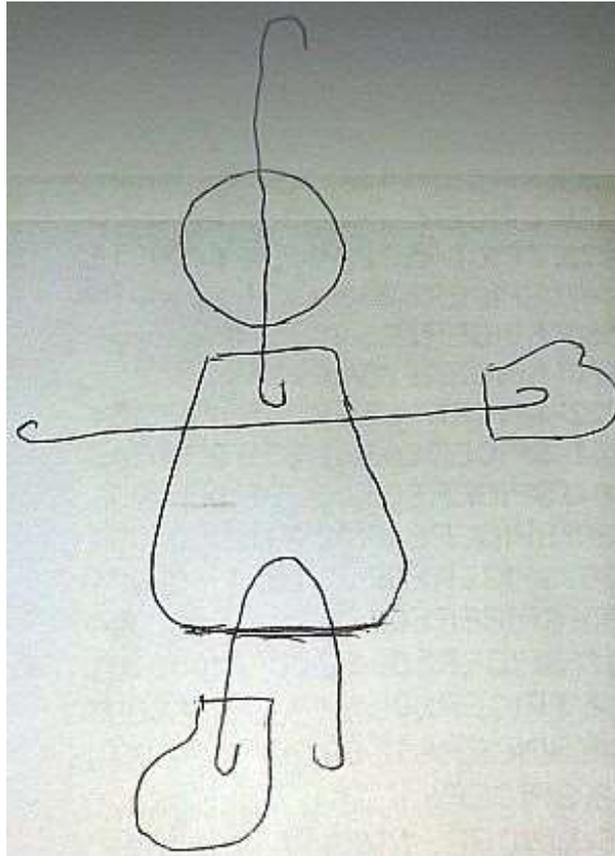
12 beads about .5cm

Embellishments



Cut out all the pieces.

Take 1 head, 1 body, 2 feet and 2 hands and lay on a sheet of paper.



To attach the head to the body - take the 10cm piece of wire, bend a small loop at one end and glue the loop to the top of the body. When dry add a bead (neck) to wire and glue wire through middle of head. Leave to dry well. Bend the end into a loop to attach her to the tree.

To attach the arms to the body - take a 13cm piece of wire and glue to body.

When dry feed 6 small beads to one side of wire, bend a small loop to end and glue to a hand. When dry do the other side. Leave to dry well.

To attach the legs to the body - take a 13cm piece of wire and bend in half. Glue to bottom of body.

When dry add 6 large beads to one side then bend a loop and glue on foot. When dry do the same on the other side. Leave to dry well.

Lay out other pieces. Glue eyes to head piece, add mouth and glue onto head pieces with wire glued to. Glue hands and feet pieces on top of the others.

Decorate last body piece as much as you can with glitter glue, beads and shapes cut from felt or whatever you can find.

When everything is dry cut a piece of pot scourer and glue to head.

While digging through my craft box I found a pattern for another fairy or angel made of safety-pins, and decided to take it and the bits needed to make it with me on holiday. My five South African grandchildren helped me make some for their Christmas trees. Everyone who saw them wanted one or two and we landed up with quite a production line. I have no idea how many we finally made but got to the stage when I was dreaming of them.



Every time someone else put in an order I had to go down to the local craft shop to buy more beads and things and spent hours looking at all the awesome things to make and buy. I was in my element and for hours I forgot my pain and loss. I saw a kit for a mosaic cross which I bought and made for my daughter's Christmas present. It was not very good but I really enjoyed making it and was very proud of myself. More importantly, she was very impressed with it. It now sits on a top shelf on her veranda where everyone can see it, but not the mistakes I made.

Christmas was a large family affair with lots of people around at all times so there was no time to feel sorry for myself. Everyone tried so hard to make Christmas a happy occasion for me but by New Year I was ready to sit by myself and plan my new life. My daughter and her family went and stayed with my son and his family to celebrate with a large party for the night, so I had time alone to work things out. I made myself something good to eat, put out snacks and wine, put on a Tina Turner concert DVD turned up really loud, and started my business plan for the coming year.

By the time the 2nd bottle of wine was finished, and the DVD had been on twice and I was hoarse from singing at the top of my lungs, my plan was finished. I had worked out what job I wanted, what colours I was going to paint my house, what

furniture I was changing and how I was going to fill the time after work. It was the most exhilarating exercise I have ever done.

When I came home from my wonderful, relaxing holiday I realised I needed to get on, and so to start I booked a stand at a local agricultural show that I had attended for the past few years, and spent the next few weeks making jams and chutney to sell there. On the day of the show a lady stopped and chatted with me about my products and explained that she managed the tea room at our local stately home and was looking for local products to sell. She asked if I would be interested in selling my products there. I jumped at the opportunity and was very busy making jams all summer for the tea room as well as working full time. Days, then weeks, went by without me feeling sad enough to hide in bed for days, which was a very good thing; and I now have a special friend as well.

Lavender Jelly is the most popular jam that I sell, followed by Lemon Curd.



LEMON CURD

250g unsalted Butter

6 eggs

500g Sugar

200 mls Lemon Juice (about 5 lemons, depending on size)

Zest from lemons

Scrub the lemons, Grate off zest and squeeze out the juice. Add juice, zest, butter and sugar to a double boiler or bowl over pan of gently boiling water. Allow to melt slowly, stirring occasionally

When sugar has dissolved add beaten eggs through a strainer to make sure there are no lumps of unbeaten egg white and cook gently until the curd coats the back of a spoon. Pot into warm jars and use within 6 weeks.



LAVENDER JELLY

1.5kg Bramley Apples

Sugar

1 Litre Water

Lemon juice

4 Tblsp Lavender flowers

1 packet pectin powder (mix into sugar to stop lumping)

Chop apples into quarters and place all ingredients in pan and boil till apples are soft.

Drape muslin over colander standing in large bowl and empty contents of pot into colander. Leave overnight to drain.

To every 600mls of juice add 500gms of sugar and 1 and a half tablespoons of lemon juice.

(I usually manage to squeeze 1200mls juice out but sometimes need to add some water.)

Add juice and sugar with pectin added to jam pan and bring to the boil gently. Boil till setting point is reached and pot into warm jars.



It is now 18 months on and though I still miss him every day I am better.

I have planted a rose for him and I sit next to it and chat to him often. My little house is my sanctuary: my friends keep me going and I have two really good jobs. This summer I will be doing more markets and fetes selling not only jams but also soap and aromatherapy skin care.

Without the felt and bead fairies to get me out of bed I think I would still be there.

Thank you to my family and their families and their families for all you have done for me. Thank you to all my friends in Cape Town, Rochdale and Oxted, you listened. Especially you Melly, you have been my rock.

Doodle Picture

By Fifi Lavender



Coloring is rapidly gaining recognition as an anti-stress therapy, helping people to turn their lives around. Fifi Lavender is one of the artists working to create the Crimson Cloak coloring book range with this in mind.

Suggestions to find:

The Dragonfly

The Frog

The nest

The Ladybird

The daffodils

Mummy Duck

The lily pad.

How many Ducklings?

Homeless

A Poem by Cynthia MacGregor

We sit in a small square of sunshine
On the January pavement,
Kevin with his cardboard cup,
Begging for coins or perhaps paper money—
Anything to buy some warming coffee,
Or something more substantial
To calm a rumbling stomach.

He will share his food with me,
Knowing I am just as hungry,
Just as homeless.
But I cannot speak for myself as he does,
Cannot write a sign like his:
HOMELESS PTSD AMPUTEE VET,
Which is his story anyhow, not mine.
I was simply kicked out by a family
That no longer wanted me around.

My eyes speak for me—begging, pleading.
But most people look away,
Not wanting to see the pain, the hurt,
Not wanting to see the message.

Some days we sit for hours,
Moving only as the sun moves,
Unlucky in our quest.

What we really both want is love,
But we would settle for a piece of bread.
What we really both want is a home,
But we would settle for some coins
Or—dare we hope it—a dollar bill or two.

Sometimes Kevin calls out
To those who pass him by.
It seldom helps.
I wish that I could do the same:
Express myself in words like him.
But I am just
A dog.

Mitsui on the Ship: an Edo Blood Story

By [Don McCann](#)

When choosing to start the next chapter in your life, the wise know that the true beginning does not start when you reach your destination, but when you make the first step on to the road that takes you there.

I

Mitsui had not slept in a lot of different beds in her life, but this had to be the softest, most perfect bed in the world. The mattress seemed filled with nothing but feathers. And pillows this soft could only be filled with clouds. She could sleep here forever and never wake.

If only she could sleep.

Abruptly, her stomach heaved and she threw up into the bucket at her feet.

Again.

She could not believe her stomach held anything else to bring up.

She had last eaten last night, after that luxurious bath. As wonderful as the food was, she was careful not to eat too much because she wanted to do *katas* afterwards. The scalding bath and rich food had the combined—almost unwanted—effect of quelling her anger, if only a bit. She found she was able to be civil to The Captain, but still did not invite conversation.

After dinner, she went up to the deck and practiced. Or, tried to practice. After her first punch, she found herself sprawled, face down on the deck. Dismayed and frustrated, she got up and tried again. And failed again. And again. The same with kicks. The same with combinations. She found she could scarcely walk, much less practice anything.

It was several maddening minutes before she realized the reason she could not keep her feet was because the deck was moving. Not only that, but she was beginning to feel strange. Her stomach felt like it was moving, too, and that made her feel . . .

Mitsui barely made it to the rail before spewing up all that wonderful food. After she was finished, she wiped her mouth on her sleeve and turned back to the deck . . . and found she was *not* finished. Spinning back to the rail, she heaved again. She spent the next hour hanging over the rail before finally being able to limp back to her cabin.

Why is this happening?

Was it the food, something in the air; in the water? She had no idea, all she knew was she wanted it to stop.

Falling into that soft, soft bed, she thought she was safe. But the ship would not stop moving. Neither would her stomach. She found a bucket near the tub and managed to drag it over to the bed and had been there ever since.

Unable to lie down, barely able to sit up, Mitsui was perched unsteadily on the side of the bed, sloshing bucket clutched between her shaking knees. Her stomach had long since emptied, but was still rolling. Her head was pounding and her vision was starting to get fuzzy. Her long hair, now matted and tangled, hung down into the bucket, but she was too ill to even care. When she wiped her lips her pale face felt hot, but she had stopped sweating hours ago. Her body hurt everywhere. Now she was hearing a buzzing in her ears that got louder as her vision started to fade.

Am I dying . . . ?

She could not believe that one of the first things she got to do in her new life was die. As the room started to dim, she thought that dying would not be so bad if it meant all this would stop . . .

II

Mitsui's head was still pounding, but it was worse now. Dimly, she noticed the buzzing was gone, but that was little comfort. She opened her eyes, but still felt the pounding. No, that was wrong, she thought—she *heard* the pounding. And she hurt less. Her eyes were open, but she could not see, so she closed them again.

The pounding got louder and she frowned. Mitsui gasped.

Even frowning hurt.

Carefully, she relaxed the muscles in her face and the pain receded. Slowly, she opened her eyes again and recoiled from what she saw. And smelled.

Sometime during the night she had managed to slump from the edge of the bed to the floor and now held the sloshing bucket cradled in her lap with her head hanging over it. Having her face that close to the vile contents made her stomach heave again. Fortunately, she had nothing left and she was able to turn her head and set the bucket down.

“Uhhhhh . . .” she moaned and lowered her face into her hands. “Aaahhh!!” she exclaimed and jerked her head away from her hands. She had forgotten that her hair had hung down into the bucket. Now she had the disgusting mess in her hair *and* on her hands. Though she could no longer throw up, she still felt horrible and her head was still pounding—worse now, having jerked it like that.

“Mitsui!” came a voice from outside her door. Then the pounding again, “Mitsui! Are you all right?”

She looked up slowly and realized the pounding was not in her head after all. Someone—The Captain—was pounding on the door. She realized he was probably only knocking, but her throbbing skull could not tell the difference.

“Ohhhh, please stop,” she managed to croak before dissolving into a fit of coughing. Her throat was raw and she was terribly thirsty. But she was afraid to drink anything for fear she would not be able to keep it down.

“Are you all right?” The Captain asked again. “I can leave, if you wish to continue resting, but it is well past midday . . .”

“No—” she coughed again. “Wait . . . wait . . .” Mitsui turned and clung to the side of the bed, then struggled to her feet. Trying not to move, she hung onto the bedpost and looked around the room, trying to see what was moving and what was not. She feared her head would carry this pain forever.

One hand at a time, she released her grip and stood on her own. Bravely, she kept her eyes open and realized she felt a little better. The ship did not seem to be moving as much as before and her stomach felt a little more stable. Her body hurt less and the pounding in her head was receding. A little.

Cautiously, she shuffled to the washbasin and splashed a handful of water onto her face. She took a few tentative sips and waited to see if they would stay down. When they did, she took a few more, but stopped, still afraid to go too far.

Still groggy, she looked in the mirror. Mitsui did not recognize the apparition that peered back at her. She had never seen those bloodshot eyes with the dark circles. The hair on that head belonged to a madwoman and that pasty, gray pallor was better suited to a not-so-fresh corpse.

Splashing more water on her face, she made a halfhearted attempt to rinse the mess out of her hair. She shook her head, weakly.

That will have to do. I am not here to impress anyone.

Finally able to stand a little straighter (and only wobbling once), she walked to the door and opened it, “Yes, Captain?” Still a bit unsteady, she gripped the doorway and managed to remain straight.

Reflexively, he bowed and straightened, “I came to see if—” he stopped, startled at her condition. “Oh!” The Captain backed away from the door. “Please!” he bowed, backing swiftly away. “Please wait . . . I will be right back! I had no idea . . .” His voice trailed off as he hurried down the passageway.

Mitsui squinted after him, puzzled. She leaned, still groggy, against the doorway.

Do I look that bad?

She started to go back into the room, but realized it actually felt quite nice to rest right where she was.

I should just wait here . . .

She was ready to slide down to the floor and rest a bit more when The Captain’s hurried steps came back down the passageway. Mitsui straightened and turned to him. Before she could speak, he thrust a cup at her.

“Drink this. It will make you feel better.” The Captain had been caught unawares seeing his charge in such a state.

Turning her face away from the steaming cup, she told him hoarsely, “Oh no, no, I . . . I have been horribly ill all night,” she walked slowly into her cabin. “I could barely keep down a few sips of water just now.” Making her way to the bed, she sat down carefully. “It must have been something in the food, I—”

Following her into the room, he asked, “Have you ever been on a ship before?”

“A ship? No, never,” she lowered her head into her hands again. Now, perhaps she could sleep. She felt completely drained.

Setting the cup and a kettle on the table by the bed, he knelt down in front of her. Not touching her, he tried to look into her eyes. “Look at me,” he ordered. “Do you feel hot?”

Too tired to feel offended by his brusque tone, Mitsui looked up and just nodded.

“You are not sweating. You are probably dehydrated from vomiting.” Looking into her eyes, he frowned, “The men tell me you were trying to do *katas* on the deck after dinner last night.” She nodded again, eyes starting to slide shut. “Mitsui!” Her eyes snapped open. “Did you start to feel this way right after eating, or after being on the deck?”

“Ummm . . . deck . . . tired . . .”

“Please, you need to drink this,” he spoke firmly and held the cup up to her face again. “From your appearance, you are suffering from seasickness. This will help.” His voice softened a bit, “Please, drink.”

She sniffed the cup this time. It smelled sweet, with a hint of . . . she realized she did not care what it smelled like, or what was in it. If it would make her feel better, she wanted all of it. With shaking hands she grasped the cup and sipped the still-steaming contents. “Mmmmm . . .” Carefully, she drank the rest of it.

Immediately, the warm potion spread through her belly, stopping its cruel contortions. She took a deep breath and opened her eyes fully. “Thank you,” she told him, her voice steadier now. She cleared her throat.

The Captain stepped over to the dressing table and brought her back a cup of water. “Drink slowly,” he ordered.

She nodded and took the cup. When she was finished, she handed it back and looked over at the kettle on the table. She pointed, "What is in that?"

He reached down and poured another cup, "Green tea, vanilla and several medicinal herbs." Handing her the cup, he went on, "It is something ships keep on hand for times like this.

"Since you have never been on a ship, it will be difficult to get used to the constant movement. That is what causes seasickness," he explained. "Your body is unable to make the adjustment.

"You did not notice it at first because we were in calm waters when we first left port. But, last night," he explained. "We had rough seas. And you trying to do *katas* did not help."

Sipping the potion, she asked, "This will make it better? Will I be all right, then?"

He nodded, "A cup of this every morning until we reach port and you should be fine. But, for now, you should rest."

Feeling better already, she shook her head and stood, "No, I feel better now. I need to continue my—" Mitsui had no sooner gained her feet, than she staggered forward, suddenly dizzy again.

The Captain, ever alert, caught her—and the cup—before they both fell to the floor. Carefully, he set her back on the bed and she wrapped an arm around the bedpost. "Ummm, Captain," she told him, "I think perhaps, for now, I should rest."

He started to answer, but she was already crawling to her pillows.

I should have checked on her sooner.

He still could not believe how terrible she had looked when she opened the door. He had never seen seasickness that bad before. He was angry with himself for not anticipating this possibility. He looked down at her, sinking into the pillows.

I should have known better. She is new to all this. I must be more vigilant with her.

The Master would have his head—or worse—if anything happened to her.

Waiting until she had nestled under the covers, he brought over the pitcher of water and placed it on the table next to the kettle. She was still dehydrated and would be terribly thirsty when she awoke tomorrow morning.

She wanted to practice her *katas*. If she was going to do that on a ship, he thought, she would need to practice standing first. Walking out of her cabin and closing the door, The Captain sighed.

This is going to be a long trip.

III

When Mitsui opened her eyes, she could still feel the ship moving, but it did not seem so violent now. Squinting, she slowly raised her head from the pillow and looked around. She could see through the window that the sun was up, but had no idea what day it was. It could have been the same day, the next day, or the next week.

Groaning, she sat up. Slowly, she lowered her feet to the floor and stopped to see what would happen. When her stomach stayed in place and nothing turned upside down, she felt it was safe to try and move. Cautiously, she levered herself to her feet, but kept hold of the bedpost. Licking chapped lips, she released her shaky grip on the bedpost and carefully turned to the table to pour a cup of water.

Managing to get the cup half filled, she drank. Emptying the cup, she put it down and leaned forward on the table. Closing her eyes, she inhaled and released several deep, cleansing breaths. She was finally starting to feel almost human again.

Opening her eyes, she saw The Captain's potion still on the table. She thought about having a cup, but thought she should first find out how long she had been asleep. Still a little dizzy, she shuffled over to the washbasin and splashed water on her face.

Better, but not much. A hot bath . . .

She turned away from the mirror and walked with measured steps into the next room. Not knowing if the water would be ready, she was pleasantly surprised to find the tub simmering and ready. Gratefully, she shed her robe and stepped into the steaming water.

The sides of the tub had built-in cushions and, after the scalding subsided, she laid her head back with a sigh. The now-gentle motion of the ship caused the water to sway back and forth, adding to the soothing heat. Still, she did not fall asleep, just lay there, enjoying feeling not horrible. She knew she had things to do—a lot of things—but was determined to not think about any of them right now. Right now, just . . . nothing.

The Captain was sitting outside Mitsui's door, but had stood as soon as he heard her stirring. He did not knock, just waited, thinking she would probably want some time to herself. He heard the water in the bath and was glad he had the men keep the fire going. It had been two days, but having it ready made things easier for her.

He sat back down and made himself comfortable again. He was sure he had a while to wait.

After her bath, wrapped in a luxurious towel, so long that she had to hold it up to keep it from dragging on the floor, she had given herself a quick tour of the cabin. Sipping The Captain's potion, she eyed the bed with longing. Even the memory of it was wonderful and it was all she could do not to crawl back into it. But she knew, if she did that, she would probably not rise again until the ship was in port. With a sad sigh, she kept walking.

The cabin was sparsely furnished—a vanity, with mirror and matching chair, two standing wardrobes and the bed with its end table. They were all fashioned from some exquisitely carved bright golden wood and finished with clear lacquer, buffed so deeply that her reflection appeared trapped inside. The vanity held a washbasin and matching pitcher, which appeared to be carved from rose jade and inlaid with pure gold. And the bucket she had vomited in—spotless now—

. . . who cleaned it?

—was made of the same gold-inlaid jade.

But, for all the opulence of the space, the center of the cabin was strangely empty, as if . . . Mitsui smiled a small smile and attempted a few slow *kata* moves. How thoughtful—abruptly, she stopped just before she toppled over completely.

At least I did not throw up this time.

She still could not find her balance. She had no idea being on a ship would be so . . . so different.

Walking slowly around the space, she tried again to gain her footing. After a few frustrating minutes, she stopped, thankful at least, for the thin mats covering the floor. Taking a deep breath, hands on her hips, Mitsui just stood in the center of the cabin. Perhaps this is what The Captain was talking about, she realized.

*I should find him and—
knock—knock—knock—*

“One moment . . .” she called. Mitsui walked slowly to the wardrobes, trying not to stumble—succeeding this time. Hanging the towel on a convenient hook inside a wardrobe door, she chose a *gi* set of pale orange.

The color of a fading sunset . . .

Shuffling to the chest of drawers, she chose a functional set of undergarments and stood in front of the mirror to dress. She considered a pair of *tabi*, but decided, if she were going to find her legs, her feet would need to find the deck.

After a few minutes, she gave herself a quick inspection—

This will do have to do . . .

—and walked—still carefully—to the door. Taking a deep breath, she opened it to see The Captain standing there.

IV

The sunset colored *gi* now dark and soaked with sweat, Mitsui stood, trying not to pant, on the deck behind The Captain. Her body hurt everywhere and, though she had taken his tonic, she still felt her stomach moving in a slightly different direction than the rest of her body. But it had been three hours and at least it was not getting worse. In any case, that was the least of her pain.

Seething with frustration that she had not yet mastered walking on the ship, she tried vainly to dig her toes into the boards of the deck (*tabi* would have been shredded by now). She winced and cried out in her mind— even her toes hurt . . . her *toes!* Irritated, she shook her head, trying to drive away the pain, drops of sweat flying from her matted hair. The combs that held it off her neck clacked together when she did this, the noise only adding to her frustration. She would have swept them off her head and thrown them into the sea, if she thought it would help. But, she realized, even though her hair was only down to her knees, she would probably still find a way to trip over it.

Can I do nothing right on this cursed ship!?

After a (very) light meal, The Captain had offered her a tour of the ship, but she declined. She grumbled that she was having trouble keeping her balance and asked if his tonic would help with that. He told her no, that it was only to keep her from being ill.

“I imagine you would like to practice your *katas* on this trip,” he said. She just nodded. “Well, before you can do *katas* on the ship, you will have to learn how to walk on the ship. And before that, you will have to learn how to stand on the ship.”

Three hours later, she had scarcely managed that and was now trying to force herself to walk behind The Captain.

This is impossible! How can he have such a light step when the deck will not stop moving?

Gritting her teeth and frowning down at the deck, she stomped in his footsteps.

Frowning, The Captain stopped and turned around, “Mitsui, you have to—” He was cut off abruptly as, not watching where she was going, Mitsui slammed into him. Snarling angrily, she pushed him roughly away from her.

Surprised, he stumbled back a step, but quickly recovered. Instinctively he fell into a defensive crouch. With a curl of her lip, Mitsui fell into a crouch of her own, shaky though it was.

For the last three hours, he had endured her snarling and whining. It was as if she *refused* to understand. She was simply too stiff. All she had to do was relax, instead she got more and more frustrated and, because of that, even *more* stiff. She was clearly angry about more than not being able to do *katas* on the ship, but about

what, he had no idea. And truthfully, it was none of his business. She wanted to learn how to move on the ship. Whatever she was angry about was only getting in the way.

What Sung wanted with such a petulant child was quite beyond him. Even so, she was his responsibility. Still, even a loyal servant has limits.

And now she wanted to fight.

Slowly, The Captain straightened from his crouch. He bowed to her, "I can see you are tired," he said carefully. "We can continue this tomorrow, after breakfast." He stood and turned to go below.

"No!" she barked and he stopped, still facing away from her. "I need to do this *now!*" Mitsui planted herself on the deck, bending her knees like he had been trying to show her all along.

Turning just his head, he repeated firmly, "No. We can continue tomorrow, after breakfast."

Neither of them moved for a few moments. Then, Mitsui straightened and walked up to him. "You think I am soft, just because I am a girl?" she sneered. "I warn you, do not favor me so."

Still not facing her, he started, "You are—"

"Do not tell me what I am!" she cried and swung a roundhouse punch at the back of his head.

Hearing the rustle of her sweat-soaked *gi* and the rush of air as her fist shot forward, The Captain ducked and spun to face her, easily avoiding her punch. If she had not been so off balance and fatigued, she might have even come close. Now glaring at her, he stood silently. Fists up, arms forward, knees bent (albeit awkwardly), she looked almost ready to fight.

"Mitsui—"

"Do not—!" she swung again and he did not even have to block. He merely sidestepped her second shaky strike and stepped back two paces.

When training some of Sung's soldiers, he occasionally encountered one who had a problem with authority or, for some other reason, had trouble taking orders from him. Invariably, they would try to fight him and end up face-down in the dust. Sometimes, he had to actually fight a little, but most times, he simply had to stay out of their reach until they grew tired of picking themselves up and realized who was in charge. He was reluctant to fight Mitsui because he could not afford to hurt her. But, looking at her, he realized he would not have to.

Taking a deep breath and glaring back at her, "All right," he lowered again into a crouch. "I will not."

With a high-pitched cry, Mitsui charged. The Captain merely stepped aside again and she rushed past him. He could have made it worse by sticking his leg out and sending her sprawling, but felt it was hardly necessary.

She will be on the deck soon enough.

Wobbling to a stop, Mitsui whirled and attempted to circle around him. Idly, The Captain watched her feet. Her ankles were stiff and the muscles in her calves were quivering. He pointed, "Mitsui, I have been trying to tell you, flex your knees more. Your ankles are not supposed to—"

With another scream, she charged again, this time aiming a front kick at his chin. The Captain leaned back and stepped around her. Jerking her head around, she tried a backfist, but he simply stepped back another pace. Surprising him a bit, she launched a back kick that would have caught him in the belly, had he not already been stepping back.

Dropping her leading foot, Mitsui stumbled to the right, but quickly caught herself and threw a left front snap kick. Or tried to—The Captain only had to lift his left foot to catch her leg before it even got knee-high. Mitsui growled and stepped back. Over his shoulder, she saw the rail was getting closer and started to form a plan. A few more (missed) punches and kicks and she started to drive him back.

When this started, he had expected it to be over in a few minutes. Mitsui was still recovering from her bout of seasickness and had been struggling with her balance all morning. But now, The Captain was noticing a change. She was starting to worry less about her balance and more about getting her hands on him. Her punches and kicks were getting closer; he had not seen her stumble or sway through several combinations. He was actually starting to have to defend himself.

Finally . . .

“Mitsui, wait—” The Captain grunted, blocking a jump kick to his head. “I am trying to tell you—” he caught her ankle at his waist and pushed her away.

Enough.

As Mitsui lunged forward with a straight punch aimed at his throat, The Captain twisted and grabbed her *gi* at the shoulder as she went by. Continuing the motion, he spun her around him and used her momentum to fling her into the wall next to the door leading below.

“Enough!” he shouted. “Stop this now! Can you not see that—”

With a loud shout, Mitsui pushed off the wall and charged him again. This time, he *did* stick out his leg and she tripped.

Right over the rail.

V

“I can see you are tired,” The Captain told her calmly. “We can continue this tomorrow, after breakfast.”

Dangling over the rushing waves, Mitsui stared down in horror at the green-gray sea directly below her. Terrified by the frothing water, she did not even dare to breathe.

“I can see you are tired,” The Captain repeated firmly. “We can continue this tomorrow, after breakfast.”

Not quite able to speak, Mitsui nodded carefully so as not to disturb his hold on her belt.

The Captain nodded back, “Good,” He lifted and turned her until she could just touch the rail. “Grab the rail,” he told her and she did so, arms outstretched.

Hanging there, Mitsui would have breathed a sigh of relief, but fear had stolen all the air from her lungs and turned her tongue to dust. She could only pant shallowly and wait for The Captain to pull her in.

“Do you have a good grip?”

She nodded quickly and tried to speak, but her throat had seized and would not release any words.

“Good. In the morning, then,” and he released her and walked away.

Mitsui screamed and, in her panic, almost released her death-grip on the rail. Hanging there, it was a good five seconds before she opened her eyes and realized she was *not* falling into the sea. Through the posts of the rail, she could see The Captain’s broad back descending the stairs as he headed below.

Wha—!??

Coming quickly to her senses, Mitsui knew better than to try and call him back. Instead, she used her awkward—but definitely secure—position to take a few

seconds and try to make some sense of the last few minutes. She closed her eyes and tried to think . . .

Now that she was a little more rational, she could see where things had started to go wrong. When he spun and threw her into the wall, she should have stayed there. Instead she foolishly charged him, not even noticing he was right up against the rail with only the frothing sea behind him. She *should* have seen it, but was too blinded by her anger.

In that brief instant of flight, looking down into the deep, unknowable sea, Mitsui's screaming plunge had been suddenly halted when The Captain reached out and snatched the belt of her *gi* and there she was, dangling over the waves.

He caught me with one hand!

Ready now, she grunted and strained herself up and over the rail and collapsed to the deck. Several other soldiers had been watching the scene play out but, when she lifted her head, they quickly turned back to their duties.

Unable to rise, she turned on her back and just lay there, watching the clouds go by. Utterly exhausted by trying so hard to walk, the fight—

If it could be called that . . .

—and hauling herself up over the rail, Mitsui's eyes slipped closed without her even noticing.

At least they finally made the ship stop moving . . .

Owww!!

She did not speak it aloud, but certainly felt it. Mitsui turned her head and the pain receded a bit. She reached up to the back of her head.

Owww . . .

There. A tender spot where—

Oh, that explains it . . .

—where she had been lying on the unyielding boards of the deck.

Mitsui opened her eyes and slowly sat up, gently rubbing the back of her head. She was surprised to see that night had fallen and a sickle moon was high in the sky. Idly, she wondered how long she had lain there.

And where was The Captain? Had he really just left her there? Frowning, she thought about it and did not blame him. He was only trying to help and she had been horrible to him.

She sighed and got to her feet. She stretched for a few minutes, then walked to the rail. Leaning over carefully, she looked down at the water rushing by the ship, then back at its trailing wake. She looked ahead at the moon's sparkling reflection in the dancing waves.

It is all so beautiful.

It would be a shame, she thought, to spend the entire voyage mired in a pit of anger and bitterness and miss all this. She could not wait for the sunrise, scarcely able to imagine what it would be like. She sighed again. To be sure, she still felt all the rage she had arrived on the ship with. Standing at the rail, however, letting the calm of the sea drift through her, Mitsui was feeling a subtle shift within herself. She realized that, if she continued to let her anger dominate her, it would consume her life long before she ever got to do anything about it. She had many steps to take in her journey of revenge and she had to take them one at a time.

Starting tonight.

She turned from the rail and started towards the doorway. She was halfway there, when she stopped suddenly and looked down at her feet in amazement.

I am walking!

She started again and took a few awkward steps before she stopped thinking about it and just did it.

Mitsui giggled and tried a snap kick. And a roundhouse. And a jump kick . . .

Hmmm . . . that may be a bit much yet.

She laughed out loud and turned from the doorway to walk to the other end of the deck. Arriving at the rail, she turned and walked to the opposite end. Finally, she realized what The Captain had been trying to tell her before . . . before . . . she stopped mid-stride, face burning with shame . . . before she had attacked him.

“You are trying too hard, Mitsui. You are trying to feel the deck, when you should be trying to feel the sea . . .”

He had been trying to explain that ships are not moving, *the sea is moving.*

“On land, in a house, if you stop walking, you will stop moving because the land under the house is not moving. At sea, on a ship, if you stop walking, you will not stop moving because the sea under the ship is moving,” he told her. “On a ship, whether you move, or not, you must remember the sea never stops moving. The ship does not matter. Even the ship is at the mercy of the sea.”

Mitsui stopped in the middle of the deck, feet a little wider apart than normal, knees slightly bent . . . and felt the sea. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back. Even though they were moving through the waves, she could hear (*feel*) their rhythm against the hull.

“The ship does not matter . . .”

Moving a little closer to the rail, Mitsui lay on her back again and spread her arms and legs wide. Keeping her eyes closed, she turned her palms down to better absorb the vibrations through the deck. Not the vibrations of the ship, but of the sea.

Now I understand.

Sitting up, she took off her tunic and rolled it up under her head. Pushing down the sleeves of her undershirt, Mitsui lay back and turned her palms down again. She was going to be there a while.

Coming up the stairs just then, The Captain stopped in the doorway. He frowned, confused. He turned to the soldier behind him, “I thought you said she had awakened,” he whispered.

The man nodded, “She did, sir. But she lay back down.”

The Captain looked back at the girl lying prone on the deck. Noticing her palms, he allowed himself a small smile.

She is beginning to understand.

He turned to the man again, “Bring two blankets from my cabin.” Looking back at Mitsui, he had a feeling they would be there a while.

The Return

By Brian O'Hare

[Found in a Diary]

May 1998

Today I drove past the cemetery where my father and mother lie buried. I said a prayer for them. Nothing out of the ordinary there, you might think. You would be wrong. I have not said anything remotely resembling a prayer for almost thirty years. So why today? I am sure there is nothing of grace in me. Can one pray and not be in a state of grace? I am reminded of Claudius' dilemma after Hamlet pricked his conscience with his 'play-within-the-play'. Claudius knelt before an altar and tried, vainly, to pray:

*'My words fly up; my thoughts remain below.
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.'*

Did my prayer go to heaven? What was I even thinking about? I have no idea. I was passing the cemetery and I said, aloud if you can believe that, "God bless Daddy and Mammy." I didn't plan it. I didn't have any notions in my head about how holy and how wholesome it is to pray for the dead. I was heading towards the golf course, no doubt with golf on my mind, and suddenly I said, "God bless Daddy and Mammy." I drove on, mystified, trying to remember some of the elementary theology I had studied in Canon Sheehan's *Apologetics* some forty-five years earlier. I vaguely remember being told that if we are not in a state of grace, our prayers don't reach heaven. However, they can be put 'on hold', as it were, until such time as we go to confession (none of us had ever heard of the 'Sacrament of Reconciliation' in those days) and thus become restored to God's grace. Confession? What prompted that thought? I have not been to confession for more than thirty years and I have not the slightest intention of going now. Why am I even thinking about this? It is all very odd.

May 1998

Oddity piles upon oddity. Because it was forcing me to contemplate things I would have preferred to ignore, that first entry deflected me from any further thoughts of continuing this diary. But it was only the start of a very strange pattern that was beginning to emerge in my life. Every time I pass the cemetery, I say without fail, 'God bless Daddy and Mammy!' It is extremely puzzling, even discomforting. My life has been about career, money, material comforts, nice house, nice car, golf, holidays, television, reading and, ultimately, I suppose, self-indulgence – all the standard idols. God has not fitted into it anywhere, at least, not to my knowledge. Now every time I pass the graveyard I wonder if he hears me; I wonder what he is thinking. My prayer has to be meaningless! Given the materialistic life I have been leading, it cannot be anything else. Yet this whole business has me constantly thinking about God. In fact, every time I walk past the town's cathedral, I now stop and go into it. I have not done that since I was young. I don't pray when I go in, however. I do not even go in as far as the pews. I stand at the back. I tend to hide behind one of the pillars there and do nothing, say nothing and, as far as I can figure out, think nothing. I stand there, blank, puzzled, ill at ease. After a few minutes I go out again. Inevitably I think about the Pharisee and the Publican, but I do not say, 'God be merciful to me, a sinner.' I don't say anything. I do not even know why I go in there.

But I return to my diary because today something strange has happened. I was searching through an old poetry book this morning, looking for a quotation I couldn't quite remember. I thought I would find it in one of Wordsworth's reflective or philosophical poems. The line I sought is something like: 'The past is part, and a necessary part, of the man I am today.' (Obviously there are some peculiar reflections going on in my own head when I am seeking the genesis of an idea like that.) In the event, I couldn't find the quotation I was looking for but I did stumble across an old poem by Francis Thompson that I had studied at school – 'The Hound of Heaven'. The first lines hit me with extraordinary force, infused in that first instant with intense meaning, meaning that I could never have apprehended in my schooldays regardless of how much study and effort I might have put into them. But now – heart-stopping!

*I fled him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled him, down the arches of the years;
I fled him, down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind ...
Up vistaed hopes I sped ...
From those strong feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase
And unperturbed pace ...
They beat – and a Voice beat
More instant than the feet –
'all things betray thee who betrayest me.'*

I stared at these lines then, and I am staring at them now. They are extraordinary but they echo so loudly in my head – like a loudspeaker turned on at full volume – that I have to turn away from them. I am afraid to follow where they lead. I don't want to follow where they lead.

Further into the poem I find yet more lines that seem aimed at the centre of my soul:

*For though I knew his love who followed,
Yet I was sore adread
Lest having him, I must have naught beside.*

Lest having him I must have naught beside! So much meaning packed into so few words and, right now, a dagger in my soul. Almost my entire adult life has been a choice of earthly things over God, the material over the spiritual. It never bothered me before. I read a few lines from a poem and ... I'm bothered! What is going on?

The second message I might not have noticed were it not for the fact that Thompson's lines were running through my head. I was working in my study and, reaching for a book, I knocked down a small prayer-book from my shelves. I happened to glance at the page at which it fell open and these lines caught my eye.

*O Where can I go from your Spirit
Or where can I flee from your face?
... If I take the wings of the dawn
And dwell at the sea's furthest end,
Even there your hand would lead me,
Your right hand hold me fast.*

These two verses on the same day – can simple coincidence be the answer?

I have written them down and I have read and re-read them. I am affected by what has happened, that I cannot deny. My reason is urging me to plump for

coincidence. Why would God go to all this trouble to catch my attention? Is it rational to imagine, even for an instant, that God would set up something as complicated as this? And yet, the old cliché ‘God works in mysterious ways’ is humming in my brain. I’m embarrassed even to write that down. None of this makes any sense.

And what about that other Christian notion – ‘impulses to grace’? I have experienced many times in the past number of years, dimly and at a distance but consciously, little promptings that might be described as ‘impulses to grace’ – the notion that I should bring Christian values into my teaching; the feeling that I should become a little more detached from ambition; the desire to help young teachers who are pursuing post-graduate qualifications. I have responded to a degree to such promptings but always I’ve been able to file them in my subconscious as some kind of social justice or a developing maturity. But what is going on now, and what has been going on for the past several months, is not ‘dim and at a distance’. It is very much real, in my face, and challenging me. But what is the challenge? I am still the errant Christian I have been for a long time; I have no conscious need to change. Indeed, ‘lest having him I must have naught beside’ is a strong argument for maintaining my spiritual *status quo*. Except, a voice immediately sounds in my head, ‘Your *status quo* is not spiritual.’

The echoes of Thompson and Psalm 138 are, today, loud in the corridors of my mind. I keep trying to ignore them, to dismiss them, but I am constantly drawn back to them. One thing is clear. Either the entire episode is coincidence or it is not. If it is coincidence, I can simply dismiss it from my mind. If it is not coincidence, then it must be something ordered, something meaningful. If I leave my rationality to one side for a moment, if I ‘suspend disbelief’, as Wordsworth suggests in another context, then the ‘logic’ of the ‘message’ becomes clear: ‘You have fled me long enough; you have flown before me far enough; you can no longer hide from me. I have come to retrieve your soul.’ No, that cannot be right. Written in cold print like that, this interpretation looks absolutely ludicrous. It has to be coincidence.

Reviewing what I have just written brings to memory something my sister, Briege, also a Poor Clare, once told me about ‘synchronicity’. “Carl Jung,” she said, “did not believe in coincidence.”

If I remember correctly, she explained that Jung had a conviction that when unrelated events in life coalesce in some synchronous fashion, the hand of God is there behind such congruence, the Divine Plan is in operation. For Jung the conjoining of events in a way that draws significant attention to them is simply the Spirit working in the world and in us. So where does that leave me?

June 1998

I have always loved my job. I never stinted in the energy or the effort that I devoted to it. As a young teacher I gave late afternoons and evenings to the pupils; as an Assistant Director in a large Institute of Further and Higher Education many years later, I gave everything I could to organising, managing and building. I was so busy that I could not walk from one place to the next, and even in my latter years I still dashed constantly between our two campuses – East and West –both of which have several floors and lifts. I never use the lifts, no time to wait.

Recently, however, existing managers were offered a redundancy package and after some discussion with colleagues, a few of us accepted the offer. I am touching sixty and have only two years left to complete my statutory forty years’ service.

Thirty-eight years in the profession! I started when I was twenty-two. Twenty-two! What an extraordinarily callow age. What could I have possibly known about anything at that time? Yet there I was in September 1960, fresh, eager, and totally unaware of the depth of my ignorance, unleashed upon a school full of unsuspecting teenage boys.

As the years went by, I became painfully aware of my ignorance and finally returned to university for further study – eight years in all, between 1978 and 1986. This study helped my teaching a bit and gave me, perhaps, a little added knowledge of psychology and of the nature of inter-relationships. It did not, however, put a great dent in my ignorance. But with the passing of the years, I think, I did grow a little in understanding of my profession. Sadly, in the spiritual sphere I remained not only in ignorance but also in splendid unawareness of that ignorance.

This morning I was informed that I retire officially at the end of August. Notification and forms to be completed will be arriving in a few days. I am not sure how I feel about it. I certainly am not particularly jubilant or excited. Indeed, I am somewhat depressed that my career should be ‘fizzling out’ as damply as it appears to be doing. Owing to my managerial responsibilities, I have not been teaching much, barely three hours a week, during the past decade. But I look back beyond that and see how much better my teaching might have been, how much more effort I could have put into ‘character formation’ as much as ‘knowledge building’. It is sad – all we get is the one chance. Mine began at twenty-two and, my goodness, what did I know? Oh! I had my share of praise and did some noteworthy things. I made friends with Inspectors and got to work alongside many of them as colleagues in various projects. But did I really achieve anything or was I simply working for money, promotion and glory? I think I can say, I hope I can say, that I did the best I could with the skills and knowledge I had at the time. But now that I am older – and, perhaps, a touch wiser – I find it easy to stare into the embers of my dying career, to spot the mistakes, the omissions, the inadequacies of both temperament and understanding and to feel the onset of regret. These regrets appear to be influenced, too, by what I am beginning to suspect is a burgeoning spirituality, though where it might be coming from, or why, is a complete mystery to me.

I now see so many ways I could have used my teaching, especially through the great poets, the great novelists, the great dramatists, to establish a much more values-oriented focus on what I taught. I talked to my sister Joan a while back about this very point. She had once attended, with a group of nuns from her convent, a series of evening literature classes I was teaching. Her recollection was that my teaching not only had a Christian orientation but that I was charitable beyond the call of duty to one particularly recalcitrant student in the group. I hope she is right. I have no recollection of what or how I taught. I do remember the student she referred to, however. He tested my patience to the limit. Students like that you remember always.

Well! After August all I will have are memories. As I said, I am not sure how I feel about that.

November 1998

Retirement is fine. My brother, two friends and myself have now made up a regular four-ball which meets every Monday and Wednesday for eighteen holes of golf. It is enjoyable, stress free and health giving.

I notice that my prayer as I pass the graveyard has changed. I have added the names of a close aunt and uncle who also lie buried near my parents. Then, later, other names, for various reasons, were added to the list which has now become quite

long. When I go into the cathedral I no longer lurk behind the pillars at the back. I go on into one of the pews and sit there. This situation has become quite extraordinary. I do not actually pray but sometimes I might say:

'Lord, I know you can see me. I know you are there. I know you know what is going on in the innermost recesses of my brain and heart. But I don't! I do not know what I am doing here. Is it you who is constantly calling to me or is there something in my psyche bringing me in here to seek answers to questions I don't even know I have?'

Then I might sit a while longer in silence, shake my head a bit at the mystery of it all, and leave. That is what actually happened today and has triggered another entry, among an already extremely erratic series of entries, in this strange diary.

Lent, 1999

Your new birth was not from any mortal seed but from the everlasting word of the living and eternal God. (1 Peter 1:23)

The mills of God grind slowly. Autumn and winter have come and gone since my last entry. All has been as it was. My life in retirement has rolled calmly along now-firmly-established tracks and nothing of any note has occurred to warrant further contact with my diary – nothing, that is, until a few days ago. Something truly amazing has happened and, while I am still trying to come to terms with it, I think I can now make an attempt to write about it.

My wife, Sadie, is a very Christian woman. She was a radiographer at the local hospital and was noted for the charitable and caring manner with which she treated patients. She is a regular communicant and often goes to Mass during the week as well as Sundays. She never passes a church, at home or abroad, without going in to pray. Perhaps it was she who inculcated that recently developing habit in me.

A couple of weeks ago, at teatime, she informed me that a group of Redemptorists were to conduct a 'mission' in Newry cathedral the following week. It is really a kind of public 'retreat' but for as long as I remember it has always been known in Newry as 'the mission'. I have no idea why. I suspect that the retreat may have been conducted by missionary fathers in earlier times. In any event, Sadie said that she would be attending each evening. I passed little remark at the time but some time later I spoke to her about it. "That mission business ... I think I'll go with you."

It is hard to describe the expression that appeared on her face. I am sure she thought I was not well but finally she said, "Certainly! Why not? It can't do you any harm."

The mission was interesting. As usual, however, I sat to some degree aloof, as I have done all my life. I watch people. I examine them. I make assessments of their skills, their sincerity, their weaknesses, their tendencies. I do not believe I do this in any malicious way. Sometimes my conclusions are negative but equally, depending on what I see, my conclusions can be laudatory. I look; I see; I analyse. It is who I am; it is what I do.

When the missionaries were preaching, I was watching and analysing. I noted the one who spoke loudly, who moved around in the pulpit as if he was pacing, who waved his arms and continually made the grand gesture. I listened to what he had to say and I filed it. I watched, too, the priest who spoke earnestly and with great force, who relied on the eloquence of his words and the strength of his gaze rather than the punctuation of emphatic hand movements. I listened to what he had to say and I filed it. I watched the young, dark, slight, sincere priest who spoke quietly, who placed no

reliance whatever upon the customary dramatics we have come to expect from retreat preachers over the years. Father John, for that was his name, was one of those rare people who do not deliberately do anything, who do not adopt any particular kind of stance yet who, despite their modest bearing and self-effacement, exude holiness. I listened each time to what he had to say but I did not file it. I pondered it ... nightly.

Thursday evening came. Part of the planned ceremony was the Sacrament of Reconciliation. When this was announced, it didn't quite register with me. I think I vaguely imagined that later in the devotional programme there would be some sort of general blessing. What in fact happened was that a large procession of priests from all of the parishes in the diocese emerged two-by-two from the sacristy and located themselves at various points around the cathedral.

Father John, who had been in the pulpit at that time, announced that he himself would greet penitents on the high altar. There occurred in my pew (what I described later to my sisters as) a 'kerfuffle'. I was sitting at the extreme inside end of the packed pew. I can remember clearly some noise, awkward movement, a series of suddenly startled features (some slightly irritated) ... just faces, clear in my mind. Nothing else! Without having the slightest clue how I got there, I suddenly found myself at the foot of the main altar, well ahead of any queue, making straight for Father John. When I realised where I was, I realised equally that I had absolutely no idea of what I was going to say. I had not had any intention of going to confession. I had made no preparation of any kind – no examination of conscience, no Confiteor, nothing! I had been sitting in my seat calmly surveying the priests emerging from the sacristy. I noted that one priest had made to genuflect when passing the altar but, because his colleagues before and behind made no attempt to genuflect, he stopped himself, mid-obedience, and walked on. I remember the incident clearly. I remember thinking that the priest should have gone ahead with his deferential gesture no matter what the others did. Then suddenly I was at the bottom of the altar steps. (I have just re-read this last section. It seems totally unbelievable that anyone could act in such autonomic fashion ... and yet, it happened exactly as I describe.)

I moved up the steps towards Father John. He stood waiting, calm, serene, an expression of ... what appeared to me to be ... kind interest upon his face. My mind, obviously, was now whirring at massive speed, mostly trying to figure out what I might say, now that I had taken (what I totally and absolutely knew to be) an irrevocable step. I framed in my mind something like 'Father, it is thirty years since I have been to confession. I do not know quite how to go about this. I forget the words, the formula ...' and I stepped forward.

"Father," I said, and stopped, surprised at the weakness of the croak that emitted from my mouth. My throat was totally constricted; saying anything was a supreme effort. Somehow I managed to say, "It's thirty years ... I don't know ..." and that was it! Tears began to course down my face. I looked mutely at Father John, desperately pleading for assistance. I tried again to speak but my mouth simply opened and closed, opened and closed, like a goldfish in a bowl. I kept looking at Father John, maybe wondering with part of my mind if he was going to become impatient and tell me to get on with it. No impatience – just complete kindness. He stepped forward and, in a gesture that I had seen many times in various depictions of the meeting of the Prodigal Son with the Father, he placed a hand on each of my shoulders and said, "Don't worry that you can't speak. Are you sorry for all the sins of your past life?" I could only nod dumbly. "Well, know this," he continued, "God now forgives you every sin you have committed since the day you were born."

The tears continued to flow unabated but the enormity of what Father John had just said startled me into a brief and amazed response, “All of them?”

“All of them,” he replied. “I’m going to give you absolution now and you can return to your seat in the full knowledge that you are filled with the grace of God. Try now to say an act of contrition while I bless you.”

Was there ever a moment so wondrous? Is this how the woman about to be stoned for her sins felt when Jesus said, *‘Since none of these has condemned you, neither will I condemn you.’ (John 8)?*

I returned to my seat, blinded with tears. I stumbled, inevitably, on the steps but a kindly male hand supported me. What did I feel when I got back to my seat? I have no idea. I was stunned, that much is certain. I have a vague notion that the phrase ‘Thank you, Jesus’, was echoing over and over in my brain but there were no coherent thoughts. I was not aware of any of the relief that would seem almost a mandatory response. I was not aware of any need to prostrate myself humbly before the Lord and express my gratitude. I should have done – but I didn’t. What did I feel? I would like to say I felt joy, delight, but I truly can’t remember what I felt. I have tried and tried over these past few days to recall the emotions of that moment – a moment that shall be forever precious to me – but I can’t. It seems to me that I might have been experiencing a total absence of feeling ... or was it a feeling so deep that my brain could not apprehend it, an emotion too deep for thought? I know I kept thinking, ‘I should be praying! I should be thanking God!’ But even this refrain was distant and vague. I simply sat in my seat, unmoving, unthinking, stunned ... in a state of ecstatic numbness. Ecstatic numbness? Where did that idea come from? I wrote it instinctively just now, without thought ... and yet, felicitous phrase, it explains exactly how I was feeling.

Despite some intense reflection over the past few days, I have been unable to find any explanation for what I have come to term ‘this extraordinary epiphany’. What suddenly motivated me to rush to the altar? When did the notion of seeking forgiveness first enter my head? The obvious answer is that the grace of God was working in me. Of course it was. But does the grace of God usually operate with such suddenness, such force? This moment of love and forgiveness was, is, an immense gift but where did its intensity come from? My mother, God rest her, died when I was twenty-one. Did she plead with Jesus’ mother to do something? Did Our Lady then go to her Son, like she did at Cana, and ask him to sort this man out? I do not know but I do know that the miracle at Cana is no more incredible for me than this miraculous epiphany. Sadie, certainly, was pleased. She did not say anything but as we left the chapel she took my hand and we walked to the car in awed silence.

A Tale of Two Brothers

By [Rodney Page](#)

Harold and Larry Pinkston embraced uncomfortably at Starbucks in the Orlando airport terminal, neither quite knowing what to expect from the other.

Their conversation began awkwardly ... inane chatter about the weather, the upcoming football season, the aches and pains of old age and the recession. Neither knew how to open the discussion about Harold's reason for flying down from Asheville.

Finally, Harold took the initiative. "It's taken a long time to get to this point." "Yeah, it has," Larry replied. "Shame it's been over fifty years."

They both laughed nervously.

Fred and Lois Pinkston hadn't actually planned it but were thrilled their second son, Larry, had been born almost exactly a year after their first, Harold. In fact, Harold and Larry's birthdays were within a week of each another. Lois already contemplated joint birthday parties for the boys. It was almost like having twins.

When the tots were two and three, it was obvious the boys were developing quite different personalities. Harold, the oldest, was a good baby. He learned quickly. He slept when he was supposed to, was patient and affectionate.

Larry was also smart but aggressive ... but not in an ugly way. He was just hard-headed and determined to get what he wanted when he wanted it. The younger of the two, Larry was clearly dominant.

Harold was close to his mother, Larry with his father. In his father's view, Larry exhibited the traits a boy should have ... a bit obstreperous, physically active, fearless, and stubborn. Fred's favoritism was not at first overt, but the two boys sensed who received their father's stroking, and it wasn't Harold.

By the time they started elementary school, the boys' strikingly different personalities were evident. Harold was the typical first child ... responsible, obedient, and respectful. His behavior conditioned his parents to expect more of the same.

Harold cleaned up his side of the brothers' room. He did his homework immediately after arriving home from school. Each report card showed good if not excellent performance, and the next grading period promised to be the same or better.

Conversely, Larry didn't follow the rules, but suffered few negative consequences. He cut corners on his chores. His academic performance was mercurial. He sometimes excelled in subjects he liked but paid little attention to those he didn't. Praise showered down for good grades but never any criticism for the poor.

Harold protested the double standard. His mother was sympathetic but noncommittal. His father would hear none of it, offended Harold dared question how he raised Larry.

Harold accepted reality. Larry was the favorite, and Harold didn't have the ability or desire to be like Larry. He could vocalize his objections, but rebellion was outside his comfort zone. And, based on experience, it would be futile.

So Harold chose the only other available option: he internalized his frustration and insecurities. He accepted his inferiority. His natural shyness morphed into adolescent reclusiveness.

He reasoned that if his parents, who were supposed to love him unconditionally, didn't believe in him, no one else would. He concluded that he was a loser.

By his senior year in high school, Harold's self-esteem bottomed out, his negative self-image complete.

Larry, a junior, was popular and excelled at sports. His grades were average, but he had a way with people ... classmates, teachers, and coaches alike. He was charming, gregarious, persuasive, and maybe a little manipulative.

Fred Pinkston already discussed Larry's college plans ... the major consideration: what college provided the best opportunity for Larry to meet the 'right' people? Fred saw greatness in Larry. The younger son had potential to achieve financial success, far beyond that of his father. Larry was the key to Fred and Lois's early retirement in Florida.

Harold was the senior class nerd, only without the stereotypical superior grades. He didn't date and had few friends. He had little interest in college, convinced colleges would have less interest in him. He took the SAT but never opened the envelope reporting his scores. His parents never asked how he did.

Harold registered for the draft. The Vietnam War was winding down, and Harold drew a low lottery number. Though he could avoid the draft, he enlisted in the Army after graduating. Harold wanted out, the means didn't matter. Constant reminders of his inadequacies were more than he could bear.

The Army's aptitude test results reflected Harold's internal ambivalence and low self-esteem; he scored a little below average in all areas. After basic training the Army sent him to Quartermaster School. He emerged as a Fabric Repair Specialist ... a fancy moniker for a flunky who sewed ripped canvas parachute bags.

Harold's only self-acknowledged desire was to travel. He had hoped the Army might station him overseas. Maybe they would send him to Germany, but even Korea would do. Instead, he was assigned to Fort Bragg, just outside Fayetteville, North Carolina, and only six hours from his parents in Atlanta. Harold ruefully surmised he should have joined the Navy.

Harold didn't know why he allowed his mother to talk him into coming home for Thanksgiving. He'd been away for almost two years with no desire to return, but he finally relented after his mother became emotional ... after all, Larry would be home from college.

Driving to Atlanta, Harold earnestly worked to improve his attitude. His expectations were low. His father hadn't changed, but maybe he'd ease up for the holiday. Harold believed he could put up with anything for fifteen hours.

He arrived just before the seven P.M. dinner hour, thus minimizing the time he would have to spend with the family. He also lied, telling his mother he had to report back by three P.M. the following day.

Thanksgiving dinner went well enough until Fred heaped lavish praise on Larry for accomplishments at college ... even though Larry had yet to complete his first quarter on campus.

"Larry, tell your brother about how well you're doing in your classes."

"Dad, I've only had midterm exams. I did okay, nothing special," Larry said.

"Come on, Larry. You only got one C; the rest were Bs. That's pretty damn good. It's a hell of a challenge being away from home, and I'm awfully proud of you, son," his father told him.

Lois tried to change the conversation. She recognized Harold's pained I knew this would happen expression.

"Harold, you haven't said much about what you do at Fort Bragg. Aren't you with the paratroopers?" his mother asked.

Before Harold could answer, his father said, "Hell, he's not a paratrooper; probably doesn't have the slightest interest in jumping out of an airplane or even getting close to one. Isn't that right, Harold?"

"It's not important what I do," Harold said dejectedly.

Having quickly dispensed with his preferred interpretation of Harold's duties, Fred turned back to Larry.

"Tell us about fraternity rush. Do you think you're gonna make SAE?"

"Rush was fun. I met a lot of nice guys, and I'm sure I'll get into one fraternity or another," Larry answered.

"Of course you will," Fred said. "You're a smart, handsome guy. Any fraternity would be stupid not to select you. SAE's the best, and you're the best. I guarantee you, they'll ask you to pledge."

Harold realized he should have never come home. He had known better, but let his mom's pleas overcome his better judgment. As his father went on and on about Larry's real and imagined successes, Harold pushed the dressing and mashed potatoes from one side of his plate to the other; he'd lost his appetite. His lack of participation in the dinner conversation wasn't missed. Nobody much cared about what he might say. Some things never change. Harold survived the onslaught on his ego and kept his mouth shut. Maybe the night would just end and he could get the hell out the next morning.

Fred was well into the cheap Chablis; someone had told him white wine was appropriate with poultry.

He leaned over toward Larry, within earshot of Harold, and said, "Larry, you getting any up there in Athens? I know your brother damn sure isn't unless he's buying it from a Fort Bragg hooker."

Fred thought it was funny as hell, but neither son laughed. Larry was surprised by the gratuitous cheap shot. Harold was outraged. Twenty years of pent up anger and frustration erupted.

"So you think I can't even get a date? Can't you do any better than that, you asshole? How about drugs? You must certainly think I'm a junkie. Why don't you ask how many troops I've killed because I screwed up the parachutes? Go ahead, take your best shot. You don't give a shit about me or what I do; you never have. It's always been 'Larry's done this' or 'Larry's done that.' He could screw up anything and get away with it. You never came down on him."

Fred tried to say something. "Listen to me, young man, I—"

Harold didn't let him finish.

"No, Goddamn it, you listen to me for once. But don't worry, this will be last time you'll ever have to. I've never been a part of this family. Well, now you can make it official. I'm out of this shitty family. But what the hell do you care? Why should I think you'd even care? Shit, I just made your day."

Lois heard the shouting and scurried into the dining room. She tried to say something but Fred shushed her and shouted at Harold.

"Go ahead, walk out that door and don't come back. I don't want see or hear from you again, you hear me? Plus, I'll write you out of the will."

Harold calmed himself

“I bet you’ve wanted to say that since I was born but you were too chicken shit. Congratulations, you did it. See, it wasn’t that difficult, was it? You’ve gotten what you always wanted.”

Harold stood and started to his room to pack. But he turned, smiled and said. “Oh, as for the will, you can shove it up your ass. You don’t have a pot to piss in. I hope Larry produces for you. That’s what you’re waiting for, isn’t it?”

Harold glanced at his brother and continued.

“Larry, you know that you’re being groomed for gravy train duty, don’t you? I hope you graduate and make a lot of money. You’d better because that asshole is expecting to live a life of leisure from your labors. Good luck.”

Harold was out of the house in ten minutes and began the long drive back to Fort Bragg.

Fortunately, I-85 was practically deserted. Harold’s mind wasn’t on his driving.

He had finally stood up to his father, but the gratification was short-lived.

Harold reasoned Larry was a willing accomplice. Larry hadn’t openly ridiculed or disrespected Harold; he didn’t have to. He sat back passively and basked in his father’s praise which often came at Harold’s expense.

With each passing mile Harold became angrier with his brother.

Larry was gifted in so many ways and could succeed at anything on his own. He didn’t need to allow Harold to be kicked around to get a leg up, but he had.

Fred Pinkston unabashedly hoped to cash in on his second son’s wealth-creating potential. But at least he was open and up front about it.

But the perfect Larry sat on the sideline while Harold suffered. Larry could have intervened and been more supportive. He could have acknowledged Harold’s accomplishments. Doing so wouldn’t have diminished his own. But he didn’t. He slid gracefully through life, his mistakes ignored, his shortcomings excused. Every success, small and large, was celebrated and exaggerated. Larry cleverly and smugly took full advantage.

The last 150 miles to Fayetteville passed slowly, but Harold found a new peace. The showdown with his father had empowered him. Harold could be himself and pursue his own interests. He could create his own criteria for success and happiness. What his father thought no longer mattered.

Now Harold had effectively removed the two villains from his life’s story. From now on he controlled the plot, but the truth was Harold still had no plot to control.

Harold completed his Army enlistment and moved to Asheville. He had tired of the flat lands surrounding Fayetteville and thought the mountains were beautiful. He did odd jobs around town and for a time worked as a groundskeeper at the Biltmore House.

But Harold remained aimless with no sense of purpose ... his only conscious goal figuring out how to pay next month’s rent for the dilapidated mobile home.

However, sometimes love comes on suddenly, and if one is lucky, it is the kind of love that can change a life. Harold, maybe for the first time, was lucky.

Sally Rucker was an RN at the VA Hospital in Asheville. Harold was introduced to her by a common friend and he was immediately smitten. She was tall, with long, auburn hair, and was very attractive. She, like Harold, had suffered through an unhappy childhood. Their situations were different, but the outcomes similar:

Estranged from her mother, she had not returned home to Charleston since graduating from nursing school.

By their third date both knew the relationship was special. Six months later, Harold asked Sally to marry him. She accepted, but on one condition ... Harold must get his emotional act together, identify his life's goals and establish a plan to achieve them. Sally had no intention of marrying an ambitionless part-time yardman.

Harold assessed his abilities, desires, and available options. He analyzed dozens of potential career paths but kept coming back to counseling, counseling for troubled teenagers. God knows, he had plenty of personal experience.

He needed a Bachelor's degree, and then a Master's, but could obtain financial assistance from the Army. Even better, a local college offered the desired curricula, and he and Sally wouldn't have to relocate.

Harold jumped through the requisite hoops, secured financial aid and was admitted. With commitment never before experienced, he enthusiastically jumped headlong into his studies.

Harold trudged through the mandatory freshman and sophomore courses. His grades were pretty good, but became excellent once he finally got to the more interesting and relevant courses in his major. He went to summer school and completed his Bachelor's in just over three years. His Master's degree came fourteen months later.

Harold was hired by the Buncombe County Health Department to work with preteens. Many were from broken homes, or they lived with parents with substance abuse issues. Harold was very good at what he did. Many of the kids' situations were heartbreaking, some hopeless, but Harold never gave up.

Harold had finally found his passion.

Both Harold and Sally's family situations complicated their wedding planning. They could have become married in a private civil ceremony and been done with it. Instead, Sally wanted her two sisters, her father, and a few close friends present. She knew Harold wanted nothing to do with his father but assumed he'd want to invite his mother and brother.

"I think we can keep it under a dozen. I'll invite six or seven, then your mother, your brother, and the people you mentioned from your office," Sally said.

Harold hesitated a moment and answered more sharply than intended, "No, just Frank and Jennifer from the office."

"Sorry! Don't bite my head off," Sally countered, surprised at Harold's tone.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you."

"Apology accepted. You're not going to invite Larry or your mother?"

"I don't think so; too many bad memories."

"Harold, it would hurt your mother terribly if you didn't invite her. You talk to her every week, and you've told her about me. What are you going to do? Just call her up after the wedding and say, 'Oh, by the way, Mom, you remember that girl I told you about? Well, we got married last Saturday.' I don't think so."

"You're right; that wouldn't be fair. We'll invite Mom."

"Good. What about Larry and his wife?" Sally asked.

"No way!" Harold exclaimed.

Sally mulled her next move. She knew Harold wasn't close to his brother. He never talked to him or saw him. To her knowledge, all Harold knew about Larry was whatever his mother told him. But, Larry was Harold's brother.

“You haven’t seen or talked to Larry in over ten years. Maybe it’s time to bury the hatchet and move on.”

“Easier said than done, Sally. Yeah, it’s been over ten years since I talked to Larry or my father, but look at the results. I’m happy and focused. I have a meaningful career, and I have you. I’ve done better without them in my life. They screwed me up for all those years, and I’ve worked hard to get my shit together. Why would I risk all that? Maybe one day, but not now. I’m not sure I could handle it.”

Sally knew he was right. He wasn’t ready yet, and perhaps he would never be. She knew enough about Harold’s dark days to not resurrect his painful memories. Against all odds he’d overcome wounds most couldn’t. He’d turned his life around. Insisting Larry be invited was, indeed, not worth the risk.

Harold and Sally’s fourteen-year-old twin daughters were stars on the junior varsity soccer team that had just won the regional championship. It was a joyous ride home for Harold, Sally, and the girls. There were lots of giggles, high fives, and a bit of ridicule for the hated (and now defeated) Spartans from Hendersonville.

Sally checked her voicemails when they got home and motioned Harold to the bedroom. The call Harold knew would eventually come had.

“Harold, you need to call your mother. I’m sorry; your father died.”

Harold was not grieved, feeling only dread of the upcoming obligatory family reunion. Out of respect for his mother, he had to go to the funeral.

Harold’s mother had visited Asheville periodically, but he hadn’t been to his childhood home for over thirty years. Now, he must return to the place of awful memories, now made worse by the burial rituals. He had to play the role of the grief-stricken son.

The scene would be made more awkward by his daughters’ presence. They’d never met their grandfather or their uncle and cousin from Orlando. Harold’s intentionally vague explanations over the years as to why not would leave them full of questions.

On the four-hour drive to Atlanta, Harold struggled to describe his family history. The girls were bright and mature for their age, capable of dealing with the truth, but Harold equivocated. He would get to a critical but hurtful point and back off to avoid a painful memory, his explanation meandering senselessly.

Ashley, the eldest twin by four minutes, finally asked, “Did you hate your father?”

Harold grimaced. There was no way to dodge his daughter’s question.

“Yes, yes I did, I’m sorry to say. Hate is a terrible and damaging emotion, but yes, I hated him.”

Ashley pressed, “He’s dead now. Do you still hate him?”

The question startled Harold. He’d hated his father while he was alive, but now he was dead. Did he still harbor any hate? Yes, somehow. Did he hate his childhood memories? Did he hate the memories of the man? Did he hate what the man had done to him? Just what the hell did he hate?

“I don’t know, Ashley. I really don’t.”

Harold turned into his old neighborhood. The house hadn’t changed much. The trees were taller, and a few of the houses had been torn down, the large lots subdivided into two or three parcels, each with an ostentatious three-quarter-of-a-million-dollar home. Such was the appeal in Atlanta these days of close-to-downtown living.

Harold parked on the street. A car with Florida plates was in the driveway. Larry and his family had already arrived.

Harold was shocked when he saw his brother. Harold remembered Larry as thin and athletic. Larry was now at least forty pounds overweight, his face was puffy and red, the telltale signs of too much booze. He looked twenty years older than his age. The youthful, self-assured, confident, and gregarious Larry was now soft-spoken, shy, and dominated by his boisterous and obnoxious wife, Marsha.

The brothers shook hands; neither felt a hug appropriate. Larry introduced his son, Kevin, a sullen sixteen-year-old dressed in black, adorned with tattoos, a nose ring, and a hairstyle defying description. He was obviously not pleased to be among present company. Kevin mumbled a half-hearted greeting to Harold, Sally, and the twins, but only after Marsha demanded he do so. Kevin was no more a pleasant human being than his mother.

Harold's mother flittered around the house, seemingly oblivious to the tension between her sons' families. She talked about her sons' youthful exploits, fabricating fanciful and inaccurate recollections of the good old days when the boys were growing up.

Neither Harold nor Larry confirmed nor denied their mother's fantasies. Both sat quietly, dutifully nodding their heads and wishing they were anywhere other than their childhood home.

However, Marsha wasn't reluctant to talk ... and she did, incessantly.

She went on about Larry's financial success and their material possessions. There was their home in Orlando: all 5,500 square feet of it. She talked about how comfortable the ride to Atlanta was in their new Mercedes SUV, and how nice it was to get out of Orlando's stifling summer heat and retreat to their mountain cottage outside Highlands, North Carolina.

But, of course, Marsha's life had its challenges. The gardener was busted for an immigration violation, and replacing him had taken weeks. There were the intransigent administrators at Kevin's private school that didn't understand or respect his free spirit and individuality. Marsha had considered legal action after Kevin was thrown out of his third private school in a little over two years.

Mercifully, Harold's mother requested help preparing dinner, and Marsha's filibuster ended abruptly. Harold's twins watched TV, and Kevin glued himself to his smart phone, texting non-stop.

Harold and Larry stepped out onto the porch. Neither seemed comfortable speaking. Finally, Harold broke the awkward silence.

"Well, how have you been doing?"

"Pretty good, I suppose. How about you?" Larry responded.

"Not bad. Sally is wonderful. The twins are doing well in school, and my counseling work is satisfying."

Larry's pained expression gave away his sadness.

"I'm really glad to hear that, Harold. I work like a dog, but I'm doing pretty well, at least well enough to pay all the bills," Larry said, not commenting on his own family.

"Mom said you are in real estate," Harold said.

"Yeah, commercial real estate," Larry nodded. "Central Florida's booming. It really hasn't been hurt much by the dip in the economy. Too many orange grove owners are willing to sell for a gillion dollars to make way for strip malls and office parks. It can't last forever, but it's been good to me so far. I understand you work with troubled children."

“Yes, I’ve been doing it since I got out of college. I’ll never get rich, but Sally’s an RN, and we do okay. We both like what we do.”

“Good for you. There’s a lot to be said for enjoying your work and family,” Larry said forlornly.

“Where did you meet Marsha?” Harold asked, trying to find some commonality of interest with his brother.

“At a Chamber of Commerce function,” Larry answered, volunteering nothing more.

“How long have you been married?”

“Eighteen years.”

It was clear Larry wasn’t particularly interested in discussing Marsha.

“Is Kevin your only child?” Harold asked.

“Yes.”

Harold strained to move the conversation along.

“The twins are a little younger than Kevin. We’re running all over the place, carting them from one activity to another. What are Kevin’s interests?”

Larry smiled slightly, more of a smirk.

“He spends his waking hours playing demonic video games and getting into trouble.”

Harold abruptly changed the subject back to their professions. Larry seemed genuinely interested in Harold’s counseling work. Likewise, Harold learned a lot about the commercial real estate market in Orlando.

The brothers talked for about twenty minutes. Marsha opened the screen door and screeched that dinner was ready.

“Harold, I’m really sorry that Dad treated you like he did. There was no reason for it. I regret anything I did to make it worse.”

The comment sent Harold’s memory to places and events he didn’t want to recall. His conversation with his brother was genial enough, but even though he tried, Harold couldn’t return to memories that had taken years to forget.

Harold didn’t respond to Larry’s comment and turned to walk inside saying, “I believe dinner’s ready.”

The next two days were miserable for everyone except Marsha who delighted in regaling her brother-in-law and his family with detailed descriptions of how she frittered away Larry’s wealth.

Once Harold and Sally figured out Marsha’s perverse little game, it became a source of amusement. When Marsha launched into a description of the cruise up the Rhine or the Bermuda vacation, Harold and Sally looked at each other, smiled, nodded, and let Marsha ramble on with her tales of opulent consumption.

Less easily ignored was Kevin, who was an insolent and insular little shit. The twins simply avoided him. Marsha offered up constant praise for Kevin and rationalizations for his rude behavior. However, enough truth leaked out for Harold and Sally to accurately ascertain Kevin’s antics had caused considerable chaos in the family.

He’d been thrown out of three private schools. His grades stunk. He’d been busted twice for misdemeanor drug violations. He was a loner, collected knives, and addicted to violent video games.

For Kevin’s every misstep, his mother had several explanations. Each absolved Kevin for his lack of effort to become even a minimal contributor to civil society.

After the graveside services, Harold and his family immediately headed back to Asheville, all frazzled after three days in Atlanta. The twins railed about what a jerk Kevin was until Sally told them that she'd heard enough.

The car was quiet for about an hour until Sally loosened everyone up. In a mock impersonation of Marsha, she described a vacation to the moon, complete with detailed descriptions of an assortment of servants Marsha hauled aboard the spaceship. It was in good fun, and everyone needed to decompress after the witheringly awkward and depressing time in Atlanta.

By the time they got home, the family's natural easiness, positivism, and comfort with each other had returned.

But Harold remained a bit shaken up by his brush with the past. Larry was making tons of money and obviously hadn't set up his father in a life of luxury in Florida. Larry, the goose, hadn't laid the golden egg his father had expected. Harold found the thought humorous; he had fantasized for years that his father's selfish plan would fail. So why now did he feel a twinge of guilt?

Also, Harold felt something other than animus for his brother. Larry was financially successful, but it was obvious his life pretty much sucked otherwise. Marsha was a bitch by any standard. She thoroughly enjoyed the fruits of her husband's labors, but offered no observable support or affection. Kevin, according to Larry's own comments, was a source of parental disappointment and despair rather than pride and joy.

Harold had pigeonholed his firmly entrenched emotions for years, but now his feelings stirred. His father was dead. As a counselor, he knew that continuing to hate a corpse was not good for mental health.

Perhaps Larry should take over the 'most hated' spot on Harold's list. But the precious and perfect Larry was no longer precious or perfect. He had become a financial success, but based on his appearance it had taken a tremendous physical toll. Larry was depressed and subdued, his formerly gregarious, positive, and persuasive personality totally absent.

How strange life is, Harold thought.

The two brothers exchanged occasional e-mails over the next ten years.

Harold wrote mostly about his family ... the twins' high school prom and graduation, Sally going back to work full time, taking the kids to college, their campus exploits, and what they were doing after graduation.

Larry wrote nothing of his family, and Harold didn't inquire. Larry's e-mails concerned his business, mundane descriptions of successful or not-so-successful projects. For the last eighteen months, the not-so-successful vastly outnumbered the successful; Larry's notes took on a desperate tone and then ceased altogether.

Harold's inquiries went unanswered. He knew he should pick up the phone and call Larry, but he didn't.

Finally, Harold received a four-page letter from Larry. In part, it read:

Dear Harold,

Many years have passed since we were "real" brothers; probably when we were only five and six. But yet I still remember those too few years when we were friends.

Maybe I was too young and didn't realize what was happening among you, me, and Dad. I didn't really perceive his favoritism toward me for what it was until I was ten or twelve.

I can honestly tell you I never intentionally tried to hurt or take advantage of you. But I must also tell you I didn't come to your defense as often as I should have.

I would be lying to you if I said I didn't enjoy the role of favorite. I know I got away with stuff that, had you done it, you would have been punished. I know Dad went more than overboard on every little thing I did right or every small success I had. Could I have more aggressively taken your side? Yes. Could I have supported you more? Yes. Could I have done many things that would have lessened the hurt you went through? Yes.

But those sins might be forgiven or explained away because I was a child and teenager. What I cannot explain away are my actions as an adult. I should have reached out to you. Maybe it would have helped. I didn't, and I really have no good explanation, but maybe an excuse.

I knew you wanted nothing to do with me, and I didn't know what to say to you. I could have apologized, but what good would that have done? One measly apology is nothing for the years of what Dad and I did to you.

I guess my excuse was that I was embarrassed, and as every year passed, I became more embarrassed, but not enough to call you.

Larry wrote several pages recalling the good times when they were small boys, many of which Harold had long forgotten. There had been good times, Harold remembered, but that was so long ago.

Larry continued with a brief description of his current situation, and it was not good.

I write the following not to ask for your sympathy or help, although the timing might lead you believe otherwise. I simply need to tell someone who might listen and care.

My business went under. The real estate market crashed down here. I've filed for personal bankruptcy, and once Marsha learned of my financial situation, she filed for divorce and is circling like a vulture for any scraps my creditors might leave behind. I should not be surprised.

Kevin is in jail, thankfully. That sounds terribly harsh, but had he not been arrested for drug dealing, he would have eventually hurt or killed someone. It pains me to have such thoughts about my own son. I am much to blame for allowing Marsha to have her way with him.

Harold was shocked upon learning his brother's plight. Based on his single meeting with Marsha and Kevin, Harold surmised Larry's personal life was miserable, but at least he had been very successful in his business.

Harold finished reading Larry's letter.

If you choose not to respond, I will understand. If I were in your shoes, I probably wouldn't, but I hope you will.

Despite all Dad and I did to you, you have succeeded. You overcame abuses that would have scarred others for life. You dealt with your feelings, you went to school, you work at something you love and you have a wonderful and loving family. You started with nothing and now have everything. I started with everything handed to me on a silver platter and now have nothing, and I deserve no better.

I am remorseful and cannot find the appropriate words to ask your forgiveness.

I love you, my brother.

Larry found a table in the corner of the Starbuck's at the Orlando airport, and Harold picked up two black coffees and joined him.

"I appreciate you flying down," Larry said.

"Well, after reading your letter, I thought it made sense to meet face-to-face," Harold responded.

"Probably so, but I still appreciate you going to the trouble of coming down."

"No problem. Why did you write the letter, Larry?"

Larry pondered how to express his thoughts. This was probably his last chance at reconciliation with Harold.

"I'm complicit in much that caused you pain over the years. As I wrote in my letter, I could have done something to help you, but I never did. I have no reasonable explanations, only excuses. I've been greatly humbled, Harold. Dad made you believe you could never succeed; he made me believe I could not fail. It seems he led us both astray."

Harold listened intently. He impulsively decided to fly to Orlando after reading Larry's letter, not really knowing how he felt or what he would say.

Larry continued. "You know, Dad made me think everything I did was correct and proper. Every decision I made was the best, whether it actually was or not. I thought I was invincible and bulletproof." He shook his head sadly. "Dad taught me to rationalize away every mistake I ever made. Consequently, I began to think I couldn't make a mistake.

"It all began to catch up with me when I met Marsha. She was gorgeous and very successful in her career. I had hoped she would be an asset to me in my business and chose to overlook her shortcomings, knowing that somehow, everything would work itself out—because it always had.

"Turned out she was an overbearing, arrogant bitch who spent money like no one I've ever seen. I worked hard to pay the bills. I was able to because the market here boomed and I rode the crest of the wave. When the market crashed, she had no further use for me.

"I wasn't any good as a father. I was working all the time and didn't pay attention to Kevin. Marsha pampered him and let him get away with anything. Does that sound familiar? It seemed he changed overnight from a toddler to a selfish and mean-spirited teenager."

Larry sipped his coffee and concluded, "So, here I am, Dad's golden boy. I'm busted financially, the marriage is over, and my son's in jail. But you know what? I'm not sorry because the whole ugly journey made me face reality, finally, after all these years."

Larry briefly touched Harold's hand, and then drew his hand back. "Harold, I'm very sorry. I can never make up for how I treated you. If you choose to fly back to Asheville and never speak to me again, I'll understand. But I'm glad you came. I just want to tell you that I apologize, and that I love you."

Harold was deeply moved. Larry's apology was sincere and heartfelt. Harold thought back to his own deep despair many years ago. He recalled how helpless and hopeless he once was, how Sally came into his life and gave him a reason to live, to achieve, and to want to make someone proud of him. He had not shed his own emotional baggage; he never would. But Sally and the twins' love and positivism filled voids in his soul, shooed off melancholy when it reared its ugly head. He had

survived, if not completely healed, certainly out of psychological intensive care. He was strong, confident. He received love. Could he return it to his estranged brother?

“Where’re you staying?” Harold asked.

“I’ve got an apartment in Castleberry,” Larry answered.

“Got a lease?”

“No, it’s month to month. Why?”

“Because I want you to pack up your stuff and come to Asheville,” Harold said, smiling at his astonished brother. “We’ve got to make up for a lot of lost time.”

[A Soldier's Tale](#)

By [Esma Race](#)

Illustration by [Veronica Castle](#)



Alex was having a problem waking up. His eyes would not open, nor did his limbs feel as though they would obey his unspoken commands to move. He tried to recall what had happened before he fell asleep. Had he been drinking? Then he dismissed the idea: he never drank on duty.

He felt as though he had been in a very deep sleep, but when the word duty sprang into his mind, memories came flooding back. Memories of dust and gunfire, exhaustion and the need to be alert at all times. His comrades and the conflict that they were all engaged in.

Afghanistan. He now remembered everything, the flash and the explosion, then darkness and nothing else.

That's it then, I've been injured. With that he decided that he must be in a hospital; but where? In the military hospital at Camp Bastian, or back home in England?

How injured am I? he asked himself. The first instinct was to panic, but Sergeant Alex Dexter wasn't one who panicked easily. Aware of his breathing, he tried to check himself for any obvious problems. However, nothing at all seemed normal. His arms and legs didn't feel as though they belonged to him, his eyes refused to focus. Keeping calm, Alex tried to listen for any clues as to where he was, he also tried to call out: but nothing except a whimper came out of his mouth.

He lay very still. *What on earth has happened to me?* he wondered.

He found out very soon, and was so shocked that he stopped breathing for a few moments, causing the people caring for him to lift him up.

Being lifted into those loving arms just confirmed to him his worst fears. He was horrified. He felt his heart beating fast, all he could think of was that he was dead.

Dead! But not really dead. Born again, reincarnated or whatever word he used, still himself with his own thoughts and memories, but in this tiny strange body.

Oh my God! ... Am I still a male?

He had no way of knowing at that moment: did he want to be female? Well, that was an idea to ponder about. Then something even worse came into his mind. What nationality was he? For the staunchly patriotic Sergeant Alex Dexter to be anything other than British was unthinkable, although American, Canadian, or

Australian would be acceptable. The unthinkable was to have been born into a family loyal to the rebels that he had been fighting against. But then again he would soon forget his past life, wouldn't he, he certainly had never heard anyone saying "oh by the way when I lived in a previous life, I lived in Alaska ..." or any other random remark. However he didn't want to forget a single thing about his past. His mother Sonia was so special; and his Dad Sam, whom he had always looked up to and admired.

He felt a sudden great sadness. *They will all be so devastated to know I've died. How on earth can I let them know that I am still here and can remember them?* Karen his wife, waiting at home, must have been notified by now, the knock on the door that all army wives dreaded. How would she tell his daughters! Tears formed in his eyes at the thought of Lydia and Francesca growing up without him. A wail of distress came out of his mouth, which startled him so much that he continued to howl and could not stop.

Then he heard a voice, a male voice, speaking in English. "Wow," the voice said, "he's got a strong pair of lungs!"

Well, now I know my gender at least, he thought. The arms cradling Alex were firm and strong, he felt secure but still unsettled. Then he thought to himself *this must be my new father. This is really bizarre.*

Then the man handed him into another pair of arms. Warm loving arms, which held him close. *My new mother!* It was almost too much for Alex to take in. He listened carefully though, as the two new people in this strange situation chatted together.

"What are we going to call our new little son, then?" Alex waited for the answer with his heart in his mouth. *I've got a name already,* he thought in dismay.

"Gareth sounds good to me, what do you think, Grace?"

"I think that sounds fine: Gareth Lee Newport, after you, darling ..."

Alex now had the answer to two of his questions. What were the names of his new parents, and what was he going to be called in his future new life.

He was slowly coming to terms with what had happened to him. He knew he was completely dependent on these people, of whom he knew nothing. He had to rely on them completely for everything, food, warmth and shelter. He had no control at all. He could not walk or talk. He was helpless. Although he felt content in his new mother's arms he was afraid to sleep in case he totally forgot his previous existence. So he set about deciding which facts he needed to imprint in his subconscious mind.

He started with his name, date of birth and army number, closely followed by his daughters' full names and date of births. Then his wife and parents' details. With that done he let himself slip into a restful sleep, but not before wondering how everything he had thought about death could be wrong. Where, he wondered, was the tunnel with a light at the end? Why was he not met by Jesus, angels, or at the very least his Gran?

Twenty four hours later, baby Gareth Lee Newport was back at home, the memories of his past life were still with him and he was determined to reclaim his family. *I must grow up fast and learn quickly* were his main thoughts, other than never forgetting.

But all to no avail: within the next few weeks all the memories had faded away.

The Memorial service had been held for Sergeant Alex Dexter of the Third Paras, killed when on patrol in war-torn Afghanistan, and his family were picking up the pieces of their lives.

Baby Gareth continued to make good progress, and his Grandma kept insisting that he was an Old Soul. “Been here before, that one,” she said, on more than one occasion.

[The Day of the Fast Gun](#)

By [Wesley Tallant](#)

The thunder of the two pistols erupting, and the spitting out of their deadly projectiles, sounded as one. Two clouds of gun smoke filled the air. The two hands that held the pistols jerked upward at the same time from the recoil of the weapons....

But let me start at the beginning, three days ago, that lead up to this moment. A moment that will live forever in the minds of the people who witnessed it.

My name is Charlie Evans. I am a reporter for The Barleyville Gazette. I have written news articles for some of the larger newspapers back east. But trouble with a married woman there forced me to come west. Her husband was a judge in Philadelphia. I stopped in Chicago for a while, but a similar situation came up there. That time it was the mayor's daughter. Same story in Saint Louis.

Anyway, back to our story.

I've been in Barleyville now for about six months. The small paper here is almost not needed. Gossip gets around faster than the newspaper does.

Barleyville is not much more than two roads that intersect in the eastern plains of Wyoming. It has only a couple of hundred residents who live here year round. It has two saloons, a dry goods store, blacksmith/livery shop, an apothecary store, etcetera. Your general western town.

Barleyville was a quiet, peaceful town. It was so peaceful that there hadn't even been any gun play for almost two years. But all that changed three days ago when the man in black rode into town.

He was dressed all in black, from his hat to his silver-toed boots. The buttons on his black leather vest were made of silver. The details of his hand-tooled gun belt were accented with silver piping and thread. Even his trouser belt had a silver buckle on it. The twin Colts in his gun belt were nickel plated with pearl handles. His hat was pulled down to shade his eyes from the sun.

He rode a pure white horse. It looked like it could chase the wind for days without stopping. The saddle on its back was black and trimmed in silver with a large Mexican-style saddle horn.

People on both sides of the street stopped what they were doing and watched as he rode by. Whispers began flying, and the gossip mill was alive once more.

He rode through the middle of town to the livery stable and dismounted. He tossed the livery boy a silver dollar and said, "Brush him down good. Give him all the oats he can eat. I'll be back to check in on him later."

He walked with more confidence than anyone I'd ever seen before. He walked the entire length of town looking at every detail of the place. He then looked around one more time before entering the Trail Dust Saloon.

He took a table in the back and propped up his feet on the chair next to him. Evelyn, the bar girl, brought him the beer he'd asked for as he entered the saloon. She tried being friendly and make small talk. He tossed her a twenty-five-cent piece and told her to get lost.

Sheriff Gene Danvers heard about the man and came in to check him out. Beside him were his two deputies, Tracy Hawthorn and Kyle Adams. All three men were decent with a gun, but this stranger had the aura of death around him.

Sheriff Danvers and the two deputies walked up to the table where the man sat sipping his beer.

“What's your name, mister?” asked Sheriff Danvers.

The stranger didn't respond. He just kept sipping his beer.

“The sheriff's talking to you,” said Deputy Hawthorne. “You answer him when he speaks.”

The stranger raised his head and looked at Deputy Hawthorne. His cold gray eyes sent shivers down the spine of the sheriff and his two deputies. But they stood their ground.

“This is a peaceful town,” Sheriff Danvers said. His voice had a tremor that told everyone in the saloon he was nervous. “We ain't had any gun play here for some time. I suggest you drink your beer and move on.”

The stranger took another sip of his beer and lowered his head. “I'm not here to cause trouble. I'll move on when I please,” he said, his voice as cold as his eyes.

“You ... you got a name?” asked Deputy Adams. Of the three lawmen, he was the greenest.

“Granger,” said the stranger after another sip of beer. “Now get lost. You're blocking my view of the door.”

The name Granger hit the sheriff like the fist of a lumber jack. He took a step back. “Clyde Granger?” he asked, even more nervous than before.

The man in black emptied his beer mug and waved for Evelyn to bring him another.

Sheriff Danvers screwed up what little courage he had left and said, “Enjoy your beer, Mister Granger. Let's go, boys. There's nothing we can do here.” He turned and quickly left the saloon, walking so fast he was almost running, his two deputies close at his heels.

Clyde Granger was a shootist. It was said that there was nobody faster, nobody as accurate, and nobody as cold when it came to dealing death with a six gun. He gave no quarter to anybody. If you drew on him, you would die.

It was just past noon when he took his seat at the table in the back of the saloon. He didn't move from it all day. At supper time, he called Evelyn over to him. “This town got a cafe?”

“We serve meals here,” she said.

Granger looked around. “I don't see nobody else eating,” he said. “That tells me the food here isn't any good. Does this town have a cafe or not?”

“Ida's is on down the street a bit,” she said. She turned, threw up her nose, and stomped off. She made her money off commissions from the drinks and food she served.

Granger stood, slid the chair aside, and headed for the door. He stopped at the swinging doors and looked outside at the street. He didn't expect any trouble, but he never knew when it would find him, or where it would come from. Satisfied the street was safe, he pushed open the swinging doors and stepped out onto the porch of the saloon.

He walked down to Ida's, ever watchful and alert. The smell coming from Ida's was that of good home cooking. He gave himself the luxury of a second with his eyes closed as he took in the sweet aromas that emanated from the cafe. If a person looked close, they could almost say they saw him smile.

He opened his eyes and looked around before reaching for the door to Ida's cafe. Once inside, he looked around again. There were a dozen tables in there but only a few not already occupied. He selected a table near a side wall and sat in the chair by the wall. This position gave him a commanding view of the café, and the front door in particular.

A young girl of about seventeen approached him. She had on an apron over her blue-checked dress and a towel thrown over her shoulder. "What'll you have?" she asked.

"A pot of coffee, steak, potatoes, bread, and a piece of pie," Granger said, hardly even acknowledging her presence.

She turned and went back to the kitchen.

Almost all the diners in the cafe stopped eating when Granger entered. Some hurriedly paid and left before finishing. Granger could feel the eyes of the diners on him as he waited for his meal. They were no different from the eyes that plagued him in the cafes of other towns. He had long since learned to ignore the onlookers and pick out the troublemakers. But he felt them all.

The girl soon returned with a pot of coffee and a cup. She set the cup down and filled it. As she turned to leave, he grabbed her arm. "Leave the pot," he said.

"Sure, Mister," she said and set the pot on the table.

Granger sat there for twenty minutes, sipping at the coffee and steeling glances at the other patrons who had stayed to finish their meal.

When the girl returned, she had his meal with her. She set the plate down and returned to the kitchen. Granger quickly ate and sopped up the juices with a piece of the bread. The apple pie was one of the best he'd had in a while.

"How much?" he asked the girl when she returned to collect the dirty dishes.

"Seventy-five cents," she said.

Granger tossed her a silver dollar. He then stood and left before she could get his change.

He went to the livery stable and checked on his horse and saddle, then he returned to the saloon and the table in the back.

At midnight, the bartender rang a bell behind the bar and yelled closing time. The dozen or so patrons in the saloon quickly downed their drinks and filed out the door. Granger took another sip of his beer.

"Closing time, Mister Granger," the bartender said as he cautiously approached the table. "We got rooms to rent upstairs if you need a place to stay. Fifty cents a night."

"I'm fine where I'm at," Granger said.

"But it's closing time," the bartender said nervously. "I got a wife and kids to get home to."

"Then go on home," Granger said coldly. "I'll be here when you come back in the morning." He then pulled his hat down over his face and leaned back in the chair.

The bartender turned and started for the door, blowing out the lamps as he went.

"The lamp by the door," Granger said, "leave it be."

"Sure thing, Mister Granger," said the bartender, and he left and closed the big glass doors of the saloon behind him.

When the bartender returned the next morning, Granger was still in the chair in the same position he was the night before. "Sleep well, Mister Granger?" he asked, just to be polite.

"You've got mice," was all Granger said as he stood and walked to the door. And just like the night before, he looked over the street before he stepped out into the morning light.

He went to the livery to check on his horse, then to Ida's for breakfast, then back to the table in the back of the saloon. At lunch it was the same routine, and then again at supper. Very few people spoke to him and he spoke back to even fewer.

The sheriff and his deputies still kept an eye on him, but from a distance. They now carried sawn-off shotguns wherever they went.

Again that night, Granger slept in the chair in the saloon.

That brings us to this morning. He again left the saloon when Dykes, the bartender, showed up and opened the outer doors. He went through the same routine as yesterday. He checked on his horse at the livery, and went to Ida's for breakfast. I was there with pencil and paper when he came in. He sat at the same table and ordered ham, eggs, home fries, biscuits, gravy, and a pot of coffee.

I screwed up my back as straight as I could get it and managed to get up enough nerve to approach his table.

I removed my derby hat and said, "Mister Granger, sir. I am a reporter for the Barleyville Gazette. I was wondering if you would consent to an interview for me?"

His cold gray eyes looked at me from under the brim of his hat. He sipped his coffee and just stared at me. The rest of the patrons had grown silent and you could have heard a pin drop.

"You looking to get rich off my story?" he asked coldly. "If you are, just pick up one of those dime novels and make up something like everybody else." He then went back to sipping his coffee and staring at the door.

"Yes, I feel I could make some change from your story," I said. The nervous sweat on my brow began to run and get into my eyes. "But I want to tell your story. The way you want to be remembered."

He sipped his coffee and again brought those cold eyes up to meet mine. My knees were now becoming weak. I was beginning to find it hard to breathe.

"The last time someone said he wanted to tell my story, he twisted it all up. By the end of that story, he had me being the one who shot Lincoln. I was only six years old when that happened."

"Well, sir. I would write only what you tell me to write and print only what you authorize. It will be as if you wrote it yourself," I said.

"And what's in it for me?" he asked.

I tugged at my now sweat-soaked collar and swallowed the lump that had grown in my throat. "The knowledge that the truth is written down for history and can't be changed," I answered.

He looked at me with softer eyes and pushed the chair across from him out with his foot. "Sit down, writer. You've got more nerve than a lot of lawmen I've come across."

For the next three hours we sat at Ida's, he talked and I listened. He told me he was born in Waco, Texas. His father was a cowhand for one of the big ranches there and his mother did seamstress work for the other cowhands. They lived in a shack behind the bunkhouse at the ranch's main complex.

When the war between the states broke out, the owner of the ranch joined up with the Confederacy and marched off to war with half of his cowhands behind him. Granger's father stayed behind to work the ranch with four other cowhands that were too old to fight a war. But because his father stayed behind, he was branded a coward by most of the other people in town. But the four older cowhands stood beside him.

Word got back that the owner of the ranch was killed at Jackson, Mississippi. His brother assumed ownership of the ranch then and fired everyone there and brought in his own hands.

Granger's mom and dad took what little savings they had and bought a horse and worn out buggy. They drifted west, working their way from ranch to ranch. They didn't stay in one place more than three years.

When Granger was seventeen, he killed his first man. That was in a waste dump of a town named Mulberry Creek in Arizona. He came home from working the range with his dad and another cowhand and found a stranger in their house going through their belongings. His mother lay dead on the floor. His father lunged at the stranger, but received a bullet in the chest before he got halfway across the room.

Granger had just started wearing a gun the year before. He never thought he would have to use it this way. But somehow the gun came into his hand, as if by magic, and fired. A clean, round hole appeared in the stranger's forehead, and the back of his head seemed to disappear. He still doesn't remember drawing the gun.

His father, gasping for breath, lay on the floor at his feet. Granger knelt and took the dying man's head in his hands. His father looked up at him and said, "I love you, son." He then closed his eyes and the last bit of life left him.

The cowhand told how fast he drew and fired the pistol. The word spread like wildfire. Strangers started showing up looking for the kid with the fast draw. The cemetery started growing with the extra bodies he was placing there. The town grew tired of the unwanted attention and the town marshal was told by the City Council to run him out of town. They were tired of the almost weekly gunfights on their streets.

Granger took what few belongings he had and packed them into a saddlebag and left. He never went back to that town. With him gone, the town eventually dried up and disappeared.

But wherever he went men who fancied themselves as fast with a gun wanted to challenge him. He faced two men at the same time in Tucson and bested them. Whitie Lawson, the notorious outlaw, met his fate at the hands of Clyde Granger. And so on and so on it went.

He grew tired of the game and changed his name once, and settled down in a small town in Utah. He went back to his cow-punching ways and met a girl from back east. They fell in love and were married. She was soon to have a child, but before its birth, a stranger rode into town who recognized Granger.

Although Granger denied who the stranger said he was, he knew there would be more blood on his hands. The stranger grabbed for his gun, but Granger was faster. The stranger had not even cleared leather when a bullet punched a hole in his heart. The stranger was only nineteen.

From the speed of his draw, the town knew who he truly was. His young wife couldn't believe it either. She said she would not bring a child into a world such as that surrounding Granger. So she packed her bags and moved back east.

She would send him letters, some taking months to reach him, that told of a son and how he was growing and looking more and more like his father.

Granger longed to go east and find his wife and son, but he feared if he did, the wild elements that constantly tracked him down would follow him there. He couldn't inflict that on them. But then the letters stopped coming. It had now been years since she had written him.

I asked him her name, but he just kept on with his story.

He hid out in the mountains of Colorado once. While there, he did a little prospecting and found enough gold that he could live comfortably for the rest of his life. That's when he bought the fancy guns, fancy clothes and fancy saddle. The pure white stallion had been owned by Whitie Lawson.

That's how he lived his life. Always moving from town to town, using bank drafts from the Denver bank where he deposited the gold.

I asked him what brought him to this little hamlet of a town. He looked at me and said, "Dave Woods."

"They say Dave Woods is faster than Wes Harding," I said. The nervousness that had left my body now returned.

"He's fast," Granger said after sipping more of the ever present coffee. "But not that fast."

"What does Dave Woods have to do with you coming here?" I asked.

"He wants to have it out with me," Granger said. "To settle once and for all who's fastest."

"But why here? Why not Denver or Laramie? Someplace more notable?" I asked.

"I have my reasons," he said.

Just then the door to the cafe burst open and the boy from the livery came in. Spotting Granger, he came over to the table. "He's here, Mister Granger," the boy said, out of breath from his run from the stable. "Just like you said, sir. Strawberry roan and tan saddle. Ivory grip Smith and Wesson with DW on the grip."

"Fine, boy. Where is he now?" asked Granger as he handed the boy a silver dollar.

"Out in the street in front of the livery, sir," the boy answered.

"You run along now," Granger said.

The boy turned and left as quickly as he had entered.

Granger laid a five-dollar gold piece on the table and slid back his chair. He stood, straightened up his leather vest, and checked the loads in both his Colts. He said nothing else as he walked out the door. This time he didn't look outside before he went out of the door. He knew where trouble waited for him this time.

He stepped out to the middle of the street and faced Dave Woods. People on both sides of the street scurried for cover. Women grabbed children and ducked into the nearest door. People who wouldn't be caught dead in a saloon were now hiding in them. In a heartbeat the only things left on the street were the two gunfighters and horses that were tied to hitch rails. The once bustling community now seemed like a ghost town.

Woods started walking towards Granger. Granger started walking towards Woods.

"It doesn't have to be this way, Woods," Granger yelled out.

"I think it does," Woods yelled back. "After I get through here, I'm going after Harding."

"You'll never get that chance," Granger yelled back.

I quickly ran out the back of the cafe and to a vantage in an alley about midway between the two men. I had just ducked behind a barrel when the two men stopped. They were about twenty-five paces apart.

"It's your call, Woods," Granger said.

No sooner than he said it, Dave Woods grabbed for his gun.

The thunder of two pistols erupting, and the spitting out of their deadly projectiles, sounded as one. Two clouds of gun smoke filled the air. The two hands that held the pistols jerked upward at the same time from the recoil of the two weapons. Each gun spit a flame out at least a foot.

When the smoke cleared enough to see, I saw Dave Woods lying on his back, his gun pointing to the sky. His eyes couldn't see the blue sky, and the few puffy clouds there. He was dead.

I turned to look at Granger. He had fallen to his knees; his arm fell limply at his side. I rushed over to him. Woods bullet had pierced the left side of his chest. His breath came in gasps and I could hear the gurgling as blood began to fill his lung.

He looked at me, the cold gray gone from his eyes. They were now a tender blue color, like the eyes of a new father.

“In my...pocket. Take out the...paper...there,” he said.

I reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. I looked up and saw Sheriff Danvers standing there.

“Read it,” Granger said. “I want...the Sheriff to witness...it.”

I slowly read the paper. “I, Clyde Granger, bequeath all my worldly possessions to my son, Charlie Evans.” I couldn't believe what I had just read.

“Evans...was your...step-father's...name,” Granger said. “Your mother...married him...after she went back east and...divorced me. Her name was Mary Elizabeth.”

“She died from a fever five years ago,” I said.

“That's when...letters...stopped,” Granger said. “I looked...for you. Found out you were...here at the...same time Woods...got...a hold of...me.”

“So you told him to meet you here,” I said. “But why meet me this way?”

“I've known you...were here...for months,” Granger said. His voice was noticeably weaker. “Just...couldn't...get the...courage up. I knew I...could beat...Woods...but also...knew he...might get...lead in me. I'm older...and...slower. This was...my last...chance to meet...you.”

It almost seemed like I was in a dream. A crowd had gathered around us now. “Get a doctor,” I yelled at no one in particular.

“That won't be necessary, son,” Sheriff Danvers said.

I looked back at Granger. He had stopped breathing. Slowly his body began to slump forward. I grabbed him and laid him down easily. The notorious Clyde Granger was no more.

I looked again at the piece of paper. At the bottom was a set of numbers and the name of the bank in Denver.

There are now two fresh graves in the cemetery at Barleyville. One grave has a fancy carved headstone. The other grave has just a wooden cross with a name painted on it. Clyde Granger will be known for as long as that granite marker stands tall. Dave Woods will be forgotten when the paint fades from his.

Me, I now live in the lap of luxury in a hotel suite in Denver.

Oops, I gotta go. The senator's daughter just knocked on my door.

[New Beginnings](#)

by [Veronica Taylor](#)

The Convent

Did I have everything I needed? Pens, pencils, dinner money, P. E. kit, and bus pass. I checked all the items carried in the new satchel hanging on my shoulder and I checked it again.

The knots in my stomach tightened as this new phase in my life was about to begin. This was my first day of starting secondary school. I had reached the ancient arched doorway, the entrance to the school, and rang the bell. Going into the unknown filled me with apprehension. A kind and softly-spoken nun, clothed in black robes and a white wimple, greeted me as she opened the door.

“Come in, my dear, you must be a new girl,” she said. “Now, what is your name?”

“Verity,” I answered.

“Now, Verity, let me show you where to hang your coat. Come with me, dear.”

She ushered me down the long corridors to the cloakroom. The convent school was a maze of old corridors with vaulted high ceilings and marble floors, where the sound of every footstep was magnified by its echo. Leaving my hat and coat on one of the pegs, she then directed me to the assembly hall, where girls were noisily congregating. I stood at the back of the hall wondering where to go. At that moment a nun stepped up onto the stage and picked up a hand bell, ringing it with all her might to bring a silence to the hall. The girls moved silently in formation to their class lines.

“The girls new to the school, please wait after this assembly!” She called loudly. “You will be told which class you will be in.”

I waited with the other new girls until we were called by name. My class was all new girls, unknown to each other and, like me, feeling nervous.

Our classroom was at the top of the spiral iron staircase, where loud footsteps could be heard clanking up the stairs. The classroom was old, very small in size with an intersecting door to the next classroom. There were two small, sash-cord windows with a view that opened onto the streets below.

Once we were in the classroom and taking our seats at individual desks, we began to feel as though we had a place, an idea of where we belonged in this vast school. This would be our place throughout the year, and as the weeks and months passed, we had started to build friendships that would last a lifetime.

My friend Ellen was a dark-haired girl, who made everyone laugh with her East End wit and occasional sarcasm, and Lily, a tall, polite and reserved girl with a cultured voice, who only knew the right way of doing things. Then there was Clara, so small in height, but always daring, rising to any challenge that bent or broke the rules. And not forgetting Amanda, a rather large girl with short red hair whose disruptive, but hilarious, antics would have us laughing until it hurt, causing the tears to run down our faces. She was an unruly, attention-seeking girl, who left laughter and images in our memories never to be forgotten.

These girls became my friends and when we were together, the high spirits and boundless energies bounced off one another becoming laughter, wit, rule breaking and anarchy in and out of the classroom.

In the first days of our new school, it seemed rather strange having so many teachers for different subjects, or going to other specific classrooms for set lessons, such as the fully-fitted kitchens for cookery lessons, or to the art and craft room.

My old primary school had one teacher who taught all subjects in the same class. Now, we were constantly on the move going from one class to another, and so we had to learn to get around this labyrinth of corridors, classrooms and staircases, quickly and supposedly silently.

Sister Benedicta was a short, round and cheerful nun, who taught chemistry and biology. She would take the class to the laboratories, showing us how to use litmus paper and how it changed colour to indicate whether it was exposed to acid or alkaline. We were shown how to look at the inner workings of poor dead frogs that had been dissected and pinned outstretched onto wooden slabs. A human skeleton dangled from a hook in the corner of the lab, and grotesque deformed creatures stared out at us from inside the large bell-shaped pickle jars.

Sister Benedicta enthused over her Bunsen Burners, conducting chemical experiments in glass beakers, sometimes a little too much, when the small explosions would splatter the walls and bench worktops with her burnt offerings, which brought startled screams and howls of laughter from the class.

“Oh dear, girls, I don’t think you should try that one yet,” she would humbly mumble.

Our first P.E. lesson was in the gymnasium. Everyone changed into their shorts and t-shirts and lined up against the climbing bars around the walls. One shy girl had forgotten her P.E. kit and remained in the changing rooms until the P.E. instructor bellowed, “That is not a problem, my dear, tuck your shirt into your knickers and climb the bars with the rest of the class.”

I felt so sorry for the girl who came into the hall, red-faced with her head down, and the big brown uniform knickers on show for the whole world to see.

“If you forget your kit, you will participate in my lessons in your knickers! Is that understood?” she said to rest of us in the class.

“Yes, miss,” we all uttered, horrified at the thought.

“Yes, miss?” She cocked her ear towards us.

“Yes, Miss Whittaker,” we replied despondently.

Thirty girls now knew what the big brown knickers were secretly designed for. No one ever forgot their kit.

We’d named our drama teacher the Drama Queen, a tall, heavily-built woman with short, greyish-white hair. Whatever she was wearing, she always wore flat silver pumps and a red tartan blanket that she would throw across one shoulder in a dramatic gesture, walking with her nose and chin pointing up to the ceiling and over-emphasising every word she spoke, as though she was constantly in a theatrical performance.

“How now, brown cow,” she would state, contorting her mouth around the *ow* sounds. This was her favourite line, which the class would have to repeat over and over again making the same facial movements that mirrored her own, and she milked it for a lifetime.

When the class was about to stage a play, we would go down to the basement into a small, musty room to choose the costumes. It was like an Aladdin’s cave. Costumes hung on rails, rolls of plush, red velvet and gold brocade lay scattered across table tops; mannequins stood half-dressed in the corners of the room, and fur coats took on the appearance of ferocious, wild animals hiding in the shadows. Old

shoes and boots were scattered underneath the table. Hats and belts, feathers and fans, buttons and bows filled the tattered boxes on the old, sagging shelves.

To us girls, it was a treasure trove, dressing up, finding necklaces and bangles to complete our costumes. A large, dusty mirror sat on top of a small drawer unit. As we opened these drawers, we found the stage grease paint. We all slapped it on with squeals of delight, masking our faces with black eyes, red lips and ghostly-white skin. Peering into the mirror, laughing at one another's unrecognisable and over-dramatised faces, we were having the time of our lives, away from all the hard work of our studies.

This little room became our secret bolt hole. Whenever the rain poured, and if the door was left unlocked, we would quietly creep inside and spend the break time sitting among the costumes, drinking our milk, eating biscuits, and sharing our homework notes. It was during one these break times that Lily had mentioned, "There's something awfully funny about Miss Whittaker. Don't you think she has a terrible, sort of short back and sides haircut?"

"And legs like tree trunks." Ellen laughed stretching her hands about two foot apart, indicating the size.

"You should see her on the tennis courts," Clara said, "she delivers a fast and powerful serve, like a man."

"She's built like a man!" Amanda said, waiting in the brief pause of silence before continuing. "Do you think she is a Miss or a Mister?"

Loud and raucous laughter erupted, causing Ellen to spill her milk as she knocked over the bottle, which she had precariously balanced on her lap.

From then on, we often debated whether she was a he, or a she.

As we became more accustomed to the school and found our way around the vast labyrinth, new places opened up to us. At the top of a wooden staircase was a long, narrow corridor with a door at the far end that opened onto a small, quiet chapel. Wooden panelling and polished choir stalls surrounded the chapel walls, and on the oak pews, prayer books were stacked neatly in each row.

Sometimes, on rainy days, I would sit here and pray in the quietness, escaping the raucous friends, while all around in the corridors and classes was hustle and bustle. It brought a sense of peace and tranquility. The smell of incense and warm, melting candle wax pervaded the air with a familiar fragrance from my parish church. This little chapel made me feel at home within unfamiliar surroundings.

A large grotto stood in the grounds of the school. A life-size statue of Our Lady of Lourdes was placed in the rocks. Our Lady, The Blessed Virgin Mary, had appeared in France to a poor child named Bernadette in the nineteenth century, asking for a church to be built on that very spot, where she would dispense her blessings and healings to those pilgrims that came to venerate her. This replica grotto and the statue of The Blessed Virgin Mary brought a homely feeling that I had grown up with. On my bedside cabinet stood the same statue, but smaller. It had been there for as long as I could remember. She was my spiritual mother, and when she was near, I felt her watching over me. I treasured this little 'sacred place'. The new school no longer felt so daunting and unfamiliar.

We often had missionary nuns come into the classroom and retell their stories of working abroad in poor places on the missions. We were fascinated by their accounts of how just helping to cook, clean or feed a hungry child made a big difference to the lives of the few they served, working on the other side of the world without any of the comforts of home. I loved hearing these stories, and I thought that

they were very brave. It was such a long way to go, and the conditions must have been awful. But I could never do anything like that.

I was recalling my school days to my granddaughter Laura, who was listening intently to my account of days long past, and how life really was in those days, before her time. Laura was a student at the East London University, researching real-life stories to be told for her oral history project. I was only too happy to help.

Laura arose from the armchair and placed another log on the fire as the embers began to smoulder and the warmth diminished.

“You were taught so much in your school years, Nan, that’s influenced you in your later life,” she said. “Don’t you see how those seeds of knowledge and inspiration were already sown in you?”

“I was young and impressionable at that age, and those seeds would lie hidden and dormant within me for years. It’s only now, with hindsight, that I can perceive a pattern interweaving its threads throughout my life, well, so far anyway. Now, where was I, dear? Oh, yes.”

The nuns had travelled to far off lands, but for us schoolgirls, our travels ventured into the heart of London. It was in 1967 our class was chosen to take a day trip to Kew Gardens. A day out was a special treat which we looked forward to. We were to travel to London by train. We lined up along the platform, waiting for the train to stop at the station. It was the early morning rush hour, and already all the seats were taken, mainly by city gents. They all appeared to dress in the same manner, wearing black suits, black bowler hats and carrying black umbrellas. They buried their heads in the large newspapers, which they opened wide to the financial sections. Our class of thirty girls clambered into the train.

“Move right down inside the carriage,” the ticket inspector called.

We pushed and shoved as we were tightly packed into the carriage, hanging onto the black hand-straps that hung from the ceiling. Our arms were aching as we sped through the tunnels of the tube. The carriage was like a sea of swaying brown school hats, and black bowler hats, all moving in time with the train. Slowly, as we stopped at the London stations, the carriage began to empty.

Amanda was being her normal, disruptive self, laughing as she swung from the hand-straps, lifting up her feet and swaying with the motion of the train. We all laughed at her, which only encouraged her to give a greater performance. She swung from hand-strap to hand-strap, uttering monkey sounds between the loud hoots of the laughter she revelled in. The city gents were *tut-tutting*, looking at her disdainfully over their newspapers, when suddenly, the train swerved around the bend, causing Amanda to lose her grip. She fell, crumpling a city gent’s newspaper, knocking his glasses off, and bowler hat sideways, before landing with a heavy, undignified thump into his lap. There was a moment of complete disbelief, before both girls and gents erupted with laughter. In uncontrollable hysterics, tears ran down our faces.

When she had finally stopped laughing, Amanda removed herself from the gent’s lap with mumbled apologies. The dishevelled city gent was not amused. He straightened his bowler hat and shook out his newspaper, before launching an attack of strong words on Amanda, as well as the teacher, who was making her way down the carriage to see what the cause of the commotion was all about.

We were ordered off the train. While still on the platform, the teacher gave us a stern lecture on behaviour, although she couldn’t quite hold back a hint of a smile.

Taking out her handkerchief to cover her face, she turned away from us as we watched her shoulders shaking with laughter.

Our day at Kew Gardens began by studying the palm tree plants, and rare varieties in the Palm House. We sat with our sketch books open and pencils drawing the plants that were so rare, coming from different countries all over the world.

The Water-lily House was my favourite place. Beautiful water plants, so large in size, opened their pink and cream lotus flower blooms sitting on the green water-lily pads afloat on the pond. It reminded me of Monet's painting of Blue Water Lilies. But to see them for real was simply breathtaking.

We walked to various places, and wrote of the day's experience in our notebooks. An old sundial fascinated me, as I watched the shadow slowly move around the dial, telling the time of day. Large butterflies fluttered to and fro, resting on the sundial before taking flight to the nearby flower beds.

At lunch time, we unpacked our satchels and ate our sandwiches, drinking hot tea from our flasks. We sat on the green outside of Kew Palace, admiring the Dutch architecture of the building. It felt good to be out in nature, enjoying the vast varieties of plants in the warm sunshine. Giant sunflowers bowed their heads, as if to look down upon us with a nod of approval as we sketched their yellow, faceless features.

Here in Kew Gardens, on the western edge of London, we were a world away from the noisy docklands and the industrial places of home.

Rules

Mondays were the worst days for school dinners. The meals never varied, and there were no choices, just the one dish of the day, which was boiled potatoes, gristly meat, and Brussels Sprouts. The same amount of food was dished out to each girl by the kitchen staff, whether we liked it or not. When we sat at the tables, we would swap or give away the food we didn't like – but always out of sight of the teachers, who would insist that we finish everything on our plate.

"Eat up your Brussels," I was told, as Mother Agnes, the headmistress, tapped her fingers on the dinner table to emphasise her words.

"I'm sorry, but I can't eat them, Mother," I replied. "They make me feel sick."

She raised her eyebrows disapprovingly, then said, "There are starving children in Africa who would love that food."

"I will be sick if I eat them, Mother," I answered. I couldn't see how if I ate them, and was made sick, that it would help a starving child.

Her face became like stone. "You will eat your Brussels! And you will not leave the table until every scrap on your plate is finished," she commanded.

I sat there nibbling at the edges of the Brussels, trying not to taste or swallow. She stood by my side watching, until another teacher called to her, and they walked to the end of the dinner hall in deep discussion. My mind was racing, wondering how I would get rid of the Brussels before she returned? I looked around, finding nowhere to bin them, and most of the girls were leaving the dining hall. I picked up the Brussels from my plate and stuffed them into the pockets of my pinafore dress. They felt hot and squashy against my legs, but it was better than being sick. The headmistress returned and looked at my plate.

"I don't know what all the fuss was about, that wasn't so difficult, was it?" she snapped.

"No, Mother, it wasn't," I agreed.

“You may leave the table. Go!” she said in her irritated manner, flinging her hands towards the door in a gesture to dismiss me.

I left the dining room with the food bumping against my legs in the deep wet pockets, knowing that I had to find a place to dispose of the evidence before returning to the classroom. I didn’t want the smell invading the classroom, and a full-scale investigation being launched as to where the stench was coming from.

I had caught up with my friends, who were sitting on the sports field, and told them what happened. They thought it was hilarious, and came up with several suggestions as where to leave the Brussels.

“Let’s squash them under the pile of maths papers on Miss Richard’s desk,” Amanda said, as her eyes glinted with delight.

“No, better still, drop them into the plant pots at the end of the corridors, so their delicate fragrance will waft around the school,” Ellen said, sniffing the air as if to savour the aroma.

“I don’t think you should do that,” Lily said, “you’ll end up in trouble.”

Just at that moment, a tennis ball came hurtling over the high school wall and hit Lily on her shoulder. She gasped and groaned, and we all looked to see if her shoulder was bruised. Thankfully, as Lily slowly recovered, there appeared to be no damage.

A high wall separated our school from the adjacent state school. Instead of returning the tennis ball, I shared out the evidence equally. Taking advantage, and with love, we served hot squashy Brussels into their courts.

From that day onwards, we all kept a small brown paper bag hidden in our pockets to keep our pinafores dry and clean from the dinner delights of the day. And the state school frequently received ready-wrapped, inconvenience foods from a high-flying, fast-food service.

High above the school, on the rooftop, was a tennis court, and in the summer months just a few older girls would be chosen to use the rooftop for their tennis match. Eventually, I was lucky enough to get to play there.

The view was simply breathtaking, a three-hundred and sixty-degree panoramic view. I had never been so high before and was held in wonder at the sight. I could see familiar landmarks, like the G.P.O. tower in London far in the distance; church spires, and treetops and rooftops of the homes and buildings all around. From here, all that was below felt distant and somehow unreal. I could see the same landmarks and buildings that I knew, but from an unexpected perspective – looking down from above, not looking up from below, and the landscape looked so different from this higher place.

Below was the everyday, mundane normality of life, now too far away to capture the detail, but up there was an endless space, a blue infinity and freedom with clarity. It had always been here, but remained undiscovered to most. A place where you could lie back and watch the clouds drifting through this beautiful uncreated space and capture a thousand passing thoughts, unhindered and bound by no limits.

After our tennis match was over, we made our way down to the changing rooms. My locker was next to the P.E teacher’s room, and I overheard crying coming through the partly-closed door.

“I don’t know what we will all do now. My dad has left us,” a young girl sobbed.

“Oh, my dear,” Miss Whittaker said sympathetically. “You mustn’t worry. Adults do some crazy things, without thinking sometimes. Perhaps your dad just needs a little bit of time on his own for a while to think things through.”

“Do you think so?” she said. I heard the fragile hope in her voice.

“Be patient for a little while, my dear, wait and see. Now, dry your eyes, and if you need someone to talk to, you can always come to me in confidence. I have a daughter the same age as you. Try not to dwell on this too much, and try to stay calm.”

I heard the girl blow her nose and walk towards the door. I felt so sorry for that girl and I kept my back to her, as I didn't want to see her face and know who she was.

Then I felt guilty for all the horrible things we had been saying about Miss Whittaker. She was a kind person underneath that tough appearance, someone who did have a heart and cared about the girl's sadness, giving her hope to cling onto. I kept their secrets to myself. It was a lesson that taught me to try not to judge by appearances.

I thought of my own dad and how blessed we all were to have him. He would be strict with us at times, especially with me, because I was the eldest child in the family. I know that he loved me, but he would not welcome the changes I was going through.

My friends went to the local youth clubs in the evenings, and I asked – no, I begged to go with them. It was always a battle of wills whenever another change of routine came into play. It would be weeks before he would say 'yes', and there were so many rules or conditions to adhere to.

“I'll take you there and I'll wait at the gate at nine o'clock to take you home. Be ready or I will come into the club and collect you,” he would say.

And when I wanted to look grown-up, putting on blue eye-shadow and pink lipstick, his stinging response would bring tears to my eyes.

“You can take that muck off your face. You are not going out looking like that,” he shouted.

On a few occasions, Clara would come to my house and we would sit in the backyard discussing what we wanted to do during the school holidays. Sometimes, we would go to the pictures across the river, taking the ferry, or go to the big department stores to try out the new shades of lipsticks from the testers and spraying the latest perfumes onto our wrists. We had no money, but we had fun just window shopping.

“I don't want you hanging around with that girl. She is a bad influence on you,” my dad would say after I told him what we had been doing that day.

Leaving childhood behind and adventuring into teenage years was not an easy task for me.

The more I changed, the tighter my dad held the reins.

Why was it that I was grown-up enough to travel alone on two bus journeys to school miles away, but not grown up enough to walk two streets away to the youth club on my own – the same streets I had always played in?

I wanted to be part of the youth club, and I was, but always apart somehow from the normality of the crowd. I felt as though I didn't fit in, well, not completely. And yet, when my younger sister Annabel wanted to join the club a year later, no word of resistance from my dad came her way, and I was the one to keep an eye on her. What had been so hard for me was now so easy for her. She didn't have to fight to gain independence or a sense of freedom because that barrier had now been broken. But there were always other battles to fight.

An incident in school in later years also had its own battles. Our history teacher was a Miss Marshall, also known as Sergeant Major Marshall, and everyone in the school was afraid of her. It was always the custom to stand whenever a teacher

entered the class. When Miss Marshall walked in, everyone stood in silence. She would then look at everyone individually, waiting for a while before saying, "You may sit. Take out your pencils, rulers and exercise books. You have twenty seconds."

The desk lids would fly open and the items would be retrieved and placed quickly on the desks. Miss Marshall would begin to write on the blackboard and talk at the same time, informing us of the history subject that we were to retain and write in our books.

Then one hot and sultry afternoon, when we were frantically listening, writing and reading the words on the blackboard, she turned around and shouted, "Who told you to write?"

There was complete silence.

"I am waiting for an answer," she said.

"No one, Miss Marshall," Donna said, who sat at the front of the class.

"Put your pencils down," she said.

We put our pencils down. Miss Marshall turned back to the blackboard and erased the writing. Turning back to the class she said, "Now, you will write what I have told you and what was written on the blackboard. You have two minutes."

We began again, trying to remember both her spoken words and written words when a few seconds later, she said, "Stop writing!"

No one had finished their writing and Margaret, who sat at the back of the class, was still trying to complete her written sentences. Miss Marshall walked over to her, picked up her ruler and whacked her knuckles, causing Margaret to cry out.

"You will obey me," she snapped. "You will stand for the remainder of my lesson."

"Take out your text books," she called to the class. "You have ten seconds."

The desk lids flew open again, but Mary was having trouble finding her book. Miss Marshall walked over to her and slammed the lid of the desk down onto her hands. Mary screamed with the pain, then she started to cry.

"Stop that crying," Miss Marshall shouted.

Mary began to sob as her hands began to swell.

"Stop crying! You will obey me!" She seethed, gritting her teeth and snatching up the ruler from the desk.

"Leave her alone," Josie shouted, who sat at the back of the class. Josie was the only girl in her family with five older brothers, and she was afraid of no one.

"How dare you speak to me like that," Miss Marshall shouted, who was becoming angrier by the minute. "Come here, girl!"

Josie jumped out of her seat and stood face to face with Miss Marshall, not batting an eyelid. "Leave her alone, she has done nothing wrong."

Miss Marshall raised her hand, still clutching the ruler, but Josie was too quick for her and snatched the ruler from her. Miss Marshall lashed out at Josie, trying to hit her, but Josie ducked out of the way.

"I will have you expelled for this," Miss Marshall said bitterly.

"And I will report you to the authorities for cruelty," Josie retorted.

The colour drained from Miss Marshall's face and she looked visibly shaken.

"The headmistress will hear of your behaviour," she shouted to Josie before marching out of the classroom, shaking in anger.

We were shocked, and remained silent trying to comprehend all that had just happened. The only sound was Mary's sobbing.

A few minutes later, Josie was called into the office of the Headmistress. Sister Rita quickly and quietly came into the classroom telling us to put our books

away. She then read to us in her soft, calming voice from the Charles Dickens novel *Great Expectations* until the bell rang at the end of the day.

Josie was never seen at the school again.

I often thought of Josie, and wondered what she was doing; did she go to another school, or was she staying at home? No one knew what happened to her.

Miss Marshall was also never seen at the school again.

Rumours flew around the school that she had left to take a position at another school, or that she had been jilted at the altar and would not be returning, but we all knew that she had gone too far, and had received her justice.

Josie had stood up to her, and set the whole school free from the fear of Miss Marshall's oppressive rule.

"And they say that angels come in unexpected ways," Laura said quietly, with a gentle smile that lit up her face from within.

I looked at Laura, astonished by her remark. She was a young woman now, but when she was a child, I had told her bedtime stories of angels and their powers, which made her feel secure, knowing they were always by her side while she slept.

Barriers

My years at school continued with working hard on my studies. And, as we approached the final exams, the laughter became less frequent. Life was becoming more serious, with the desire to gain good qualifications, which would open doors in the world of work.

I had not decided what I wanted to do once I left school, perhaps work in an office, or become a hairdresser. I had many dreams, but felt unable to choose only one.

I had a Saturday job at the local hairdressers, where I would shampoo the clients' hair with masses of lather and bubbles while they chatted away telling me of the latest gossip they had heard that week. Blue rinses were the fashion statement for the older ladies, who all left the salon with the same style and same colour; they were locally known as the 'Blue Rinse' brigade, and I was so thankful to them for the generous tips they gave, which topped up the low pay packet.

I gave my mum part of the money I had earned, and saved the rest to buy things that I wanted, or to go out with my friends. During the school holidays, we planned to go to London to see our favourite pop stars. This would cause another argument with my dad.

"You are not going to London and waiting around in the streets," Dad would say.

"But, Dad, we're only waiting outside the fan club. We'll not be wandering around," I replied.

"You are not going!"

"But Lily is going. We'll stay together, and we'll come home together."

"I said no! You are not going, young lady, now go to your room."

I stormed out of the room and slammed the door. I stomped up the stairs and sat on my bed in tears, where I stayed. Later my mum came into my room, to see if I was all right.

"Why can't I go, Mum?" I asked.

"You know what your dad's like once he has made his mind up, well, he doesn't like change," she said.

“But I’m not doing anything wrong.”

“I know, but just be patient, wait until he’s in a better mood and then ask again,” she said, patting my hand and giving me a warm smile.

I knew I would get nowhere if I went downstairs and asked again tonight, so I decided to wait and pick my moment.

I waited for three weeks.

Then one evening, my dad came home from work in a happy mood. He told Mum that he had been given a pay rise and his friend wanted to sell his car.

“Joe wants to sell his car, Tess. I had a look at it today, it’s a nice car, in really good condition. I’m thinking about buying it.”

“It would be nice, George, to have a car. We could take the kids out to the seaside for the day, or go to London, maybe visit the zoo. You could take me shopping, love, and I wouldn’t have to carry all those heavy bags. Let’s visit my sister Mary in Brentwood, we haven’t seen her in ages. Just think, George, no more waiting for buses in the cold,” Mum said excitedly. “Can we afford it though?”

“Well, if we don’t buy it now, it will be gone in a day or two. He wants a quick sale.”

“What colour is it? Is it like the Geratty’s car at number 149? He is always out there polishing it until he can see his face in it.”

“No, Tess, it’s not like that, this one is a Ford Popular. It’s a deluxe model,” Dad said, pushing his shoulders back and puffing out his chest. “And it’s Royal Blue.”

“Royal Blue, ooh fancy that. That’s better than the Gerratty’s grey car. Let’s buy it, George.” I saw Mum in her mind’s eye sitting in the front seat, being driven to all the places she would like to go ... in style.

Dad had a big smile on his face now that he had Mum’s approval.

“Buy it, Dad,” I said. “If you like, I’ll wash it every Sunday.”

Dad looked at me with surprise. “All right, you can wash, polish and keep it clean.”

He leaned back on the kitchen chair, looking pleased with the outcome as Mum dished up the shepherd’s pie and peas.

Later that evening, Lily called at our house. We went into my bedroom, cutting out the pictures of pop stars from the bundles of magazines I had brought home from the hairdressers and pinning them on the wall with drawing pins. My favourite pop star at that time was Barry Gibb. He was tall with dark hair and so good looking.

“Are you coming to the fan club with me and Ellen next week?” Lily asked. She had been to the fan club many times and always asked if I would like to go.

“I really want to go, but I have to pick my moment to ask my dad,” I said. Then it dawned on me he was in such a good mood tonight. “Wait there,” I said.

I ran downstairs, hearing my dad happily whistling away in the kitchen.

“Dad, Lily has come round to ask if I can go to the Bee Gees’ fan club with her next week. I told her I had to ask you first, because you always have my best interests at heart, and that you are such a caring dad to all of us. Lily said she knows that you are and she respects you very much.” I held my breath, keeping my fingers crossed behind my back.

My dad stopped what he was doing and gave a solemn look over the top of his glasses, which were perched on the end of his nose. “Does she, now?” He paused and thought for a moment. “Well, I’d say Lily has very good judgement.”

Was I mistaken or was that a faint flicker of a smile I saw on his face?

“All right, if Lily is going, then you can go with her, but you are to stay together and be home by eight o’clock, no later.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I said as I gave him a hug.

Another barrier had been broken.

I ran up the stairs, so excited that I would be allowed to go. Lily and I danced around the room to the sound of the Bee Gees’ L.P. playing on the record player, making plans for the trip to London. From that day onwards, Lily, Ellen and I would often travel to London and wait outside the fan club of the Bee Gees.

We sat on the stone steps at the entrance to the club on Brook Street, just behind Bond Street Station. The club was a terraced Victorian building with black railings on either side of the steps, and a basement entrance below the street level.

There were always groups of girls waiting to catch a glimpse of the Bee Gees. A tall girl with piercing blue eyes and a thick Irish accent sat on the steps next to me.

“Have you seen them yet?” she asked.

“No, no one has come out yet.”

“I hope I’ll see them. I’m going back to Ireland tonight. I came to London wit mi da. We’re visiting relatives and I have been here every day so far wit mi cousin Roseanne. I saw Maurice and got his autograph yesterday, but I haven’t seen Barry yet.”

“Barry’s my favourite. I have his picture pinned on the wall over my bed. I bought their new single last week, *Words*, have you heard it?” I asked.

“Yeah, it’s a great song. I’m trying to get mi da to buy it for me.”

“Do you think he will?” I asked her.

“I’m working on him.”

I smiled at her. “I have to do the same with my dad, work on him, I mean. Why is it so hard for them to say yes?” I said.

“I know what you mean. I say to mi da, can I go to the pictures, Da? *No!* he says.

“Can I go round to see Colleen, Da? *No!*”

“Can I come to London with you, Da? *No!* But I’ll let you into a secret. Butter him up. It works wit mi da every time. I’m here in London, waiting to see the Bee Gees because I told him he was the best da ever, he’s so clever, and I get my good looks from him. He loves it. He’s butter in my hands,” she said, opening her hands and closing her fingers in a comical gesture. “Mind you, I tell mi mammy the same things, but she’s a bit more clued up than mi da.” She grinned.

She gave me a nudge with her elbow, digging into my side and with a wink of her eye. “Try it,” she said. “He can only say, *No!*”

We both laughed and shared the chocolate Mars bar between us, which had fallen out of my bag.

Other fans were arriving and soon the steps were full of teenage girls waiting to catch a glimpse of the Bee Gees and get their autographs, if we were ever lucky enough to get near them.

Several times that day Barry Gibb came out to chat to us. “Hello, girls, are you waiting to see Robin or Maurice?” He smiled, waiting for the response.

“Barry, Barry!” The crowd went wild screaming his name, rushing towards him with autograph books and pens waving in the air. He came out and stood next to us for photos to be taken, then signed our autograph books.

“What’s your name, love?” Barry asked as he took hold of my book.

“Verity,” I answered, standing close to him and looking into his eyes.

Barry’s hand scribbled across the page —*To Verity, best wishes, Barry Gibb.*

“Thanks, Barry,” I said. Was this real or was I dreaming?

Our pop star had spoken to us. We were walking on air, and went home in a state of euphoria.

“Do you still have those autographs or photos, Nan?” Laura asked.

“No, I don’t know what happened to them, they are lost in the past somewhere. At the time they were so important to me, but now they are just a memory. They’re lost along with all the other memorabilia I had collected in those days.” The 1960s era was a distant memory and I pondered for a moment recalling the old treasure chest where I used to store all my precious possessions. That too had long gone.

The Factory

At school our final exams were underway and we were all feeling the pressure of gaining good results. So we were revising every night and all weekends; we had no free time for a few months. Tension, tiredness and stress were taking its toll. I would go into the little chapel to find peace and quiet, to gather my thoughts and focus on the next exam.

I knelt in prayer and asked the Blessed Virgin Mary for her help so that I would pass my exams and make my parents proud of me. I told her that I was so tired and I needed strength and a clear mind to do my best. Sitting in the quiet and peace brought an inner stillness and the pressures gradually faded and lifted from my shoulders. I knew she had heard my prayers and was easing my tensions.

We sweated and strained over the difficult maths exam, feeling anxious and yet depleted at the same time. We had done our best and hoped that it was enough to obtain a good pass mark. At last the exams were finally over and we all breathed a sigh of relief, letting go of the tension and tiredness we felt free. I left school, with no idea of what I wanted to do next.

Ellen and Lily had found a temporary job in Stratford, which they would start in a few days’ time, and would last until September, working in a local pie and sausage factory.

“Verity, there are still places available, why don’t you come with us?” Lily asked.

“I don’t really want to work in a factory,” I replied.

“But you don’t have a job yet, at least you would be earning some money until you find out what you want to do. It’s only temporary work for a few months; come with us,” Ellen said.

I thought about it, still not relishing the thought of factory work, and reluctantly agreed to give it a go. “Okay, give me the application form so I can fill it in.”

I filled in the form. Ellen said she would hand it in at the office the next day. Two days later, Ellen called at my home to say that an interview had been arranged for me at ten o’clock on Friday.

I went for the interview and was offered the same job as Ellen and Lily, working in the sausage department of the pie factory. I was taken on a quick tour of the work area and told to wear only flat shoes in the work area, for safety reasons, and then sent to pick up my overalls from the supplies office upstairs.

The factory was cold and the smell of raw meat made my stomach heave. *I must be mad agreeing to work in this place*, I thought, wanting to walk out into the

fresh air and never return. Life's constant changes had brought another new beginning my way, one which I wasn't exactly thrilled about.

Monday morning at eight o'clock, I was at the factory door with Ellen and Lily, wondering how I would survive the day from the smell of raw meat to standing in the cold damp conditions. We found our way to the changing rooms and put our bags into our lockers. We had to wear baggy white overalls with white hair nets (which looked like puffed-up shower caps) that scraped every hair on our heads tightly out of sight. We were a vision of delight!

Ellen walked up and down the changing room with her hand on her hip and head tilted to the ceiling, attempting to sway her hips seductively as she wobbled on her stilettos.

"And this is the latest design from Pie, a lovely little number for day wear that is so exclusive only the chosen few will ever feel the starched, bleached, heavy-duty cotton against their skin. This little outfit will last a lifetime, topped off with a head-dress that blends perfectly with the design of this latest white-collar garment. In my estimation it has to be the overall winner of the season," she said with more than an air of sarcasm.

Lily and I both laughed and joined her on the catwalk, flaunting our exclusive new look.

We still had twenty-five minutes before starting work, so we climbed the stairs to the canteen for a cup of tea and a slice of toast to start the day. The canteen was almost full with factory workers sitting at the tables eating a full-cooked breakfast with mugs of hot steaming tea, warming their hands and faces as they drank. As we walked in they all stopped talking and stared at the three glamour beauties now standing at the end of the counter queue. We were feeling slightly embarrassed and hesitant as to what to say or where to go. The queue moved quickly and soon we were putting our tea and toast onto our trays, looking around for a place to sit.

"There's a seat here, darling! Come and sit next to me," said a plump, red-faced man with spittle dribbling down his chin, patting the seat next to him with his sweaty, puffy hands.

"Thank you very much, but we prefer a window seat with a view," replied Ellen, as she paid for her tea at the counter.

"Suit yourself," he replied.

"We always do," Ellen said with a fixed grin as she walked past him.

Laughter and sniggers were heard around the canteen and all eyes were looking at us. We eventually found a small table in the corner where we could hide out of sight, and sat to drink our tea.

"I think that man fancies you," Lily said, glancing at Ellen.

"You're just his type. You'll knock him dead in that outfit," I said.

"I feel like Ena Sharples in these overalls and hair net," Ellen laughed.

"Exactly!" I replied.

We sat in the corner drinking the hot tea amid the banter and laughter until it was time to start our shift in the sausage department. The siren screeched over the tannoy to start the shift and everyone in the canteen rose from their chairs and began making their way down the stairs.

Our work area contained large vats where sausage meat would be churned and squeezed out through a pipe which had the endless sausage skin attached to it. The meat pushed its way down, filling the skin as it wriggled like an eel on the conveyer belt. It then passed through machinery which cut the sausages into bundles of twelve.

It was our job to pick up the sausages and pack them into plastic trays. We did this all day and every day.

The radio played loudly, which helped to make the time more pleasant, as we sang along to the songs or just let our minds drift while automatically packing the sausages in a robotic fashion. Our eyes were always clock watching for the next tea break or lunch break, or better still, time to clock out.

I would often daydream of walking on a white sandy beach with blue skies and turquoise seas, almost willing myself to be somewhere beautiful, warm, and relaxing, like those pictures I'd seen in magazines. But then reality returned with a thump as I dropped the sausages on the floor. Uttering a few choice words under my breath, I quickly kicked them under the machinery, just before the supervisor reached my work area for inspection.

"Why did you stay there for so long if you hated the work, Nan? I know I would have left after the first day," Laura said.

"Believe me, Laura, I wanted to leave so badly, but things were different in those days. Young women were not as independent as your generation today, and besides, as my dad pointed out, I was not there to enjoy my work, but to bring home a wage. But that new beginning at the factory brought unexpected twists and turns into my life."

"What was that?" asked Laura.

"It's something that has remained with me to this day. Even though the eras come and go, this will always stay with me."

"I don't understand, what will stay with you?"

I paused and smiled at Laura. "Words, special words, love, that changed my life."

Laura looked puzzled. "Well, are you going to tell me those words?"

"No, Laura, they are mine to keep. Perhaps one day you'll keep secret the treasure that brings a new beginning, and changes your life forever."

Closing her notebook, Laura put down her pen. "Whatever those words were, Nan, I can see how different your life is now from the background of your past. You have given me a snapshot picture of growing up in the 1960s. Your memories will shine through in my project, life experiences as seen through the eyes of a child and her teenage years, living in the East End of London from a bygone era."

"I like your description of a snapshot picture. There are so many more filed away in the old memory box, just waiting to be dusted off and make a rare appearance again."

"Hold on to them, Nan, they are other stories waiting to be told." Laura sat pensive for a few moments. "We could compose an anthology of real-life stories, or maybe life seen through the different decades of just one child."

"Whenever you're ready, Laura, we'll start at the sepia-coloured snapshots, before they fade and are forgotten forever."

"They won't be forgotten. We'll renew them with colour and bring them to life."

I smiled at Laura's descriptions. She had a special way with words.

Chewing Gum

By Barbara Weitzner

There are many such places in South Florida; modest, gated, retirement communities with Spanish style copper tiled roofs, palm trees, emerald green lawns and eww, freakishly huge insects called Palmetto Bugs; inhabited mostly by retired professionals with upper middle class incomes. I could go on and on about how nice it is to live here, but this story is about an elderly thief I nicknamed Chewing Gum.

So back to her:

A few months after Chewing Gum moved into the community and began participating in the activities, money began to be missing from purses in the card room, sunglasses and wallets from the pool area tables—even my jean jacket with my American flag lapel pin left on an empty chair went unaccounted for. We thought it might be one of the cleaning crew. Members stopped leaving their bags on the tables when they used the restrooms or when they went to the café to refill their coffee cups.

Chewing Gum's real name does not matter—she is an aging, seventy plus gnome-like woman, who seldom keeps hurtful remarks to herself, and who couldn't care less what you think of her, confident and arrogant by nature, convinced she is smarter and superior to most of us. Her skin is dry and wrinkled in a way I hope I can stave off for a few more years. The too-short shorts she favors expose blue veins and dimpling cellulite that map her legs.

Chewing Gum, as I refer to our new resident because of her constant gum snapping jaws, volunteered and eventually became the person in charge of selling raffle tickets for our club's breast cancer charity, for such things rely on the help of members. Unsuspecting, trusting folks, in the business of retirement, gave her money for tickets, relying on her to fill them out honestly. She also collected money for condolence cards, and food baskets.

At every yearly charity event, Chewing Gum won one of the top three prizes. "Wow," we all exclaimed. "Isn't she lucky?" But beyond the comforting buzz of friendly gossip, suspicion and doubt started to seep into people's conversations. No one knew why this rumpled little woman that few tolerated was always so willing to volunteer to handle monies.

I stopped playing canasta with her when she explained her secret codes for throwing sevens and aces. "That's cheating!" I'd sputtered, shocked, preferring to put as much distance between her and myself as possible.

"Nah, everyone does it. No big deal," she'd said, flapping her hand as if swatting away a mosquito and exhaling a pungent blast of peppermint. But I felt otherwise. She was a cheat. Of course it explained why she often won the canasta tournaments. Disgust bubbling away in my gut, I began to think of her as a woman totally unconcerned about morality and began to connect her to the rash of missing items, her luck at winning the raffle prizes.

I brought my suspicions to the board members of our community. Trying to keep my voice modulated but having no success. I said, "I'd like to know what you think. I'd like to hear your thoughts, what any of you have to say."

I had expected murmurs, accusations, disapproval, confirming stories—nothing—A covey of nice elderly ladies unwilling to believe or be distracted from their routines, preferring to spend their time agreeably. Perhaps the idea of confrontation seemed exhausting, the continuity and serenity of their pleasant

routines, the main things that gave them peace of mind—and preserving that peace of mind seemed most important. Or perhaps they thought I was inventing my suspicions.

“Well, it’s difficult—you must give us proof. Until then, we cannot do anything.” This said in an apologetic tone as if each was collectively embarrassed or uncomfortable.

But I didn’t want these thefts to happen again. I didn’t believe for a second that Chewing Gum was not responsible for the thefts and raffle cheating, I was feeling midway between frustrated and irate, when a few weeks later, the president of our PAP organization, suspicious about the half-filled barrel of raffle tickets, decided to empty and check the names on the tickets—and discovered her own tickets and many others had not made it into the barrel and that the majority of tickets held Chewing Gum’s name.

Then, like a solved puzzle, everything fit together in every member’s mind. There it was: A Jurassic upheaval, the proof of her dishonesty.

Cheating at cards? Pathetic, unacceptable; but stealing money from a charity fund high up on the scale of unforgivable.

Our president faced Chewing Gum. Her accusation: a fine line between statement and query. A gentle and then not so gentle interrogation took place. Quietly and without fuss Chewing Gum was asked to make restitution. But it was naïve and ingenuous to believe that Chewing Gum would apologize. Although her jaws stopped moving, what reflected on Chewing Gum’s face was not shame or apology or repentance for her actions, but amusement. She burst out with a short, dry laugh, called us all morons and stalked out of the room.

If you’re wondering what happened after Chewing Gum was confronted and ostracized by the community; no civil action was taken against her except to exclude her from taking part in the club activities. Every morning she treks the perimeter of the walking path, jaws snapping in rhythm to her pace, no spring in her step, now, the movements of a defeated body.

I wonder if she has learned anything from this.

[Macho Man](#)

by [Barbara Weitzner](#)

It is Christmas Eve, I'm in the garage, carefully wrapping each item in newspapers, things my wife Betsy and I had accumulated over the years, placing them in cardboard boxes, and then carrying them over to where I'd stacked others. I sort through what is needed and what is useless, stuff some tools in a garbage baggie, twist it closed. Most of our household things are ready and waiting for the movers. Betsy has spent the month gathering our possessions and making preparations to move.

I notice a tiny pool of water behind the water tank where a crack in the cement wall had started a few years ago. I'd spackled over it twice in an effort to correct the problem, but the crack reappears again and again. And now no time to repair it.

The apartment we've rented and are getting ready to move into is forty years old. The rooms are small and narrow, there is not enough space for everything we've stored and saved over the years. I hate having to do this, force myself to finish. I hate having to leave this home. The home where Betsy and I have painstakingly replastered the walls, refinished the floors, retiled the bathrooms and painted. The home we have loved and together made memories.

There are a few last items to sort through—to keep or toss? I wrap more tools, use the last of the newspaper I've saved before canceling the delivery, wrestle the ladder out of the clips holding it to the wall and lower it onto the floor; wonder where we will be able to put it? There's very little storage space in the apartment, especially for bulky items which in all probability we won't have any use for. I hang the ladder back on the wall. Leave it for the new owners.

Last year I would have been preparing for our Christmas party, sipping champagne and swapping gifts with friends and relatives. Last year. I remember Christmas morning—no snow, the sun beginning to peep through the beech trees we'd planted, the twins tearing the wrappings from their presents and squealing with delight when they'd opened the PlayStation they'd been wanting. The diamond ear studs I'd given Betsy.

How quickly life can change. How quickly you can move from being solvent to ruin. My stupidity torments me. All I've wanted to be is a good provider, a good husband and father. But such is not the case. I've ruined our lives.

I pick up an old tattered blanket; stuff it into a storage bag. I remember sitting on this blanket in the park, eating cold chicken sandwiches and Betsy's homemade potato salad—birds hopping onto the edges to snatch the crumbs. We'd stopped to picnic on the way to visit Betsy's parents. We'd sat under an elm where the heat of the sun couldn't reach us. The boys tossing a Frisbee.

I heave a sigh with the pleasure of the memory, drag a go-cart we'd built using wheels from the stroller Betsy's friends had given her at her baby shower out to the curb. It has started to snow. This year we will have a white Christmas.

I recall how we'd looked forward to having the twins, had no sense of anything awaiting us except happiness and am reminded of the first time I'd peered at my baby sons in the hospital nursery, upset because both boys were red-faced and screaming, while in the other bassinets newborns slept peacefully. I'd panicked, and rang for a nurse who'd assured me the twins were fine.

A sob rises up in me.

Betsy pops her head in the door. "Finish up, dinner will be ready in ten minutes."

I look at her. I recognize her look of worry, the wrinkles between her brows. There is none of the sparkling, alluring blue eyes, the wide smile, and she looks exhausted. I ache with love for her.

I wipe my feet on the mat, come into the house, glance into the living room which has been stripped of everything except the couch, the gate leg table, the TV, and the Christmas tree. Packed and labeled cartons are stacked against the walls, and I try not to think of the guilt hanging over my head. Try not to think of the awful day I had to tell my wife I'd ruined our life:

"Betts, I need to talk to you about something ..."

I'd heard the quaver in her voice. "Oh God—you're not leaving me for some other woman?"

"No, no. I love you, Betts, but I don't think you're going to feel the same way about me after ... well, I might as well blurt this straight out. We've lost all of our savings. I should never have trusted Austin with our savings."

Betsy sat frozen in disbelief. "What happened? What did Austin tell you?"

"He said it wasn't his fault, he was sorry and he's also lost a lot of money."

"How could this have happened? How will we survive?" Then she started to cry.

"I'm sorry, Betts," I said, because I needed to justify myself although Betsy hadn't accused me and because I'd never experienced such shame before. "I should never have invested our savings with him. I could cheerfully strangle him. I believed he had our interests at heart. I took a chance on the stock market to be able to give you and the kids a nicer life." I didn't know what else to say, covered my face with my hands. Betsy put her coffee cup down and left the table. I heard her close the door to our bedroom. After a while she came out and said, "we have to move on; enough crying over spilt milk. Let's take one step at a time. We can get through anything one step at a time."

Not a word about the panic she must be feeling. If she wished she had refused to allow me to invest with Austin, she would never say so, but her smile seemed less spontaneous, more like a performance. We hugged each other. I've always loved my wife but never more than now.

We put the house up for sale. I continued going to my office, answering the telephones, listening to people describe their automobile accidents, filing insurance claims. In all my years I had never shared any personal problems with my co-workers, but one day stress and anger overcame me and when my secretary sent out the wrong claim to the wrong client with the same last name, my ability to maintain my professional demeanor failed me and I totally lost it. Of course I apologized but the malevolent looks I received from the office staff further diminished my self-esteem.

I briefly wondered if it would be better to end my life. Better for Betsy and the boys. There would be life insurance. I could fake a car accident. Drive into a tree, or over a cliff. No one would suspect the truth. But what if I didn't die? What if I survived and became an invalid for life? No. The last thing Betsy needed was to cope with another difficulty. So I abandoned the idea.

We lived with abrupt mood swings, optimistic and affectionate, or sudden outbursts of frustration. What was odd was how we became closer to each other, assuring each other everything would fall into place, everything would be fine.

I knew it wouldn't.

Sometimes we'd talk about it. Betsy asking me questions. I never had answers. After a while we couldn't talk about it. Going over the details over and over again, just added to our despair. The blame, by now, is moot.

Betsy's parents came to visit, offered us money for a down payment on a smaller house. I'd met Betsy's eyes. Her folks were in their eighties and living on a pension and both had chronic health issues. "No," I said, "but thanks for the kind offer."

"In a few years the boys will be old enough for me to leave them and look for a job," Betsy assured them.

One day I came home from work and Betsy was crying. She told me that one of boys had asked her if she was sad because he and his brother fight over using the PlayStation, or because they don't always pick up the LEGOs.

"Oh damn!" I was shocked. "Betts, we cannot burden them. It's no good, what we are doing to them." I thought about strangling Austin, the pleasure I'd feel wringing his neck with my bare hands; or buying a gun (so easy to get these days) and shooting him; or kidnapping him, tying him up and leaving him in my cellar for a week without food and water—deriving a bit of pleasure from these scenarios. But that would bring more shame and problems to Betsy.

I recalled the first time I'd met Austin. It was only two years ago, but it feels like a whole lifetime. We ran the treadmill the same time every evening after work. He often took business calls on his cell phone or would strike up easy banter with other members. He was about my age, good-looking in a boyish kind of way, with a silver swath of thick hair I envied. One day we left the gym together. He'd changed from his gym clothes into what I guessed was a thousand dollar suit, a custom made shirt. I noticed he drove a Mercedes.

I'd introduced myself and he'd said, "Name's Austin Randolph, I'm a workout freak. But to my friends and *beaucoup* happy investors I'm known as Macho Man," and then he'd laughed. At first I thought him haughty, arrogant, and not afraid to say what he thought about anything. Macho Man. *Hah.*

Then I began to like him, soon thought him a good buddy, letting myself be flattered by his friendship. I enjoyed listening to him talk. We discussed our families, Isis, and the problems in the Middle East. I actually found myself interested in what he had to say although our conversations were mostly one-sided, my contributions mostly questions. He read a lot of both fiction and non-fiction and was uncommonly well-versed in politics. I never found him boring. Eventually we over disclosed to each other, he telling me how he had successfully built his business, as he fussed with the crease in his gym shorts, me confessing how each month it's become increasingly tougher to meet the monthly bills.

We introduced our wives and the four of us started going out to dinner and the movies together, the surprisingly quick depth of our friendship. When we visited them, Betsy and I were impressed by their beautiful home in the exclusive section of town, flattered by the invitations to their elegant cocktail parties. They were excellent hosts, tried hard to please their guests. We looked forward to their invitations.

Quick story: We were invited to another of the Randolph's cocktail parties. I pressed the doorbell and Betsy and I shared a giggle as the Randolphs' doorbell chimed the opening bars of Macho Man. A uniformed maid greeted us and took our coats. Betsy, looking spectacular in a new black dress, her blonde hair, usually held back in a ponytail, in soft waves framing her face, drags me on to the dance floor the Randolphs have created by rolling up the carpet in their recreation room. Servers weave their way through the rooms. Wine glasses refilled before becoming empty and

trays of hors d'oeuvres passed around with constancy. Hugh speakers rock the room with music. Marijuana and cocaine available to those who indulged in a more exotic high. Betsy and I drink Bloody Marys, feast on lobster rolls and tiny lamb chops and dance to the slower music. Austin, ever the attentive host, cuts in on us and whirls Betsy away from me. I wander into the library and over to the voluminous bookcase and read the spines. A chubby, middle-aged woman comes into the room and flirts with me. She catches my hand and won't let go. I twist away from her grip and make my way out to the terrace and sit down on a chaise, enjoying the fresh air. After a while Betsy comes looking for me, mischief on her face, her eyes too bright. She admits, in a high-pitched giggle that Austin's wife had convinced her to take a toke of the joint she was smoking. She giggles, finishes her Bloody Mary with one long slurp and says, "let's go home."

I'd had a bit too much to drink and drove us home cautiously. After I'd paid the babysitter, we tumbled onto the bed and had the best sex ever. (Going into detail serves no purpose.)

I couldn't understand how I had perceived Austin as bad news when I'd first met him.

Another evening, while the women were in our kitchen setting out dessert and coffee, Austin took me aside, told me I should take my savings and put it into real estate investments. He knew things I didn't know, he understood things about investments I didn't understand. He could see opportunities I couldn't see. "I'm quite good at what I do. I see advantages others don't."

I was impressed by how comprehensive and detailed he was, but hardly understood anything of what he told me. "I have to confess, Austin, I'm a bit embarrassed. But then I've always been terrible at finance. Betsy takes care of all our bills. You know what I mean."

Austin said, "Actually, I do. It took me four years of college, two years to earn an MBA for me to understand how the stock market works. If you want to retire with money to enjoy, you have to take chances. You don't risk, you don't gain. The real question is whether you're capable of action or not."

After they'd gone I sat up thinking about his advice. It sounded a little too pat to me.

And yet ...

And yet ...

Well, what did I know? I thought about the cost of sending both boys through college, being able to afford to take a cruise to Europe—something I knew Betsy always wanted to do. I thought about trading in our thirteen-year-old Honda, replacing the water heater, painting the house and the idea of being able to do these things was enough to eclipse my doubts. "Just you wait," Austin had said, "just you wait, you're going to be much better off. You gotta do what it takes or you don't. No in-betweens. Tell you what. C'mon down to my office Monday morning and we'll go over your options." He pulled out a card holder and gave me his business card, gave me the names of two clients. One was his lawyer, the other his brother-in-law. This should have given me pause, but it didn't.

Still with mixed feelings, I proposed Austin's offer to Betsy, assuring her that Austin is the right guy to make us rich. "Right now, we aren't drawing much interest on our savings. I'm tired of buying lottery tickets. Luck doesn't fall into your lap, you have to reach out and grab it. Don't you agree how much this makes sense?"

Betsy didn't seem so sure.

"I'm not going to do anything you don't want to," I said, but convinced her that it was the right thing to do although I wasn't sure I was doing the right thing.

I arrived a half hour too early. Austin's office was in a remodeled town house off of 68th street. In the foyer, sitting on an Oriental carpet sat a Louis-the-something mahogany desk. A white-haired middle-aged woman rose from her seat to welcome me, introduced herself as Miss Rae; clearly tasked with making clients comfortable she asked me if I would like some coffee, sparkling water or soda while I waited.

"No, thanks," I said and returned her friendly smile.

She motioned me to a leather sofa assuring me Mr. Randolph will be with me shortly. "Mr. Randolph is squeezing you in between appointments, so please be patient." A large vase of artificial flowers sat on the glass coffee table but there were no magazines to leaf through. I crossed my legs and waited, listened to the piped-in music. *KC and the Sunshine Boys* stuck in my head.

About twenty-five minutes later, a snazzy-dressed man came out of Austin's office and Miss Rae signaled me to go in.

The walls of his office were painted red. A carpet of geometric patterns covered the floor. My attention was drawn to a huge colorful lithograph on the wall behind Austin's equally impressive black lacquered desk.

"Like it?" Austin asked, and before I could answer, proudly identified the artist and rose to welcome me with a hearty handshake and a wide smile. I duly admired the picture, anxious to get down to discussing business.

"I'll try to keep this straight and simple. If you have any questions feel free to ask," Austin said, typing something, I couldn't see what, on his computer. He studied the sheaf of printouts for a few minutes, looked up at me and began to explain a real estate investment trust he placed a high value on and suggested would be a good start for me, detailing his proposal, his manner confident and professional. I tried to follow his presentation, ignoring the headache that was drumming behind my eyelids. I found myself sweating, removed my jacket and hung it over the back of the chair.

I was forced to interrupt to ask questions and explanations of terms and phrases and the nuances of investing, but the longer Austin spoke, the more confused I became.

He released a loud sigh. "Well, you'll just have to trust me. Don't worry, the investments I'm suggesting are foolproof."

So I gave him our savings and that evening in my kitchen Betsy and I toasted with champagne, a part of me scared at what I'd agreed to do.

That first year we were receiving big interest on our investments. We replaced the water heater and bought an Audi SUV. It was wonderful not having to worry about finances.

"You see?" Austin gave me a high five as we were leaving the gym. "They call me Macho Man for a reason."

Months passed. I might have been more astute about the falling market if my day to day activities hadn't kept me so busy, but eventually I developed a rising discomfort when my dividends were reduced. I knew that the market figures fluctuated. But I also knew not to dismiss this downturn altogether. When I'd asked Austin about it, he'd given a brief nod and shrug, assured me the market will rebound and I shouldn't worry. Yet as I listened to his assurances, doubt pounded in my veins. But as quickly as they came, the thoughts were gone. I didn't say anything to Betsy. I couldn't. I resolved to stop checking the stock market every hour, but still feeling I'd made a grave mistake.

As the discrepancies between the true market value placed on them by stockbrokers like Austin and the clearing houses' financial statements continued to widen, it was impossible to suppress my unease any longer. My insides plummeted. Panic rushed screaming along my nervous system. "Come on, come on," I pleaded at the falling figures. I began having digestion problems, heartburn, skipped breathing, trouble sleeping. I made promises to myself: *if I can get my investment back, I'll sell, give money to charity, I'll donate blood every year. I'll help out at our church bazaar. I'll give up ice cream.*

Austin stopped coming to the gym, his wife now always too busy to make plans with Betsy, and our social relationship fell out of touch. I called Austin's office, got his voicemail, felt a warning chill, a bleak and sinister feeling of what was to come, spent the day fuming and working myself up to a stroke. When I eventually got through to him, he didn't sound contrite.

"You said my investment was fool proof."

"I could not have said that."

"You damn well did. You should have advised me to sell when the market first began to drop."

"The recession, the tanking economy has hit everyone." I heard him make a guttural sound. "I've also lost a bundle," he'd answered.

"Any chance of—"

He barked a laugh. "I'd like to say yes, but no is more the truth."

My hand trembled from gripping the phone. *Shit, shit, shit.* What had I done? What had I done? I had lost all of our savings and held no hope for our future. I had ruined our lives. Everything I'd felt about Austin, everything I'd admired about him was me being blind and naive. Watching the news on TV one night I recognized the Randolphins entering the Waldorf Astoria for a pricey charity ball. It didn't surprise me they'd recovered so quickly.

I tried to make love to Betsy but failed to summon the arousal it would take. Desire had left me. I apologized to Betsy, sat on the edge of our bed, my head dropped between my knees. "Sorry, Betts. I can't stop thinking about ..."

"Try not to, hon." She got up and used the bathroom. The image of her sad, worried face lingered in my mind. When she came out she went straight to her side of the bed, her body turned away from me facing the wall.

I was forty years old. I was a fool. A stupid, pitiful fool. I lay there in and out of sleep listening to the rhythm of Betsy's steady breathing. I finally fell asleep in the unhappiness of the room, racked with bad dreams.

I sit across from Betsy and assure her the turkey is not overcooked, that it is juicy and tender. I eat the last of my rhubarb pie and help Betsy clear the table and load the dishwasher. We watch *It's a Wonderful Life*, then Betsy bathes the kids and once they are in bed I turn the thermostat down. Doing this every night has saved us money. Betts comes downstairs and sits down beside me. She reaches for my hand and squeezes it. "How's the packing coming along? Did you get everything done in the garage?"

"Most of it. I'll finish up tomorrow."

She notices my look. "It's just a house. It doesn't mean anything anymore."

I'm at a loss for words. I know this is a lie, that Betsy is as heartbroken as I am. "Are the kids asleep?"

Betsy nods. We get up and take their presents from where we'd hidden them in the closet and place them under the tree.

Snowflakes are being blown against the windows.

"Let's not dwell on the bad stuff tonight. Let's be thankful for our healthy sons and the happy memories we'll take with us," Betsy says, pushing for upbeat. We hear singing. A crowd of people has gathered around our front door singing Christmas carols, evoking memories of all the happier, past Christmas Eves. We open the door, an afghan Betsy has knitted wrapped around our shoulders. The cold air stings my face. I will myself not to shout, 'go away', *can't you see our suffering?*

A fleeting shadow of sorrow passes across Betsy's features. "I love this time of year," she says, raising her face to smile at the choristers. A full moon hangs in the sky, its yellow light casts moonlight over the snow covered roof tops and lawns. Holiday lights twinkle from the eaves of our neighbors' houses. A plastic Santa adorns the Wilsons' lawn, giddy and bright and cheerful.

Listening to the singing, something eases inside of me. I am finally able to separate myself from my anger and unhappiness. I embrace all the good things in my life. Betsy and I are healthy. Our children are healthy. Perhaps someday our troubles will be transformed into peace and well-being.

I find Betsy's hand and clasp it. "I love you, Betts. Merry Christmas," I say, lean forward and kiss my wife.

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*The End*

*We hope you have enjoyed this anthology of stories. You can find out more about all the contributors and their other books below.*

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

### **Lisa Beere**



Lisa Beere is an Ottawa writer creating in the areas of poetry, short stories, children's literature and romance. Her poetry has appeared in Ottawa Poetry Magazine and Meat for Tea: The Valley Review. Her first screenplay became the film *Cindy's Gauntlet* (2015). Her book *Equal to The Challenge: An Anthology of Women's WWII Stories* was published in 2001 under the name Banister. She loves family time, fine dining, theatre, white water rafting and singing.

<http://www.canscaip.org/Sys/PublicProfile/29992144>

<https://www.scbwi.org/members-public/lisa-beere>

[http://waxpoetryart.com/ottawa/2016/lisa\\_beere.html](http://waxpoetryart.com/ottawa/2016/lisa_beere.html)

A series of her books are coming soon:

*Sparkle the Elf,*

*Night Noises,*

*Twinkle the Elf,*

*I'm Running Away,*

*Hair, Hair Everywhere,*

*Gimli the Goblin,*

*God's Littlest Angels,*

*One Big Family,*

*Sam and the Bully*

*Mommy Doll Day*



Meet Sparkle the Elf – Sparkle, the tiniest elf, is never noticed and so she feels badly about herself. She decides to learn how to sew and make a special outfit so she'll stand out from all of her brothers and sisters.

When Ernie the Elf Watcher magically appears, he reminds Sparkle of all the things she is good at and all the people that care about her. This causes Sparkle to see herself in a new light, literally. She starts to "sparkle"!

Sparkle then finishes her sewing project and wears it to dinner, where her family notices her new sparkle from self-confidence and the outfit she has put so much effort into making.

Sparkle the Elf will inspire self-confidence in children by reminding them that they are loved and have skills. It will also encourage them to be proud of their accomplishments.

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## Eva Bell



A gynaecologist by profession but a writer and communicator at heart, Eva had to wait till she finally got off duty at 60 to seriously put pen to paper.

<http://www.evabell.net/>

<http://muddyloafers.blogspot.com/>

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In addition to a wealth of short stories for children and adults, including the short story *Love, the Master Player*, for Crimson Cloak Anthology volume 3, ***Love Matters***, she has written the following works:

*Runaway Widow*

*The Silver Amulet*

*When Shadows Flee*

*Storm in the Desert*

*Strategies for Survival in an Angry World*

***Back from Beyond*** - *The subject of Reincarnation has exercised the minds of independent Psychical Researchers all over the world. Some believe that the soul or the spirit of a person after biological death, begins a new life in another human body. BACK FROM BEYOND is a work of fiction based on this surmise. A girl born in Assam is convinced that she had a previous existence as another person. She is able to solve a murder mystery that has eluded the police for many years, because she is the reincarnation of the woman who was murdered.*

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## Brian Bossetta



Brian Bossetta is an actor, known for *L.A. Confidential* (1997), *Faith of My Fathers* (2005) and *The Sunchaser* (1996). He was born in New Orleans, where he fell in love with books at an early age. Inspired by the city's literary lore and tradition, he began writing short stories and poetry.

After graduating from Loyola University, he moved to New York where he worked in theatre as both a playwright and actor.

An avid runner, Brian enjoys playing the guitar and sharing literary ideas and talking books with his wife, Caroline, who is also a writer. They live in New York.

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<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/bbossetta>

Also by Brian Bossetta: *The Piano Keys* (Crimson Cloak Publishing)



The death of a schoolfriend in the army causes old wounds to resurface, and those remaining are forced to re-evaluate their lives in comparison. This is a poignant tale of love, tolerance and redemption.

*Sanctioned*

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## Veronica Castle

Veronica Castle lives in the High Pennines of northern England. She creates coloring pages for Crimson Cloak Publishing's children's books, now collected into the book *Crimson Tangles*, and is the illustrator of *The Magic World of Bracken Lea* by [Esma Race](#), and *Little Bear's Trial* by Roger Bone, from Crimson Cloak Publishing.



*Links to more information:*

<http://main.crimsoncloakpublishing.com/veronica-castle.html>

<http://raceesma.wix.com/esma-race#!veronica-castle/c1tpe>

<https://www.facebook.com/esmarace>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/veronicacastle>

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## Janice Clark



Janice Clark lives in the Pacific Northwest, where the morning fog drifting over the coastal hills could easily conceal dragons or any number of magical creatures. She and her brother share a home on partially wooded acreage, frequented by a variety of birds, deer, squirrels, rabbits, raccoons, the neighbor's free-range chickens, and several cats who hunt the area. She does not currently own (or is not owned by) a cat or any other four-footed being. Frequently-resident grandchildren and a large garden are sufficient to occupy any time not taken up by writing.

<http://www.janiceclark.net>

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<https://www.facebook.com/PrincessButtermilkBiscuit>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/JanClark>



*The Dragon said Moo*, short story in volume 1 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies, ***Glodwyn's Treasure Chest***

*A Stitch in Time*, short story in volume 2 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies, ***Steps in Time***

*The Courtship of Gladys Pierson*, short story in volume 3 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies, ***Love Matters***

*The Apple Witch*, short story in volume 4 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies, ***Consuming Tales***

*The Carousel Unicorn*, short story in volume 5 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies, ***Santa's Little Helpers***

### **The Hall of Doors series:**

*Book one, The Mountains of the Moon: Sammy's worried. Her cat has disappeared again. No one knows where Princess Buttermilk Biscuit goes on full-moon nights. Will she come back this time?*

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*the Hall of Doors with its magical portals to other worlds. But the dreamlike adventure turns into a nightmare when Sammy is faced with the hardest decision of her life. Will she have the courage to make the right choice?*

*Book two, **The Door in the Sky***

*Book three, **The Mirror Door***

*Book four, **The Secret Door***

*Book five, **The Water Door***

***Fairy Gold** This is a “prequel” to the story of Teeka, Angelina’s daughter, in the **Apprentice Healer** series. The first chapter of **To Heal a Broken Planet** is included. Publication of that novel, and its sequel, **Into the Unknown**, is pending.*

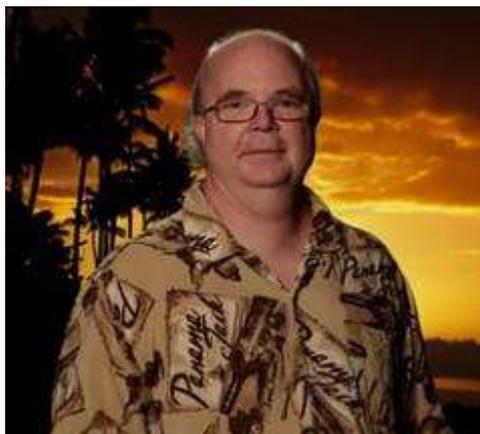
***A Brave Doll***

Other free materials on the website include “extra scenes” for the first three Hall of Doors books and an assortment of short material.

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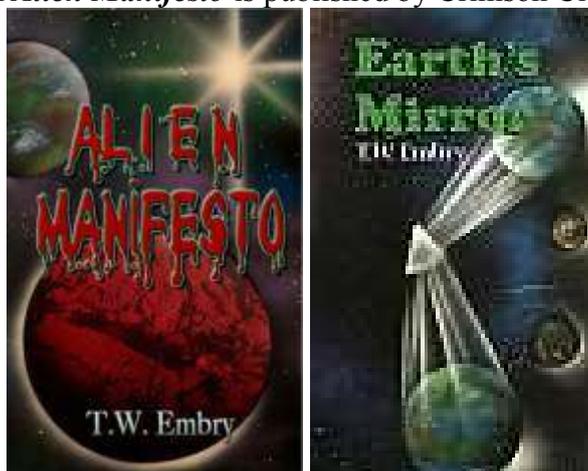
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## T W Embry



Todd was in culinary school doing an essay for the English portion of his AA degree. After finishing his assignment in a scant 20 minutes, the professor looked at his work, then asked him: "How many books have you written?" Todd had forgotten the young boy who used to write ghost stories to scare his grandmother. Later, he met an author who was giving a lecture at the local library and thought that would be a cool thing to do. Remembering the words of Professor Wolfson in culinary school, he sat down at the computer and started what would become *Revenge from Mars*, his first novel, re-released by Crimson Cloak Publishing. His short story "The Man Who Created Himself" appeared in Volume 2 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies, *Steps In Time*, and *The Legend of Center Tree* appeared in volume 4 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies *Consuming Tales*. He is currently working on his book *Ravings of a Bi-Polar Mind*.

Todd's book *Alien Manifesto* is published by Crimson Cloak Publishing.



**Synopsis:** *When orphaned ex-Navy S.E.A.L. Thomas Scott decides upon a life of crime, he does not expect to be recruited to join an elite Special Forces operation charged with stealing an alien artifact. Especially a mixed-species alien team headed by inter-galactic billionaire Snarth. The close-knit team soon becomes Tom's family in more senses than one, which complicates matters when the mysterious artifact turns out to hold secrets that may plunge the whole of the known universe into a devastating war ... look for Sequel **Earth's Mirror**, from Crimson Cloak Publishing.*



<http://twembry.com/>

<http://marielavender.blogspot.co.uk/2014/10/interview-with-author-tw-embry.html>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/twembry0>

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## Don Ford



A Native American writer and an Environmentalist caring for the natural world of water, land, air, and all living things, Don has published works throughout the U. S. and Europe, Portugal and Cyprus in particular, with connections in 62 other countries. From 2006 to 2011, he was the Forum Moderator for both the Humor Forum and the Spiritual Forum for Readers Digest Magazine. He was also the named Storyteller for the New York State Parks and Recreation Dept. at the New York State Fair Aug./ Sept. 2011. His short story *Warrior Spirit* appeared in Volume 2 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies, *Steps in Time*, and his poem *In Search of Another* in Volume 3, *Love Matters*. Volume 5, *Santa's Little Helpers*, contained his piece *Holiday Without a Christmas*, and the poem *Found Christmas*.

<https://www.facebook.com/donford2013>

<http://tinyurl.com/l4al233>

<http://www.awritercomestocall.webs.com>

[http://www.linkedin.com/profile/view?id=44086905&trk=hb\\_tab\\_pro\\_top](http://www.linkedin.com/profile/view?id=44086905&trk=hb_tab_pro_top)

<https://twitter.com/DonGreywolfFord?refsrc=email>

<https://www.facebook.com/awritercomestocall>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/dgford>



*Cave Land: No decent self-respecting modern homo sapiens should miss getting this Stone Age parody. This book rocks, or at least has its own share of rocks in it.*

***A Story Runs Through It***

***Adventure Road***

***Clay Pond and Other Fish Tales***

***Royal Ferdinand and Other Tales***

***Return to the Forest***

***Chilly, the Very Warm-Blooded Polar Bear***

***Raising Hope***

***Plight of the Butterfly*** - We have all heard stories about butterflies and read poems about the same. This book is presented to raise awareness of the serious Plight that butterflies are in today, especially the Monarch butterfly. Their numbers are dwindling, and more research is desperately needed to find out how to curb this tragedy, before it reaches a point of no return. Enjoy the stories, full color pictures, and poems presented here.

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## Anthony J. Gerst

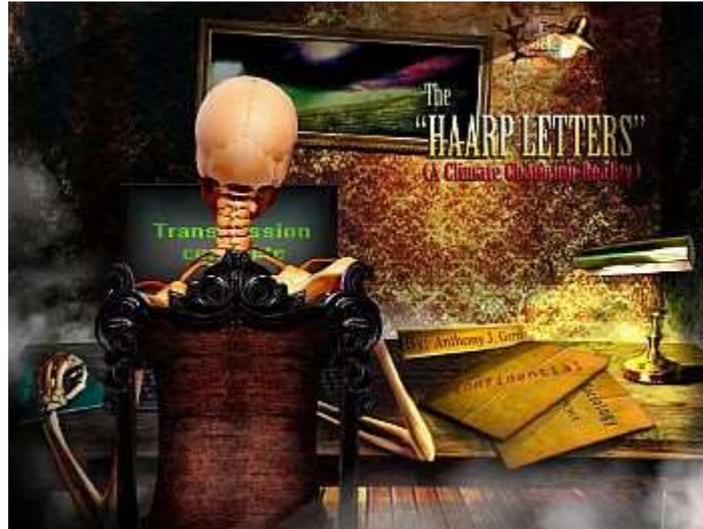


Anthony resides near the confluence of the Iowa and Mississippi Rivers, in the stomping grounds of Aldo Leopold and Chief Black Hawk. At an early age he began contributing letters to the editor to the Burlington Hawk Eye and he has been printed in several states and in various publications around the globe. His area of interest shifted in 2000 from being a political activist to an avid environmental writer. He has contributed to Planet Save, Oped.news and boomer warrior among other sites.  
<https://www.facebook.com/climatesociologyseries>  
<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/climatewriter>  
[http://anton316.wix.com/authors-page?\\_ga=1.88649371.1843511092.1434117868](http://anton316.wix.com/authors-page?_ga=1.88649371.1843511092.1434117868)

Also by Anthony J. Gerst:



*The Haunted Attic*, short story in Volume 4 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies, ***Consuming Tales***.



***The HAARP Letters (A Climate Changing Reality)*** is a dystopian Science Fiction novel, set in the middle of the 21st century.

*In the aftermath of Big Thunder, an environmental disaster, Abram Fuld, along with his militant group, some refugees and four lady scientists whose mission is reestablishing civilization, are thrown together at the HAARP compound, besieged by violent "marauders". They plan a fresh utopian start founded upon a new Gaian "religion", integral to which will be care for the world's remaining environmental resources, with the use of carbon-neutral husbandry systems and specially designed seedstocks. Concerned at the social implications of some of the innovations, Abram corresponds by email with an old friend who has survived in another of the world's emergency bunkers. These documents remain in the archives of the new Doni Sisterhood as The HAARP Letters .*



***Sasquatch Must Die***, a Crimson Short story

*"Ghosts of the Erie Canal,"* published in 2005 by Quixote Press. A collection of short stories focusing on historical events that are both entertaining and educational.

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## [Kathryn Howarth](#)



Kathryn was born in the middle of the last century in a large town in Lancashire, England. Due to her father's work she grew up in different parts of Southern Africa. She met and married her husband in what is now Zimbabwe and lived for 25 years in Cape Town, South Africa with their five children. Being widowed made her re-evaluate her life, which has led her to write a book to share all the knowledge and skills she has accumulated through the years.

She now lives in Surrey, England with her Yorkshire terrier, Boris, making soap, aromatherapy products and jam for the local market.

Her book *Finding Me Through Crafting* will be published by Crimson Cloak Publishing.

<http://kathrynhowarth.co.uk>

<http://www.craftingwithkathrynhowarth.co.uk/>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/kathrynelizabethhowarth>

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## Fifi Lavender



"Fifi" has been creating her "doodles" for years, and they are soon to be collected into volumes of coloring books. She lives in the UK. *Look for **Rainbow Doodles**, the first in her range of children's and adult coloring books, from Crimson Cloak Publishing*



<https://www.facebook.com/Fifi-Lavender-Drawings-471501139711231/>  
[https://www.instagram.com/fifi\\_lavender/](https://www.instagram.com/fifi_lavender/)

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## Cynthia MacGregor



Cynthia MacGregor lives in Palm Springs, Florida. She is a writer, editor, TV host and speaker and has written over 100 books: general nonfiction, parenting books, cookbooks/books about cooking, kids' books, and fiction. Children's crafts from one of her upcoming books can be found in Volume 5 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies, *Santa's Little Helpers*.

<http://www.cynthiamacgregor.com>

Books by Cynthia, from Crimson Cloak Publishing:

*Affirmations ... Plus Action*

*Don't Quit While You're Ahead*

*Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Santa Claus, The Tooth Fairy and The Easter Bunny.*

*Who's There? (New and Favorite Knock-Knock Jokes)*

*Predator-Proof Your Child*



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## Don McCann



Always a keen reader, Don's fascination with vampires began in the sixties watching Christopher Lee and Pete Cushing. Writing a description of a character he was invited to play in a live-action vampire role-playing game in the nineties planted the seed for the fascinating series. Don is married with two daughters and enjoys movies, collecting things, playing loud drums, and progressive rock music.

<http://dmccan0.wix.com/edo-blood>

By Don McCann: *Edo Blood, Book 1*

A vampire is born in ancient Japan. The repercussions reach the modern day.

John Aarons is a college student from Wright University (Dayton, Ohio) and is majoring in Asian Studies, with a minor in Japanese Feudal History. This term, he's studying the Edo Period and is going on a field trip to Kagoshima, Japan to visit some old monuments and monasteries. While at one of the monasteries, he stumbles upon a very old scroll. When he gets it back to his hotel room and opens it, he's shocked to find himself reading about a 16th century lord named Mitsui Hamada--a woman!

Except there were no female feudal lords in 16th century Japan.

At the end of the scroll, he finds a reference to another scroll--the next in what appears to be a series. His decision to find the next one leads him on a journey across Japan, then across The Yellow Sea into China and back to Japan again.

Each scroll reveals secrets more incredible than the last--but none more incredible than the fact that there were vampires in 16th century feudal Japan!

But, what John Aarons doesn't know is, there are even more incredible secrets still to come . . .



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## Caroline McKinley



Caroline is a librarian and a lover of "all creatures great and small." She lives north of New York City and was a working actor for many years, also writing screenplays and short plays. She enjoys hiking, hanging out with nature, and turning children, young and old, on to a good read.



***Rescued*** is her first published novel:

*When sixteen-year old Casey Riley takes justice for her friend into her own hands and ends up sentenced to community service at the local animal shelter, it seems like her summer is ruined along with her friend's. Making the best of things is made easier when she falls for a cute fellow-volunteer, however. Over the course of the summer she becomes caught up in the plight of the animals and realizes that they might not be the only ones in need of Rescue.*

[http://yalsa.ala.org/yals/yalsarchive/volume9/9n4\\_summer2011.pdf](http://yalsa.ala.org/yals/yalsarchive/volume9/9n4_summer2011.pdf)

<http://www.alsc.ala.org/blog/2012/11/animals-as-teachers/>

<http://www.twitter.com/csmckinley>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/cmckinley>

Also by Caroline:

*A VOICE FOR FREEDOM, coming soon.*

Inspired by the life, letters, and writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe

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## Shayla Mist



Aside from writing, crocheting, tatting and pretty much anything crafty, Shayla also enjoys painting and graphic design. She loves striking minimalist designs and stunning Photoshop effects and she strives every day to get better and better at them. She believes in the saying that clients know best, but she also appreciates those customers who allow her to unleash her creativity.

<https://ro.pinterest.com/mist0132/portfolio/>

<https://www.facebook.com/Shayla's Book Covers>

[http://www.selfpubbookcovers.com/index.php?option=com\\_artists&view=profile](http://www.selfpubbookcovers.com/index.php?option=com_artists&view=profile)

file

<http://thebookcoverdesigner.com/designers/shaylas-covers/>

<http://shayla-mist.deviantart.com/>

*Shayla Mist designed the cover for volume 6 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies, New Beginnings.*

Shayla has worked with the following authors: Hunter Frost ( Waking up in Vegas and Don't Wake Me Up), Alexis Woods (three covers), Victoria Milne, Diana Hignutt (latest covers for her Moonsword series – so far only one cover published).



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## Brian O'Hare



Because of a childhood disease that required a liver transplant, Dr. Brian O'Hare took early retirement in 1998 from his post as Assistant Director of the Southern Regional College in Newry in Northern Ireland. He now enjoys full health, plays golf, and travels. He is author of several academic works as well as two memoirs, and three award winning fiction novels, as well as Crimson Cloak's Inspector Sheehan mystery series.

<http://brianohareauthor.blogspot.co.uk/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/inspectorsheehan>  
<https://www.facebook.com/brian.ohare.96>  
twitter: @Brian O'Hare26

Also by Brian O'Hare:

***The Miracle Ship***, conversations with John Gillespie

***Fallen Men***

*A Spiritual Odyssey* (a memoir)

Inspector Sheehan Mysteries:

***The Doom Murders***, book 1 of the Inspector Sheehan Mysteries

***The 11:05 Murders***, book 2 of the Inspector Sheehan Mysteries

*Murder at Loftus House*, *Murder at the Roadside Café*, and *Murder at the Woodlands Care Home* (Inspector Sheehan short stories)

Coming soon: ***The Coven Murders***, an Inspector Sheehan Mystery



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## Rodney Page



A graduate of the Grady College of Journalism at the University of Georgia, in 2005 Rodney authored *Leading Your Business to the Next Level...the Six Core Disciplines of Sustained Profitable Growth*, a hands-on guide for companies navigating the perils and pitfalls of a high growth environment.

His first novel, *Powers Not Delegated*, was published in 2012

A Georgia native, Rodney lives in Hendersonville, North Carolina. His passions include hiking, photography, history, reading, and, of course, University of Georgia football. His story *Granny Mae's Journey* appeared in Volume 2 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies, *Steps In Time*.



[www.rodneypagebooks.com](http://www.rodneypagebooks.com)

<https://www.facebook.com/jrodney.page>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/rpauthor>

<https://twitter.com/JRodneyPage>

[www.linkedin.com/in/RodneyPageAuthor](http://www.linkedin.com/in/RodneyPageAuthor)

Works by Rodney Page:

*Leading Your Business to the Next Level...the Six Core Disciplines of Sustained Profitable Growth*

*Powers Not Delegated*

Synopsis of *The Xerces Factor*, Release, April 2015:

*Investigative journalist Charles Arrington was writing a book. It wasn't finished; in fact, he almost dropped the project because he discovered no evidence. But the book, The Thieves in the Pentagon...Corruption that Threatens Our National Security, motivated someone to try to kill him.*

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## Esma Race



Esma Race was born and raised in the small Cheshire village of Weaverham. She has a great love for the natural world, and has always been able to sense the nature spirits which feature in her Bracken Lea stories. She is very interested in natural healing, and is a practising reflexologist in the North of England, where she now lives with Geoff, her husband of 50 years. She is a mother, grandmother and great-grandmother and enjoys reading, walking, travelling, gardening, and English history.

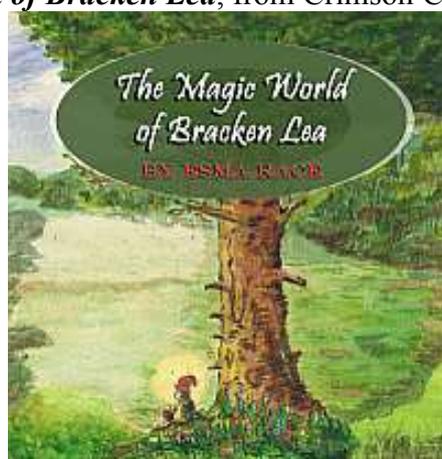
Her short story "*Horrid Rex Bites the Dust*" appeared in Volume 1 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies *Glodwyn's Treasure Chest*; "*The Eternal City*" was in Volume 2, *Steps In Time*, "*The Search*" appeared in Volume 3, *Love Matters*. Volume 4, *Consuming Tales*, featured her story *A Trio of Friends*, and *Horrid Rex at the North Pole* was in Volume 5, *Santa's Little Helpers*.



She is the author of:

*The Traveller* (short story),

*The Magic World of Bracken Lea*, from Crimson Cloak Publishing.



*"Discovering the Magic World of Bracken Lea was a treat"*

*--Long and Short Reviewer*

*" ... adorable ... After two stories I was hooked."*

*--OnlineBookClub Reviewer*

<http://www.esmarace.co.uk>

<https://www.facebook.com/esmarace>

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/esmarace>

[https://twitter.com/Esma\\_Race](https://twitter.com/Esma_Race)

[https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/8020628.Esma\\_Race](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/8020628.Esma_Race)

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/esmarace>

Synopsis of ***The Magic World of Bracken Lea:***

*A series of short stories featuring the Fairy Folk of Bracken Lea Wood: a tale of Nature Spirits for humans of all ages.*

*Welcome to the magic world of GLODWYN the Gnome. His friends include other gnomes, flower fairies, a Twisted Tree, Astrid the Fairy Queen, and the birds and animals who also live in the wood.*

*Glodwyn the gnome is a bit of a rebel. He lives and works in the ancient woodland. He is unusual amongst the Fairy Folk in enjoying the company of humans. His good-natured interest in their world seen through the eyes of his unknowing "friend", Walter the Stacker Truck Driver at the local factory, leads him to interfere in their affairs, with interesting results both for the Fairy Folk and humans. With his help, the Fairy Folk rescue a little boy from drowning, save the life of an injured cat and later that of a confused old lady who collapses in the Wood.*

*The Fairy Folk raise the alarm when a baby's mother is taken ill, and later prevent disaster at the baby's Christening, when a bad fairy threatens the child's happiness. They help a Leprechaun find his way home, and get a lost engagement ring back to its owner. Both unwitting humans and Fairy Folk work together to save nearby woodland from development. From arranging a litter-pick in the woods to finding a new wand for the Fairy Queen, it is a busy life for the Fairy Folk.*

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## Wesley Tallant



The son of a WW II disabled veteran, Wesley Tallant is himself an ex-Navy veteran of the Viet Nam era. He has a wife of 41 years and three grown boys, and lives in Blossom, Texas. Retired after 24 years with the Paris Texas Fire Department, he now writes full time. He is the author of *Mr Sparks, the Firehouse Dog*, a children's short story in Volume 1 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies *Glodwyn's Treasure Chest*, *The Road*, in Volume 2 *Steps In Time*, and the poem "Crackers" in Volume 3, *Love Matters*. *The Dead Man's Revenge* and *The Inheritance* appeared in Volume 4, *Consuming Tales*. In addition he has published the following books with **Crimson Cloak Publishing**.

<http://wttallant.wix.com/wesleytallant>

<https://www.Facebook.Com/pages/Wesley-Tallants-Author-Page/484791544922209?fref=ts>

<https://www.Linkedin.Com/pub/wesley-tallant/55/2a8/704>

<http://www.Smashwords.Com/profile/view/wesleytallant>

Books by Wesley Tallant from Crimson Cloak Publishing:

***The Wishing Elf*** (children's)

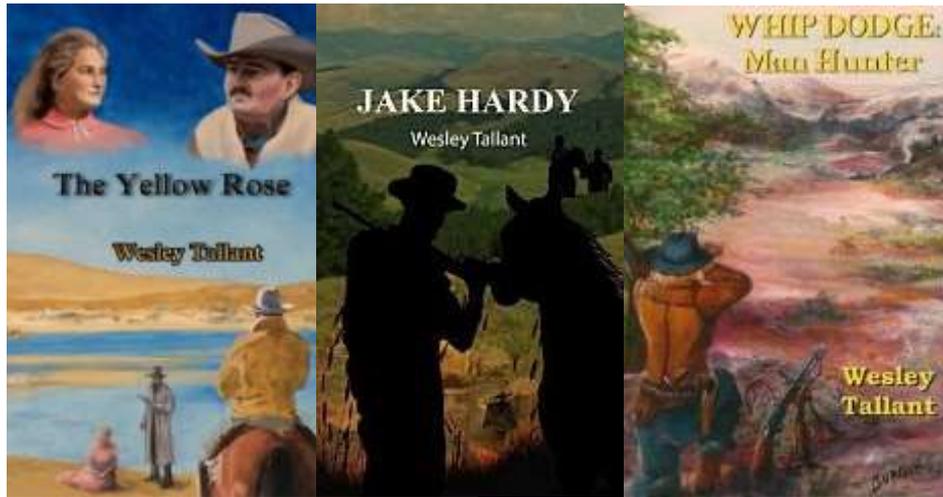
***Little Big Toe*** (children's)

***Jake Hardy***

***Whip Dodge: Man Hunter***

***The Yellow Rose***, + synopsis:

*In 1886, Bexar County rancher Mike Callahan goes for his yearly pilgrimage to honor the father he lost in the battle of the Alamo. While he is there on the fiftieth anniversary of the fall of the Alamo, his wife Rose is kidnapped. He leads a posse of men, including the county sheriff, in an attempt to rescue her. He is killed but questions soon arise as to who shot him. Intrigue and family betrayal follow Rose as she and her foreman, Dusty Hayes, strive to keep the ranch that Mike named after her, running.*



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## [Veronica Taylor](#)



Veronica is a Mother, Grandmother and a Great Grandmother living in the Borough of Dagenham in Essex County. From her Catholic Convent schooling in the 1960s, she has worked in several factories, spent most of her working life employed by banks and recently worked with children in a Catholic Primary School.

She enjoys travelling, encountering new cultures and meeting new friends along the way. Interests include attending creative writing courses, writing stories across a diversity of genres, both fictional and biographical. The piece *New Beginnings* is an extract from her forthcoming book of that name.

<http://main.crimsoncloakpublishing.com/veronica-taylor.html>

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## Barbara Weitzner



Originally from New York, Barbara lives in Delray Beach, Florida. For many years she has published articles in a South Florida magazine, and in *New England Writer's Magazine*. Her play, *Robbie Von Hooten Is A Jerk* was read to an audience at Sugar Sand Park, 2010 in Boca Raton, Florida. *An American Christmas* received honorable mention in the 2006 La Belle Lettres short story contest.

<http://www.linkedin.com/pub/barbara-weitzner/56/841/140>

<https://www.facebook.com/barbara.weitzner>

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/barlon22>

By Barbara Weitzner:

*A New Start*

*The Parradine Allure*

*Choices*

*The Most Glorious Thing Ever*

*Choices*, an anthology of short stories, available on *E-books*

Short Stories: *Please Wake Up* was published in Soundings Magazine; *First Love*, appeared in Gemini Magazine; and the article *Never too Late* appeared in Southern Writing.

*Apartment 5B*, short story in volume 2 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies,

*Steps in Time*

*Halloween*, short story in volume 4 of the Crimson Cloak Anthologies,

*Consuming Tales*



Synopsis of *The Most Glorious Thing Ever*:

*A couple meet in a bar. He buys her a drink. He can hardly believe his luck. She's gorgeous and fun. Where could it lead?*

*This is a story for every man or woman who has ever loved the wrong person; who yearns to experience true rapture—the kind that gives you shivers, staggers you, all-consuming, and leaves you breathless, ready for anything.*

***The Most Glorious Thing Ever** begins as a romantic romp that segues into a tragedy and is based on a thirty-year-old newspaper article.*

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## The Charity



**Stop It Now!** prevents the sexual abuse of children by mobilizing adults, families and communities to take actions that protect children before they are harmed.

We provide support, information and resources to keep children safe and create healthier communities. Since 1992, we have identified, refined and shared effective ways for individuals, families and communities to act to prevent child sexual abuse before children are harmed - and to get help for everyone involved.



TOGETHER WE CAN STOP THE SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN.  
WE'RE HERE TO HELP!

<http://www.stopitnow.org/>

<https://give.stopitnow.org/checkout/donation>

<https://www.facebook.com/StopItNow>

<https://twitter.com/stopitnow>

<https://www.youtube.com/user/wecanstopitnow>

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<http://www.crimsoncloakpublishing.com/>

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