

the night. Of the two of us, the possum was probably more frightened by the encounter.

I don't know how he felt afterward, but for me our staredown was a surprisingly transformative experience, working wonders for my self-esteem. Now I felt brave enough to face anything. Well, not a bear or the slopes of Everest, but strong enough for situations I might reasonably expect to encounter. Thanks to that midnight visit, I have become a self-actualized person, confident that I can meet whatever life tosses at me.

Not that I've stopped missing my husband. I long for his sure hands when I need something done that seemed inconsequential when Ralph was here: unscrewing a tightly closed jar, getting a box down from a high shelf, changing a light bulb I can't reach even with a step ladder, fastening a necklace. I have spent special days alone – New Year's Eve, Ralph's birthday, Valentine's Day – mourning for the person I loved most.

Grief is a puzzle. It comes and goes, washing over one at unexpected moments. Going through a file, I come across a paper with Ralph's handwriting and start to cry. Cuddled under Ralph's old brown robe, I sit on the couch that looks out onto my garden. On New Year's Eve at midnight, I dialed our phone number to hear his voice on the answering machine so that, in some way, we could welcome the New Year together.

As I find my way alone, the path is sometimes rocky, sometimes smooth. I'm pleased that I'm stronger, more self-reliant than I was when I was half a couple. Because I have to be, and when one must, one can.

Off the Mark

Jim Wilson

I will affix no labels
And
Make no judgments —
Because
I might
 Be right.

And I might crush
Some struggling soul —
Who
Had planned
To change
 Tonight.

Sink or Swim

Jeanne Holtzman

This week started out pretty okay. By Friday, nothing bad had happened. A bunch of planes flew over, but they didn't drop any bombs so they weren't the Russians doing a surprise attack. No one got stuck in the elevator. I didn't even have any elevator nightmares. And I got home in time for supper everyday, so I didn't have to beg my best friend Diana to walk me all the way home and up seven floors to keep my dad from hitting me, not that it usually worked anyway. She just walked me halfway.

On Saturday, as usual, I walked across the street to Diana's house. She's my first friend who lives in a private house. We sat on her stoop listening to the radio. Back in June we couldn't wait for third grade to be over, but by late July we didn't want to admit that we were getting a little bored.

Diana's sister Sheila came out and gave us the death stare. "Get out of my way, you babies," she said, pushing past us. Last summer, if her friends weren't around, she would jump rope or roller skate with us. Or help us fish our bounce balls out of the sewer with a bent hanger. But this summer Sheila wouldn't even talk to us. All she did was chew gum and walk around the neighborhood dragging her shoes, her hair all ratted up with the teasing comb she stole from Woolworth's. She looked like a dead mummy, with all that black eyeliner and white lipstick.

After Sheila left, Diana's mom came out and sat on the stoop and smoked a cigarette. Diana's mom was kinda scary, not like

a regular mom. She wore tight dresses and high heels, and went to work on the subway. She didn't work on Saturday though, so she was wearing short shorts and a tube top, and I could see the top of her bust. I'd never seen a bust in person before. It was creepy. Diana's mom took a long drag on her Viceroy and said, "It's going to be a scorcher tomorrow. How'd you girls like to go on a picnic in the country?"

I looked at Diana and she looked at me. It was a long, boring drive to get to the country, and then you couldn't roller skate or bounce ball and there was no one around. Just lots of trees and grass and mosquitoes. But Diana's mom said we could go swimming in the cow pond. I went inside to call my mom and she said I could go.

It was already hot when we left. Me and Diana and Sheila were squashed in the back seat of their old two-tone Plymouth and my hair kept blowing and smacking me in the face. Me and Diana started to sing, "The Bear Went Over the Mountain," but Sheila told us to shut our faces. She had so much hairspray on that her hair didn't even move.

When we finally got to the picnic area, it was time for lunch. I unwrapped the sandwich Diana's mom gave me and felt sick. It had mayonnaise. I hated mayonnaise. I didn't say anything, tried not to gag and ate what I could, washing it down with juice. I said thank you.

We couldn't go swimming for an hour after we ate because we might get cramps and drown. We walked barefoot in the grass to wait down by the water. Diana said she'd been to this pond before, and there was so much cow piss in the water it was really easy to swim. I didn't know how to swim yet. Sheila said the water was gross and she wasn't going in. She walked in front of us in her bikini with all her makeup on, and tried to tune in a rock and roll station on her radio.

"Stupid hick music," she whined, rolling the dial past static and country songs. "I can't believe I had to come here with you two dips."

Suddenly, she stopped and pointed. "Ew. Look at that!"

In the grass in front of us was a dead animal. It was so gross, I couldn't stop staring at it. The only dead things I'd seen before, besides squashed bugs and dried up worms, were my goldfish and my parakeet,

and they looked pretty normal, just not moving. This had flies buzzing around it, and hundreds of little, white worms crawling all over its fur and in and out of where the eyeballs used to be.

“It’s a muskrat,” Sheila said all braggly like a show-off. “Those worms are maggots.” She looked at us and smirked. “You know, maggots are in everyone’s bloodstream all the time. They’re just waiting for you to die or get sick or even scared, and then they come crawling out to eat you.” She made a scary face and wiggled her fingers in our faces.

Now I really felt like throwing up. I wondered just how sick or scared you had to be for the maggots to start coming out. I was sure I could feel them wriggling in my blood. I looked down at the blue veins that sometimes popped out in my hands to see if any maggots were swimming inside them. I squinted, but I couldn’t see anything.

We stepped around the muskrat and kept walking. When we got to the pond, Sheila lay in the sun on her towel. She finally found a good station, and turned it up as loud as she could. Diana and I waded into the shallow water and threw rocks.

“She’s probably just making it up, about the maggots, to scare us,” Diana said, but she didn’t sound convinced.

“You think?” I asked.

“Yeah, probably.”

Finally the time was up and we could go in the water. Diana jumped in and started swimming toward a big rock. I went to get my tube, but then stopped. Instead, I waded in up to my waist, cupped my hands the way my father had showed me, lay down and pulled with my arms and kicked my feet. And I didn’t sink. I was moving. I was swimming. I swam all the way out to the rock. It was true. Cow piss did make it easy to swim!

We played in the pond the rest of the day. Now that I knew how to swim, I could jump off the rope swing. It was a great day.

The ride home seemed shorter, even though we stopped for hamburgers, and Sheila complained the whole time about her sunburn, and how she needed Noxzema. When we finally got back to the Bronx, it was dark and I was falling asleep. Diana's dad took Diana and Sheila to their house, and her mom said she would drive me home and take me up to my apartment.

"That's okay. You can just drop me off downstairs and I can walk up by myself," I said, even though I was so tired I didn't know how I would ever make it up seven stories.

"No, I don't think so," she said, sliding into the driver's seat. "It's too late. I'll just ride you up in the elevator."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't ask her to walk me up the stairs. I didn't know what to do. We walked into the lobby, and she pushed the elevator button. I looked over at the entrance to the stairs. I felt my breath and heart going fast, and my face getting hot. I checked my veins.

The door to the elevator opened, and Diana's mom got in. I put my head down so she wouldn't see me cry, and stepped into the car.

"You're on seven, right?" she asked.

I nodded without looking up.

The car shook when the door closed. I held my breath, waiting for it to move. It jerked a little, and then started to go up. My stomach hurt. My mouth closed tight like lockjaw. I just stared at the word "Otis" on the floor near the door and waited for the cables to snap, and the elevator to crash down. Or for it to get stuck between floors. I didn't want to die in the elevator with Diana's mom. I wanted my own mom. I wanted to get out. I didn't want the maggots to eat me.

And then the elevator shuddered to a stop, and the door opened, and we were on the seventh floor. I wasn't dead. I rang my doorbell, and my mother answered. I mumbled thank you and ran to the bathroom. I could hear the two moms talking.

By the time I washed my hands, Diana's mother was gone. My mom gave me a big hug. "How was your day, sweetie?" she asked as she smoothed my hair.

"It was great," I said. "The pond was so full of cow piss I learned to swim!" Before she could say anything else, I yawned and said, "I'm really tired, Ma. I'm going to bed."

I slipped under the bedspread my mom sewed, and waited for sleep. The window was open, and I could hear a plane flying over. Not a Russian. I thought about jumping through the air into the pond, and how the water held me up. I hoped I wouldn't dream about elevators. Or maggots.

Life's Buffet

Mary Carter

Forrest Gump said life is like a box of chocolates, but I think it's more like the buffet line at Luby's. You can see exactly what you're getting, but you still don't always know exactly what it is — can't tell by looking whether a sauce is sweet or hot, if the corn has too much salt or not enough, and certainly don't know if the meat loaf inclines to indigestion. After a while you learn some things — not to fill up on salads, to skip the brown gravy, which bread is too dry, and that you should always leave room for pie.

Driving Down to Nogales

Sheryl L. Nelms

I glance out my side window
glimpse
white cement humped
beside the highway
packed with red plastic tulips and roses
wink of votive light
prevailed over by the blue Virginity
of a plastic Mary
speeding on I know
sacrilege
need to do a U-Turn
need to stop to pray
for someone somewhere

A Different Wrinkle

Madelyn D. Kamen

I finally get my nerve up and call the number. She asks me what procedure I am requesting.

“I don’t know,” I gulp. “I’ve got a little furrow between my eyebrows that I’d like to have smoothed.”

“In what manner?” she asks.

“I thought you guys were going to tell me what I need,” I respond meekly.

“We don’t get involved in those kinds of decisions. We just give you the information and let you decide for yourself.”

“Okay, then. I’ll see you at 9:45 tomorrow morning.”

I hang up and immediately begin the same preparation I use for dealing with all other difficulties in my life: I start to eat. “This is no way to attack a problem,” I tell myself, spitting out a potato chip. “What I need is to do is a search on the internet.”

I sit down in front of the computer and start surfing the web. What are my choices of procedures? How much do they typically cost? What are the risks?

I am overwhelmed. Not in my wildest dreams did I believe they can do so many things to a person’s face. They say they can peel, inject, abrade, lift, tuck, cut and paste, implant, replace, resurface, suck, enlarge or reduce. And this isn’t even a porn site.

Then, if I can decide what process I want, there are a variety of creams, implements, medicines, or acids that can be stuffed

in, rubbed on, beamed at, or smeared over. The costs of each varies from expensive to incredibly expensive.

The risks are yet another eye opener. I can experience blood clots, swelling, numbness, infection, scarring, bleeding, weeping, bruising, skin loss, tingling, redness, throbbing, burning, allergic reaction, protrusion, asymmetry, and permanent nerve damage – to name a few of the more colorful outcomes.

After a couple of glasses of wine and a therapy session, I determine that what I want is probably a simple botox injection, the cheapest of all of the procedures, which can run as high as \$400 per shot and which needs to be applied between two and three times each year to maintain. It is a lot; but, I reason, I only live once. I might as well look better if I can.

Now, I am prepared to go see the doctor. With printouts in hand, I go to his office. While in the waiting room, I notice that there are magazines there with luxurious items that the rich and famous can purchase. Fur coats, fancy cars, diamonds, \$1000 leather purses, days at the spa.

I think to myself this one little procedure is not even as expensive as one of those fancy handbags in the magazines. I don't indulge myself like many women do with all those fancy things. I deserve a little tune-up. It will be a small extravagance.

Soon, I am escorted into the doctor's office. He hands me a mirror and says, "Here. You hold this while I do the evaluation." He looks down at me. He is clearly distressed. He starts to move my skin around. He moves the loose tissue above my brows in three different directions. Then, he proceeds to my lids, lifting the skin just outside of them, making me look a little like I pulled my ponytail too tight.

I peer into the mirror. The light in the office is harsh. Is that on purpose, I wonder, or does he have no choice in his office lighting? I can see every pore, every zit, a few potential new

zits, every fold, every wrinkle, each crow's foot, and every discoloration. I look up at him, disconcerted, anticipating the worst. I'm not disappointed.

The doctor says nothing. He moves to my mid-face, pulling and pushing on my cheeks and my cheekbones. Then, he proceeds to my mouth and jowls, and, horror of horrors, to my neck. He says something that sounds like, "Tsk, tsk."

"What?" I say.

"You know," he says, "I can't look at just the brow without seeing how it relates to everything else."

"Is there a problem?"

He moves some of my flesh around again. "You look in the mirror while I talk."

He continues for the next ten minutes, demonstrating all of my problem areas. Now, I know I am not all that great looking, but I have learned to live comfortably with what God gave me. However, after the doctor finishes with me, I am convinced that I am hideously deformed and a candidate to play the female version of Quasimodo.

"We can fix most of this," he assures me. "And I am willing to give it to you at a bargain price just short of \$22,000. That's cheap for what I will need to do..." He doesn't finish his thought.

In your dreams, I think to myself. Around Christmas, gift-purchasing time, is definitely a bad time to visit a plastic surgeon. I want to get out of here as fast as possible, but the torture is not over. As part of the evaluation process, the doctor invites his "perfect ten" office assistant in to provide skin care information. I am not kidding when I say this girl has no pores – just smooth silk stretched over her perfect bone structure. It is her job to describe an array of treatments and make-up that I can purchase before and after the surgery to tighten, cleanse, and disguise my nearly worn-out skin. She is followed by

another movie star who takes a front-and-side mug shot of my face.

“Don’t forget to put my prisoner number on the bottom,” I say as I look at the photo.

Next, a nurse practitioner comes in to tell me she will need a full medical history if I decide to have the surgery. I don’t have the nerve to tell her there is no need to worry about it. She isn’t going to need it. Eventually, I am able to escape from the doctor’s office. I stop off at the lady’s room and look in the mirror.

“Maybe, a little furrow in the brow isn’t so bad,” I say and hurry home.

Perspective

Barbara B. Rollins

Relentless days wrest center stage
from forebears hardly ripe
as calendars slough off each page
with calibrated swipe.
From Gerber pears to bubble-gum
seems but a month or less
and calculus replaces sums
like tic-tac-toe to chess.
So halt that whirling dervish time;
suspend it by sheer will
and patty-cake to nursery rhyme
while child is cuddly still.

My 20-Year Love Affair

Stewart Caffey

I was happily married when I entered into a 20-year love affair back in February 1964. It was a difficult decision, but one that I ultimately embraced whole-heartedly. Although I had little money in my account, I made arrangements to accommodate her in my daily life. My wife knew about this decision. At first she certainly was not in agreement with me, but in time she came to accept it.

Soon the “love of my life” was going everywhere with me, and she caused heads to turn everywhere we went. I could understand why: she had a sleek body, causing people to gape and even reach out to touch her. She met my every need so beautifully – year after year. It was a love affair I will probably never duplicate again in this life.

In time, however, the years began taking a toll on her, which the whole family found hard to accept. People were no longer captivated by her good looks. But she continued meeting my needs. We were all but inseparable. Then the inevitable happened. After 20 years, this love affair was cooling. Finally I turned her over to another man. I hoped he would enjoy her company as much as I had. Yes, it was difficult – not only for me but also for my wife and then my three children – to sell our 1964 VW Beetle!

Bought at a time when very few Beetles were seen around Central Texas, ours came to seem almost like a member of the

family. On February 28, 1964 I had traveled to Abilene, Texas, where I paid \$1,797 for a brand new, light tan Beetle. Max Fergus Motors gave me a trade-in allowance of \$127 on my 1957 Ford, which lowered the price to \$1,630. However, they also added \$40 for state tax and 1964 plates so I essentially walked away with a new car for \$1,670. My note at Comanche National Bank was for \$60.11 per month for three years.

It was a great decision for our family, and the rewards for us were numerous.

We still miss “her” and talk nostalgically about her. We’ll never ever forget her and all the fun we enjoyed together! Indeed, over time the entire family had developed a love affair with our little “Bug.”

Bossa Nova Hand Dance

Kenneth Pobo

Late that summer we swayed
to Connie Francis singing
“Bossa Nova Hand Dance,”
got married. Now we’re
divorced

amicably. You met a tree
surgeon and I met a realtor.
I wonder do you and your
lover hand dance? Do you
dance at all? Are you

like me and my lover, our
dancing days done, thousands
of pots and pans before us
'til we get ample
paid-in-advance plots?

Should we have stayed
together? We can't revive
the bossa nova.
My joints are bad. Often

in bed with the realtor
I see you as a samba
at the edge of my life. You
move like hibiscus. I slip
into sleep thinking of flowers
falling.

Letting Go

SuzAnne C. Cole

Butterfly – orange, black
defined in white —
alights on my leg;
as impossible to hold
as the adult children
sharing this holiday.

Choices

Mary Carter

The door you open today
may block yesterday's hallway,
obscure tomorrow's window,
or bar next week's bridge —
open it anyway.

If I had known
how many rocks
were on this path,
I might have chosen
another – and missed
the view from the summit.

Twenty-Six Cents

Thomas Wheeler

I do not remember the origin of the bet and neither do my brothers. At some time, however, when twenty-six cents was the amount available for such purpose, some brother bet another brother that he could not do some stupid or dangerous thing. The bet was like a dare only with a princely sum riding on the outcome. The challenged brother could decline but it was rare that the opportunity to earn in excess of a quarter was not taken, even by a brother in his 30s or 40s. There were no rules but in the event of success, it was incumbent on the newly-flush to find some equally do-able but dangerous task for the loser to do to get his money back. There were hundreds of such bets over the years. Among the favorites were the following:

1. "I bet you twenty-six cents you can't knock that wasp nest down with your bare hand without getting stung." The bigger the nest and the more numerous the protectors, the more adrenaline-filled the dare. The event required speed, stealth, and a clear get-away path. A wasp is aggressive and quick but can be outrun if you get a step on it, do not trip and are appropriately motivated. To a bunch of pre-teen and teenage boys...and nowadays to a couple of 40-ish types, there are very few things as funny as seeing a swarm of angry wasps hot on the trail of a brother moving with speed that only fear can generate.

2. "I bet you twenty-six cents that you can't put that whole egg in your mouth." This one came up mostly when a double-

yolked egg was gathered and our grandmother was not around. The trick was generally not in inserting the larger-than-normal egg. The problem was removing it. A guy with an egg causing his cheeks to puff out is a pretty funny sight. Even the egg-filled brother wants to smile or laugh but cannot because of his condition. With a sibling or two laughing their backsides off, it is very difficult to relax the face long enough to get the egg maneuvered out. It was always a scream if the egg happened to break.

3. “I bet you twenty-six cents you cannot catch that (usually huge) bull snake without getting bit.” Bull snakes, at least the big ones, have nasty dispositions. After they are caught and handled for a while, most will settle down enough so that the holder can let go of their heads without getting bitten. For years, it was a Wheeler boy that held the snake and moved through the crowd during the “snake dance” performed at the end of Boy Scout camp by the scouts clad in Indian garb. The initial meeting with a big bull snake is almost never a friendly encounter. A bull snake does not have fangs but the rough edges of its mouth hurt like crazy if it gets you on a bare spot.

4. “I’ll give you twenty-six cents if you put this mouse down Sister’s shirt.” Putting things down a sibling’s shirt is not as easy as it sounds. It was, however, great fun. We Wheeler kids were an untrusting lot. Whether a mouse, a lizard, a harmless snake, a rotten egg or a piece of over-ripe fruit, the great feat was getting close. You also never knew for sure whether the two (bettor and target) were working together and the target was waiting on you to get close so that he or she could whack you with one or more solid or semi-rotten objects. For those of you that do not know, the record is 2.8 seconds to remove a t-shirt and shake out a lizard.

5. “See that fence? Bet you twenty-six cents you can’t jump it.” Three or four-strand barbed wire fencing surrounded most

of my grandparents' farm. My oldest brother and I were high school gymnasts. My other two brothers fancied themselves athletes. In our younger years, hopping the fence was not that great a feat. Our maturing brains, however, failed to adjust to the loss of "ups" which had afflicted our aged legs. In the big picture, there is very little as funny as some 30-ish guy, trying to relive his glory days, taking a running leap at a fence and hooking a toe on the top strand.

6. "Twenty-six cents says you cannot eat that piece of watermelon." This bet usually came at the end of a monstrous meal where all participants were stuffed to a point of being ill. Sometimes it was watermelon. Sometimes it was pie or chicken or potatoes. The humor generally came twenty or thirty minutes later when the eater was crying from a painful stretching of a stomach that would not hold another gram of material and the dared party still had five bites to go.

7. "I bet you twenty-six cents that you can't catch that seven-lined race runner (a lizard) by yourself." Again, the particular type of lizard or animal was not important. Any reptile, mammal, insect or amphibian would do so long as the chances of the thing being caught were reasonably small. Believe me, it is worth the money on the line to see a kid or a grown man hopping around the tank or the pasture, matching wits with something which, at that instant, probably had just as many brain cells working as the chaser.

8. "Let's toss this egg back and forth and whoever drops it owes the other twenty-six cents." The egg generally was a presumably rotten one that was found in some nest which one of the hens had hidden for a few days or weeks. The eggs could not be used because it was difficult to tell which were fresh and which stunk really, really badly. The object of the contest was to move one step farther away after each toss. The trajectory of the toss was intended to be such that, if the egg broke, the

contents would splash all over the stone-handed catcher. Over-ripe fruit could be substituted for rotten eggs.

9. “I bet twenty-six cents you cannot skip a rock eight times or more.” If curling remains an Olympic sport, rock skipping must soon become one. Skipping requires the selection of the proper stone, a testing of the wind, a solid throwing stance and just the right angle. It requires a ton more skill than pushing a rock object down the ice. I also strongly suspect that more folks rock skip around the world than do that thing on ice. Lots of money, sometimes upwards of two dollars, can be won or lost on a still afternoon.

The twenty-six cent thing is rooted in a basic manly need to show who is the toughest, smartest or most talented among the gathering. The question of who is alpha male among the Wheeler boys is still undecided despite decades of overeating, fence jumping, rock throwing and monitored expulsions from bodies. It’s a question that needs to be answered before one of my brothers starts using his advanced age as an excuse. A backcountry camping trip offers far too many opportunities to continue the quest for superiority...and for potentially bad things to happen.

Every mid-July, a couple of brothers (the related kind) and I head to the Pecos National Wilderness in New Mexico and lose ourselves in the backcountry for a few days. The trips are sometimes a bit challenging since we leave behind a number of items my first wife would consider “essentials.” Two notable events took place during the most recent of these back-to-nature treks. I hesitate to give many details regarding the first event since my wife might bring it up during the commitment proceedings she periodically threatens. Let’s just say that it involved the bet and a large rock being thrown in an attempt to break a good-sized log into fire pit-sized pieces. The log did not break but, instead, trampolined the stone into the nearest soft
