

The Misfit

Judith Groudine Finkel

Sundays I watched my friends in their white gloves and patent leather shoes walking by my home on their way to church. While they were gone, I entertained myself by hiding my brother's favorite toys or giving my Toni doll yet another Toni home permanent.

Starting at eleven o'clock, I became a sentry at my parents' bedroom window, looking for my friends' return. But even when I spotted them, my agony wasn't over. My mother, afraid I would disturb Sunday after-church lunches, wouldn't let me go to their houses. I had to wait for them to come to me.

"We can't offend our Christian neighbors," she said in a tone that made me afraid something terrible would happen if we did.

The one Sunday I looked forward to was Easter. That was because of Catherine May, who lived two houses away in our small industrial town of McKees Rocks, just outside Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Catherine had a back yard big enough for a swing set, went to parochial school and had long, gold-flecked hair.

She would come by after Easter church services with a chocolate Easter bunny and let me eat its ears.

When I was six, and about to break off my treat, she stopped me by saying, "You killed Christ."

"Who's that?"

"Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior."

I searched my memory and then spoke with assurance. “I never even met the man. So how could I have killed him?” As Catherine pondered my logic, I chewed on a chocolate ear.

The holiday that was the most difficult for me was Christmas. In school I mouthed the words to the carols. The songs were about the beliefs of my friends, not mine. Then there was the Christmas tree on the stage of the auditorium. Other children brought lights and tinsel and ornaments for the tree trimming party. I stood apart, eating the cookies their mothers had baked, trying to be inconspicuous. I felt most isolated during the December nights. Every house in the neighborhood except ours had Christmas lights.

At some point those of us who are different make a decision to hide it, ignore it or celebrate it. Without realizing it at the time, I made my decision in 1953, in the third grade. My teacher that year was the imposing Mrs. Noble, who was tall and wide, had hair the color of my red Crayola and yelled a lot. Her reading from the Bible that morning had been about the birth of Jesus. At recess, while the other children drew pictures on the blackboard, I approached her desk. I blurted out what had been on my mind all morning. “Mrs. Noble, I know all about your holiday, and you know nothing about mine.”

She stopped grading our spelling tests and peered at me over her glasses. “What do you mean?”

“Chanukah starts tonight, and none of you knows about it.”

“Do you want to tell us?”

“Tomorrow,” I said.

After school, as I trudged through the snow up Wayne Avenue Hill and slid down it, I was worried. Not about telling the Chanukah story. I knew it by heart. I feared I had done what my mother had admonished me never to do – offended our Christian neighbors.

When I got home, I took off my white rubber boots and red leggings and walked slowly up the stairs to our apartment. I went into the tiny kitchen where my mother was standing over a frying pan, making potato latkes for our Chanukah dinner. I begged her to let me eat just one of those special small pancakes. When she agreed, I felt even more guilty. So I confessed.

“I’ve got to call your father,” she said.

I’d really done it this time.

“Norm, you’re going to be so proud of Judy.”

The next day I was in front of the class with my family’s menorah, telling the story of how ancient outnumbered Jews defeated the Greek Assyrians and then experienced the miracle of one day’s worth of oil lasting eight days so that the Eternal Light in the temple never went out. I explained that’s why we lit candles on eight nights, and why I got a present on each of them. What I remember most about that day is how Mrs. Noble, whom I’d never seen smile before, smiled at me throughout my presentation.

When I finished, she said, “Next year I want you to tell the Chanukah story to the whole school when we’re all together in the auditorium for the tree trimming.” And so I did, year after year, until I graduated.

Callers

Carl L. Williams

We have more callers at the door,
bringing cakes and hams and bowls of sympathy.
Inside, the grateful others rise —
“Oh, here comes someone, and really we must go —”
from where they’ve perched on sofa edges.
Impulsive hugs of commiseration,
a sudden glance of trembling,
a well-intentioned patting of the hand,
provoking mutual tears, and then they’re gone.
“We’re so very sorry,” say the callers,
unsure of what will follow
or where to set the dishes.
So many have come to offer what they can,
yet one dread visitor who came before,
staying briefly, intently seeking,
silently turned and took so much away.

At Play With the Mouseketeers

Anthony J. Mohr

The Mouseketeers never swore. They played nicely together. They had rosy clear complexions and smiles like a sunburst. The girls talked in singsong voices. The boys had an awshucks manner which, though cliquish, exposed a reservoir of good feelings toward the world. The Mouseketeers were the children our parents wished they had. That's why I wanted to play with them.

Instead, I played at the Van Nuys Park where one day a bruiser with acne and an asymmetrical face was swearing at a boy my age who was eating a Milky Way. The boy froze, as if turning into a statue would make the brute go away. The tactic failed, and the bully taunted and shoved until the boy ran off in tears, leaving most of his snack on the ground. I peered hard at the edge of the park, wishing Cubby and Lonnie would show up and ask me to join them. Cubby O'Brien and Lonnie Burr would never hurt anybody.

I left the park and made it home by five, in time for their show.

"And now," Jimmy Dodd said, "let's join the Mouseketeers on a picnic!"

Linda and Don sing "It's a wonderful day for a picnic." Linda spots a table under a tree and says, "Boy, this is gonna be fun."

“Boy, I hope so,” replies Don, who has been lugging the food baskets.

Linda: “How about a chicken sandwich?”

Annette, Cheryl, Bob, Tommy, and Doreen show up before Don can answer. “Hey, kids,” Annette exclaims. “There’s our table.”

Bobby (To Don and Linda): “Hey, what are you kids doing here? This is our table.”

Linda: “Yours?”

Don: “What do you mean ‘your table’? First come first eat.”

Bobby: “Well,” and he points to a sign that says “reserved.”

Don: “Reserved?”

Bobby: “For us.”

Don turns to Linda with a hangdog look: “Well, here we go again. Pack up time.”

Annette Funicello beams at Bobby as she delivers the line that defines the sketch. She says it with an attitude that, while carefree, is as sincere as President Eisenhower’s grin. “Wait a minute, Bob. There’s plenty of room. Let’s all eat together.”

Cheryl is Annette’s first convert: “Sure, Bob. It’s OK.”

Tommy follows suit: “Fine with me.”

Doreen: “Please stay.”

“OK,” Bobby announces without a pause. A second later they sing that they have “baskets of goodies to munch on” and lots of prizes for the winners of the games they plan to play. I blinked my eyes while Bobby and his friends frolicked on my television screen.

That night under the covers, I joined in their games – racing in burlap sacks and balancing eggs on a spoon. Don won the pie-eating contest. “Tell me, Don,” Annette asked. “How does it feel?”

“I’m not hungry anymore,” Don replied in a deadpan voice, and we all laughed with him.

One day Jimmy Dodd announced that for one dollar you could subscribe to Walt Disney's *Mickey Mouse Club Magazine* and – most important – join the Mouseketeers. I always wondered how I could become a Mouseketeer. Now I knew. My mother gave me the dollar to mail in.

Tomorrow's Yesterday

Barbara B. Rollins

It's more comfortable to sit in a corner
than to sort out a meaningful path,
to stay in stasis at yesterday.
I meant for my life to matter,
I yearn for difference tomorrow
though comfort means to sit around.

How boring – though safe – to sit around,
sucking my thumb, a tot in a corner
hiding from fear of tomorrow,
fear of the forks in the path
but heck, does it really matter
whether I fear the unknown or yesterday?

How soothing is the fiend yesterday?
Resentments dance with shoulds around
oughts and regrets. A trivial matter
lurks there for years, leaping from a corner
into my way, blocking the well-chosen path

to imagined triumphs and honor tomorrow.



An Evening With the Jersey Boys

Ann Reisfeld Boutte

When my husband and I bought tickets to *Jersey Boys*, the Tony-winning musical about Frankie Valli and The Four Seasons, I knew we were in for a nostalgic review of the fabled quartet's hits of the Sixties. But when the curtain rose, the lights dimmed, and strains of "Silhouettes" filled the theater, I was transported, as though tapped by a wand, back to my youth.

I am standing in the gym which is decorated in green and white crepe paper and balloons, slow dancing with my ninth grade boyfriend, Louis. Cheek-to-cheek, fingers entwined, moving to the harmonies of "Earth Angel," I am on fire with the thrill of his touch, aching to melt into his arms, and so much more.

After this night, we will eat brown bag lunches together in the school courtyard. He will ride his bicycle to my house in the afternoons. On weekends, we will spend hours together gazing at each other adoringly and just as many talking to each other on the telephone when we are apart.

As Frankie launches into his falsetto rendition of "Sherry Baby," I am distracted by the woman seated next to me who is swaying to the rhythm. She even sings a few bars. In the dark, she could be my best friend, Ilene, a skinny girl with a Buster Brown haircut, a big smile, and an easy laugh. She is at my house for a sleepover, and we are upstairs in my bedroom wallpapered in lines of yellow rose buds. We eat salted popcorn

that we've cooked on the stove, drink cokes, and pore over the latest edition of *Mad Magazine* which has us in hysterics. After we've read the issue from cover to cover, we spend hours composing what we consider to be clever letters to the editor that we hope he will publish. The records on the turntable play "My Boyfriend's Back" and "Big Girls Don't Cry."

Or my seatmate could be my other best friend, Jill, another long-legged, skinny teen with dark, wavy hair. Jill's home life is troubled. Her mother is bed-ridden with heart disease and her father gets angry when he drinks. So she often spends a weekend night at my house on Walnut Street as we chat about classmates, clothes, and music. Hours into the evening, Jill will telephone her boyfriend, Joe, who she has wrapped around her little finger. Joe has a car and a little cash, so at Jill's request, he will drop by our favorite pizza parlor, pick up a medium with pepperoni and mushrooms, and bring it, puppy-like, to the front steps. My father will be delighted, as always, to see Joe make his delivery.

Teenage angst is in the air, too. And we suffer from it in varying degrees. We strive to be popular, to be accepted into the in group. We wonder if our clothes are cool, and if we have enough colored Capezios. We have science projects, term papers, and book reports to finish. Grades are a constant challenge. And our parents are impossible and don't understand us at all.

But we are in bloom. Our hair shines. Our skin is tight, and our cheeks are pink and glowing. We have energy, flexibility, and endurance. A banquet of possibilities lies before us and we dance happily to "Let's Hang On to What We've Got," "Stay," and "Bye, Bye Baby."

But, as quickly as time flies, the show is over. The curtain comes down and the lights go up. It's 2008 again.

The woman sitting on my right is not like Ilene. Her hair is brown, but it has gray roots. She is ample-armed and pear-shaped. She is wearing a Chinese-red sparkly jacket and black pants, an outfit she might have picked up at Chico's. She's no doubt a grandmother.

But then, Ilene is a grandmother now, too. And so is Jill.

A bittersweet sensation sweeps over me. My husband and I file out of the theater with other time travelers, The Four Seasons' music still stirring feelings and memories.

It's true, *Jersey Boys* has the magic to transport. But the trip backwards grows ever longer and on the road ahead, the horizon looms. It may be magic, but it only lasts two hours.

Paradise Born

Barbara B. Rollins

Meredith drifted to paradise
leaving a shell to be born,
to be mourned.

Meredith's milestones are
would-have-beens.

Meredith lives like the perfect dream
vanishing as I wake.

Meredith Rollins Warren, – May 23, 2000

Message for My Family

Diana Raab

The day after I die
and hours after my ashes cool,
find a purple urn with a window.
Purple nurtures my spiritual strength
and windows keep me alive. Remember
I'm claustrophobic and the thought
of being stuck inside a box frightens me,
since I must indulge in my favorite hobby
of people-watching, which sends me to my journal where I
find joy and solace.
Remember writers need time alone —
once a day my window should be closed,
just once a day after I die.

I Must Go Down to the Sea Again

Barbara B. Rollins

I could sit and look at the ocean forever. Never living closer than an eight-hour drive, I've visited from time to time. As a child with my parents and two sisters, then years later when my own sons were quite young, then during conferences and meetings, on two ocean cruises, and flying over the expanse of the Atlantic – I've savored it. Occasionally I've waded, probably never more than knee deep. Until now.

Far too often I've stood on the beach, the sideline of life, afraid to get into the game. I'm available for commentary, ready and eager to direct or describe the action, but the *mêlée*? I leave that to the actors. Conversation? Let me talk to the group. One on one? Too scary.

I snuck up on my fear, buying a swimsuit in May, carrying it to a June retreat but didn't dare to swim. Carrying the garment from Texas to Wisconsin, I never removed it from the suitcase, ignoring invitations and the pool beneath my window.

Today – September – the suit got wet. With salt water. I announced I intended to play in the surf, but over the swimsuit donned shorts and a shirt, for the trip across the street from the hotel. I carried my driver's license, credit card, cell phone, and new fancy camera. Did I really expect to get into the surf? Probably not. I did wade at the water's edge, as I had before. The strap of the camera bag encircled my neck, fear of falling

paralyzing me. Sand eroded under my feet with surging and ebbing water. I ventured a few feet further, anxious, nervous.

I scanned the beach for an acquaintance attending the same conference, somebody I knew but had never conversed with, of course. Maybe I would ask them to watch the camera. Should I take it back to the hotel? Could I leave it with the desk clerk? Three strangers sat in lawn chairs on the beach. Were they trustworthy? Better to disguise it as clothing piled, invisible among other piles.

There weren't other piles. Did I trust a family playing together? On a wave of courage I put the bag on the concrete base of a pier, far from the water, close enough to the seawall few people walked up there. Resting on sandals, wrapped in the clothes, perhaps the large camera became innocuous enough. In my untried suit, wearing trifocals, I ventured into the surf.

I resolved to get the suit wet. Finally water splashed the garment. Mission accomplished! I could return and retrieve the camera. No. Not enough. I went further out, and further, and further, surprised when a wave splashed on my face. I took off my glasses, held them tight, and moved further yet, marking my progress by the nearby pier. It would be marvelous to stand even with the building spread out near the end. I got close, about three feet from the goal, but the waves were covering my head, the sun long since down, and I was swimming alone, though the family of four were within sight, paying no attention to me.

I didn't need to prove anything – more. I was far enough. Standing and relishing long enough to soak in the moment, I worked my way to shore, dressed, and climbed to the top of the seawall where on a bench I pulled out the camera to take pictures of the area. In the darkness the quality suffered.

It's okay. The images in my head will remain pristine. I have dared to live in tomorrow. Life begins at forty? I must be slow, for mine peeled off the beaten path with a roar at sixty.

August 1, 1966

Janis Hughen Bell

This is a story from long, long ago. Before cell phones, personal computers, or fax machines. It was an innocent time.

It was a wonderful summer day. Things were going so well for me – spending the summer working and going to school at the University of Texas. What a lark.

I was in Austin for the summer to take six hours credit. I needed to lower next year’s course load so I could be editor-in-chief of the 1967 *Cactus* yearbook.

I was twenty, but after three years at Texas, I still felt like a kid. Of course, school was hard work, but there was so much else going on to make life exciting. Student life was easy-going. There was an innocence and peacefulness you could feel about campus.

My second class had finished and as I walked across campus that Monday, it was unusually pleasant out for almost noon. On that sparkling, perfect day, students who usually scurried to class were more relaxed than usual. Even with the heat of the day approaching, campus denizens seemed fresh and alive.

I crossed the South Mall with its carnival spirit and its vast openness. A crowd grew as I leisurely passed the Journalism Building. I thought about stopping at the *Cactus* office, but decided to go on early to my job as student counselor at Kinsolving dorm. Today, I would work lobby desk duty.

Besides, this would give me another two blocks to enjoy the beautiful day.

But as I continued my walk down the tree-canopied sidewalk, something suddenly felt strange. People started walking really close to me then passed me by. I was walking at a good pace and this surprised me. People were hurrying past me, but not really hurrying. They seemed to be gliding, as if in slow motion. They were so close for a moment and then they seemed to vanish ahead. It felt almost dreamlike. The sun was shimmering and people were floating by. Probably just a part of the magic of this beautiful day, I thought.

A student on a bicycle brushed passed me and I was startled. Looking up quickly, I saw him suddenly jump off his bicycle and leap into the air. I thought, what a crazy thing to do. But I never saw him hit the ground as I was suddenly shoved to the side and someone whispered to get down. Someone else said, “Be quiet and head for those bushes.”

Flat on the ground, piled under a hedge with others, I heard: “Shooting is coming from the Tower in all directions.”

A boy near me said, “Stay down until the shooting starts on the other side. Then run as fast as you can until they start shooting on this side again.”

I ran for cover like this three times before I made it up the front steps of Kinsolving dorm. Inside, I heard the word “snipers,” and about the dead on the ground. I thought of the kid on the bicycle. My life was changed forever.

My part in this day was small. I was assigned to the exit door closest to campus. The campus police instructed me to lock the door and not let anyone enter when the snipers were shooting on our side of the Tower.

“You must be crazy,” I said. “I was out there and I know these girls need to get inside. How can I lock them out?” I was told to do this to keep them from running up the steps to the

door and exposing themselves to gunfire. I had a megaphone to shout out when I was locking the door, but this didn't work, as the girls would not stop coming. And I could never be sure that the firing had stopped.

The task was the most traumatic I would ever face. Girls would run up the stairs and scream and cry when they reached the safety of inside. It was worse when they pounded on the locked door. I soon stopped locking the door. If a girl made a run for it, I sure wasn't going to be the one to lock her out.

The siege seemed to go on forever. I never knew how long. Someone came and got me and told me it was over and I was urgently needed for phone duty at the lobby desk. Parents were calling in hysterics to find out if their daughters were alive. We had a list. This list was of the few girls who had checked in at the lobby desk. Everyone living at Kinsolving dorm was told to come to the desk and tell us they were safe.

The scene was still chaotic and not many had come forward by the time I arrived. The phone circuits were jammed but the phones rang non-stop. "Handle the calls quickly. If the girls are not on the list then tell the parents to call back. Try to calm them," the officer said. It was awful trying to console the parents. They cried whether their daughter was on the safe list or not. It was so long before I could match a parent with a girl on the list. It was odd to have so many phone calls. Our means of communication was limited then and most families only traded weekly letters. Few indulged the luxury of long distance calls.

I worked the desk late into the night and well past my normal shift. Part of me wanted to go to my dorm room and cry too, but I knew I had to stay. Kinsolving dorm had been my college home for the last three years and I knew how much the staff needed my help this day. Many of the residents camped in the lobby all night – no one wanted to be alone. Besides, the only

TV was in the lobby and we wanted to see the news. We had heard only scattered information from the radio and the parents who called.

We were stunned as we watched the TV that night. Our beautiful campus looked like a battlefield as image after image showed the massacre. There had been only one sniper and the rampage had lasted 96 minutes. The madman-shooter was a UT student, Charles Whitman, 25 years old. He looked like the all-American boy. Slowly, the facts unfolded. We would hear the final toll –16 dead and 31 injured. Awful details. The worst was the senseless shooting of an un-born baby carried in his eighteen-year-old mother’s womb. She was the first person hit and lay unaided on the South Mall with the other dead and wounded until the siege was over.

The injured were terribly maimed. Several were paralyzed for life. The Drag (our name for Guadalupe Street) would claim the most victims killed. I am not sure if classes were held on Tuesday. They probably were, as everyone wanted things to return to normal. We kept our vigil in silence.

We had been taught to get over things we could not change and we desperately wanted the return of our innocence. People didn’t talk about the terror of that day. We were in shock. How could this happen to our wonderful lives? The authorities were worried about copycat murderers so the tragedy was not discussed much. The last weeks of summer were haunted as we dealt with our pain. Finally though, the fall semester came with its normal distractions. We could begin again and put the summer behind us. Football games, outdoor fun, and the start of fall classes occupied our days. But most of all, new students arrived who had not been on campus the first day of August. I stayed busy with studies and work on the *Cactus*. “The Tower Tragedy,” dubbed by National TV and magazines as the worst homicidal incident in recent history, received the briefest

mention – almost an afterthought in the yearbook’s Chronology section. But since that horrible summer day, August 1, 1966, I felt unprotected walking between classes, on the Drag, and even on the streets around campus. I did not walk on the South Mall until my graduation ceremony the next year. I never talked about my role on that sad frantic day until now, but the horror followed me all these years.

The suddenness and closeness of death stayed with me. I no longer feel safe in open spaces and I no longer trust strangers. I still circle around the South Mall now when I visit campus. I know the terror that happens when a madman takes the Tower. I remember a day forty years ago when the Forty Acres changed for me forever.

Great Aunt Pearl

Becky Haigler

Unlike the oyster,
which covers intrusion
with soothing layers
to create a gem,
since childhood
she has added offense
to irritation, complaint
to grief, to form a knot,
accreted misery, polished
with self-righteousness.

A Maze

Jim Wilson

All my life
Trying to manufacture
An awesome personal destiny
I wake up
In the same dream limitations
Seeing no door
I have enough nerve to open
Deep knowing
That if I do choose, open —
Walk through and close
All other doors in this room
Disappear
And in that new room of life
As I focus
Twice the more doors
Will be crying
“Open me! Open me!”
