

Of Cotton-Patch Lessons & Air-Raid Drills

Bill Neal

“The time has come,” the Walrus said,
“To talk of many things:
Of shoes – and ships – and sealing wax –
Of cabbages – and kings.”

Lewis Carroll

“The Walrus and the Carpenter”

When I first started remembering things, the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl days of the 1930s were drawing to a close. I do recall there always seemed to be two constants in our daily lives: work and the land. Or, more specifically, saving our land. More specifically still, struggling to survive and make those dreaded annual mortgage payments on our small ranch. My family, and our neighbors, were pioneer stock who came to our little West Texas community bringing with them very little in the way of worldly goods, but carrying with them a very big dream: to own their own piece of land. In the 1930s that dream was in serious jeopardy as the vultures of foreclosure seemed always to be circling ominously in the distance.

By 1941 conditions had improved, and I sensed an easing of my family’s anxiety: it appeared that we were going to be able

Maybe what matters is that we embark.” Barbara Hall ~§~ “A black

to save the ranch after all. Yet we had barely survived the double-whammy of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl drought when fate struck us – and the rest of the nation – another devastating blow. This one I remember and remember very clearly. When I was five years old, nearly six, I distinctly recall a very sunny Sunday afternoon in December when two couples – friends of the family from Quanah – came out to the ranch. We all saddled up and spent a pleasant afternoon riding to the hills located on our ranch. (Locally called the “medicine mounds,” the four geographic anomalies rose abruptly out of the surrounding plains to a height of about 1700 feet. The Comanche, there before us, believed the largest mound had spiritually-endowed healing powers,. The nearby village was therefore Medicine Mound.)

We got back to the headquarters, unsaddled and went into the house. Everyone was laughing and joking. Then, just before sundown, somebody turned on the radio. The good times abruptly ended. No one spoke a word while we listened to the unbelievable news: War! The date was December 7, 1941, – Pearl Harbor Day.

For the next four years laughter and good times were in short supply. Every night we sat riveted to the radio listening to war news, and the news in the first years was seldom good. Would the Japanese or the Germans invade us? Would we lose the war and have foreign devils take over and enslave us? Kill us? Many neighbors and family members enlisted or were drafted, and soon we began getting news that some had been killed or wounded or were missing. One neighbor boy, Norman Tidwell, who had not reached his 20th birthday, was killed. Our rural mail carrier got the War Department letter addressed to Norman’s parents which contained the news. Somehow, he was aware of (or guessed) its contents and arranged for several neighbors to

cat crossing your path signifies that the animal is going somewhere.”

be present at the Tidwell farm when he delivered the dreadful missive.

Meanwhile, our family's economic struggle continued. Yet despite wartime shortages, rationing of gasoline, tires, etc., we somehow scraped together enough cash to meet those annual mortgage payments. Still, there were incidents of humor, if only recognized in retrospect. When I was in the first grade in our tiny community school in Medicine Mound, we held weekly air-raid drills, and it was very serious business for one and all. When the warning bell sounded, we all dutifully rose from our desks. On signal, we solemnly marched to the basement where, in darkness and silence, we anxiously awaited the "all-clear" signal. Years later, I often imagined a top-level military staff meeting in 1942 Tokyo: *War minister Hideki Tōjō strides into his headquarters, and all snap to attention. Then Tōjō barks his orders: "Send secret coded message to Admiral Yamamoto. All planes to be fully armed and in the air at 0600 hours tomorrow. Strike and annihilate that damned grammar school over at Medicine Mound, Texas. Take no prisoners!"*

First Grade was the year I learned an indelible lesson in economics – a lesson that wasn't taught in school. That class opened in a cotton patch. Although cattle-ranching was our primary pursuit, Dad planted about 40 acres of cultivated land in cotton. The cotton harvest usually began in the middle or last part of September and went on for six weeks or so. Most of our neighbors were small farmers, and cotton was their main crop. Therefore, when cotton harvest rolled around there was no time for frivolity – it was a daylight-to-dark grind to get the crop to the gin. In those days, there was no such thing as a mechanical cotton-picker. As a result, it was the custom in our community for school to be dismissed for about a month in order to allow students to help with their family's cotton harvest.

Dad gave me a cotton sack and, like the other kids, I dragged it up and down the rows “pullin’ bolls” – a most hot, dusty and unromantic task. But, hey, I was making good money! (Since I was a first-grader, I didn’t have to pick all day; after about three hours I was excused.) Like the other pickers, Dad paid me two cents per pound. Every evening we weighed our sacks in the field and marked down our take. By late October, I figured I was nearly rich, having acquired a fortune amounting to almost ten dollars, if memory serves. Then came the annual community Halloween party held in the school gymnasium. There were all kinds of booths and games set up and prizes to be won. How exciting! I took my nearly-ten-dollar fortune and joined in the games with gusto, and I won a few prizes which, at the moment, seemed grand. However, after a couple of hours, my fortune was gone, and those prizes suddenly seemed kind of dinky and tawdry. A sobering thought then occurred: all those hours and days of dragging that cussed cotton sack around on sore knees and with an aching back, and now it was all gone – gone so quickly and for so little! This was the lesson I took from that episode: It sure is a lot harder to make money than it is to spend it, and it sure doesn’t take very long to spend what it took a very long time to make.

Today I am the owner of a small ranch. Located in the shadow of those medicine mounds, it is paid for. No vultures of foreclosure circle overhead.

And I never, ever once planted a single row of cotton on it.

country cream

Sheryl L. Nelms

I wish I could slip back
into that bedroom

with the lilac scented breeze
fluffing the starched and stretched
Irish lace curtains

Big Ben ticking
and the “Girl Watching Robin” print

to my grandmother
with her white hair and quiet talk
who gave me credit for worthy thoughts

to the turtle dove coos
drifting in from the walnut tree

to the embroidered pillow case

and the love that swaddled me
from the world

when life was full
of afternoon naps

good to follow the path of personal happiness to some extent. People

under the whir
of Philco fan
blades

back to the '50s
when the way
was easy

and the mulberries hung ripe
ready to fill the
evening

The Poet Interviews a Lobster *Becky Haigler*

What does it feel like, inside,
just before you split open the old skin
and wriggle out, all soft
and vulnerable and wobbly-legged?

Do you itch?
Is there a tightness in your chest?
Do you pace at night,
thinking your head might explode?

And later, do you regret it?
Do you miss the old shell?
I need to know, because...
I think it's happening to me.

tend to get upset however when you drive a steamroller down it." ~§~

The Reunion

Madelyn D. Kamen

Here we sit, the six of us. Betty, Lois, Smitty, Sharon, Ellen, and me. Glenda didn't come. She was embarrassed. She had gained too much weight. Sandra wasn't there either; but then, we didn't ask her. Sandra was never part of the group. She was the girl at school who "did" the football team. Dated every single one of them. We tolerated her, but we didn't like her. The rest of us were the girls from Kinsolving Dorm, fifth floor, section B. Tight as friends could be.

We went back there last year. To Kinsolving. We wanted to see our old rooms. They called us "ma'am" and marveled that we were all still alive when we told them how old we were. We didn't think it was all that old, but, to them, we must have seemed ancient.

Kinsolving, we found out, is no longer a single-sex dorm. It is co-educational. Now, we're not prudes – well maybe Sharon is – but I think we were all taken aback when we saw guys sprawled across the beds in some of the rooms. Especially when that young man came out of the shower with only his towel around his hips. I was praying he wasn't going to take that towel off and dry his curly blond locks before he made it to his room. He didn't. Whew!

Our rooms look so small, now. Back then, they seemed so much bigger. They were our world, our home base, hum-did-um years ago. The stories we could tell about life in them.

"To learn something new, take the path that you took yesterday." John

There were the marathon bridge games during finals, when we sat on the floor and ate potato chips and Oreo cookies, and other gifts from parents' care packages. When one of us had to study for a final, there was always someone else around to take over her bridge hand.

And there were the times we all crowded together on the same bed and sang off-color songs. "Oh, she looked so fair in the midnight air with the moon shinin' through her nighty..." I can still recall most of the words.

There were discussions on how to make your boobs bigger. The prevailing remedy during that time was to rub peanut butter on them. Smitty tried it but I couldn't see much difference. Ellen had a better idea. She took nylon hose and stuck them into her bra cups. Of course, everyone could see what looked like brown boobs through her white lace bra.

This year, we decided to meet in Fort Worth for our reunion. Today, we went to the Cowgirl Museum and rode the bucking bronco. It's not really a bronco. It's this large rocking chair that they make to look like one. They take movies of you rocking on it and splice in other film, so it looks like you are participating in a real rodeo. Then, they put the film clip on the Internet for all your friends to see. What a hoot that was!

Right now, we're all in a restaurant, doing what we do best – talk. I'm between Ellen and Betty, looking around the table at my dorm-mates of yesterday. And an odd thing keeps happening. I call it the "toggle-switch effect."

Most of the time, I see the girls looking just like they looked all those years ago. Nothing has changed. Then, all of a sudden there is a toggle, and I see a group of aging women talking. That can't be us, can it? Is that grey-haired old lady really Betty? Is that heavy-set woman really slender, little Sharon, blown up like a balloon? Are those really crow's feet radiating from the perimeter of Ellen's eyes? And who is that lady I can see in the

wall mirror – the one who has a good start on jowls and a double chin? Oh, my God! Could that be me?

Fortunately, my mind won't let me look at those old hens for very long. It mercifully toggles back, and I'm again transported to seeing my friends as they were when we sprawled on the bed and sang about "the moon shining through her nighty."

Lovely, isn't it, seeing old friends?

*Names changed to protect the author.

Breathing

Janet Morris Klise

A shiver passes
as I see my father,
a life time ago, half-lying
in the old brown recliner,
his head pulled back,
the dry insides of his lips
moving in and out
like blue parchment.

A fast sucking noise
comes from inside him,
and his hand reaches
for the yellowed clear mask,
the large toy nose.
Slowly, he pulls the elastic

a lot of girls anxious to take him down the bridal path." Marty Allen

over his face, behind his ears,
over the coarse dark hair.
The veins in his hand
know the valve.
He turns it clockwise.

I imagine
that I can see the oxygen
making its way
through the tube.
Now I try to imagine
that I wasn't there
when I was 11 years old
and it didn't work.

The Hunt

Yvonne Pearson

I was his first son
walking through yellow maple leaves.
“Shoot, Yvonne!”
No kick from my new .22,
just an easy crack
and the small striped body
writhed at our feet.
I didn't hesitate, still
somehow he must have known.
We did not share a solitary hunt again.

Hand-Me-Downs and Potato Soup

Rita Rose Rasco

Somewhere in a far-away land, World War Two raged; but in my home, there was security and happiness. I was four, and Mother and Dad didn't talk much about the war; but I remember Dad being very quiet when we listened to the war reports on the old radio so full of static every evening. I was happiest when we all laughed listening to the antics of Amos and Andy or Fibber Magee and Molly.

Mother had a special war rations coupon book. Certain foods were scarce, and Mother traded her sugar coupons for items we needed more, like the flour she used to make her delicious potato soup. We never complained about how often the soup graced our table, because it was so good. Besides, those were times before children ever griped about what they were given to eat!

Cloth for clothing was limited, but I always had pretty dresses. Mom sewed beautifully, and she always happily handed down her secret. Our neighbor owned the feed store, and he gave Mother first pick of the pretty feed sacks she later turned into my great dress creations! Lucky were the little girls that got my hand-me-downs out of the church boxes.

I never felt the hunger so many people experienced. Because of Mom's delicious potato soup, no one ever knocked on our back door and went away hungry.

I couldn't understand how a war so far away in a country I never heard of could affect us until the day Dad told me that our neighbor's son had been killed in battle. That evening we went to their house to tell them how sorry we were. A large American flag hung over their fireplace. They said it had been placed on the casket of their son's grandfather who also gave his life for his country. Cared for gently through the years, the flag was very special to the family. Mom left them a large pot of potato soup.

I grew up and had a family of my own. They became very familiar with potato soup. First, because as a young couple we struggled financially, and the soup was inexpensive. Later, because some cold days just called for a good hot bowl of soup. Now I fix it when I need "comfort food," and it always seems to do the trick.

My mother and father handed down the intangibles to me that are so very important – love, faith, security, the need for good morals and good character. I hope I've already passed these down to my children and grandchildren; but when I'm gone, there's a tangible hand-me-down someone will inherit and hopefully share. It's a wrinkled, yellowed and often used piece of paper – Mom's recipe for potato soup!

Nora Lee Benefield

Janet Klise

Ninety-seven and her hair, curly and white and silver for forty years, is streaked with tobacco brown. She got Jesse James' autograph when she was a child in Joplin, and she was Carrie Nation in a church play, smashing donated furniture with a red-handled axe. She kept a dried vanilla bean in each bureau drawer and all her slips smelled like pound cake. She dabbed gardenia cologne behind her ears when she wanted to remember the smell of Missouri the day her husband proposed. Given now to low wordless murmurs, she shakes the bed rail at regular intervals, her color gone bad, her knees bent up almost to her chest. She scolds her children as if they were all still alive and the nurses as if they were her children. In the middle of the night, loud, she starts into "Bringing in the Sheaves," no sense of sight or time. It's hell getting her to quiet down before she's finished the last verse. She's like the small shriveled zucchini she used to leave on the vine for field mice to gnaw at, or yellow crook-neck squash, cleaned and boiled and waiting.

the night." Germaine Greer ~S~ "The path of least resistance is the

Yesterday and Today

Lee Ardell

We met again at a college reunion.
I felt he held my hand a moment too long
 until I broke away
 and looked at his nametag.

His face told me nothing,
middle age rounds out features and hides past lives,
but his eyes seemed to know a secret I'd forgotten,
 a promise thirty years too late.

I waited for a heart jump, sparks and fireworks,
 but all I remembered was sweet kisses
 with a long-lost skinny boy,
not enough to return today's wanting look.

Endless Possibilities

Carole Ann Moletti

I became a nurse in 1979 but have been one since the day I turned seven. I awoke hearing gulls screeching as they dropped shellfish on the rocks and picked over the ruins for breakfast. Another voice, one I didn't recognize, raised an awareness in my schoolgirl's soul. I went downstairs to enjoy the remnants of summer: the sun and the warm bathtub called Long Island Sound. "I want to be a nurse," I told my parents as I cracked open a soft-boiled egg.

"That's nice," they said, no doubt assuming I would move up the list to ballerina or rock star.

During the idyllic childhood that comprised my first life, I did belt out my own karaoke version of Carol King's "It's Too Late" in front of a bedroom mirror from time to time. At Miss Tessie's Bronx School of Ballet, I dreamed of floating across the stage in toe shoes. But a Virgo realist, I fixed up dolls and toys, rescued stray animals and injured birds, and bandaged playmates injured in playground accidents.

At fourteen, I volunteered in nursing homes and with handicapped children. While my friends perfected their skill at applying the latest makeup, I worked as a nurse's aide. I was only sixteen when a woman with breast cancer, as yellow as the moon, disease oozing from open sores all over, died as I bathed her. Her devastated husband looked into my eyes, tears leaking down his cheeks, and thanked me for being there in her last

that the right to choose your own path is a sacred privilege. Use it.

moments. So began my second life and the resolve didn't waver until years later.

In my third life, as burned out as a lump of charcoal, I'd scream at a woman in the mirror I no longer recognized, "You must have been out of your mind!" Ass-backwards, the adult me struggled to figure out what I wanted to do when I grew up.

After I became a nurse-midwife, Grandpa Al introduced me to my great-grandmother, Jenny Bruno. He told me about her career as a midwife a century ago, and how he drove his mother to calls in a Model T Ford in the same Bronx where I now practice. His nieces passed the torch by sending me their family treasures: Jennie's instruments, license, and assorted anecdotes.

A battered, immigrant Italian, Jennie gave birth to thirteen children, eight of whom survived. She achieved more than most women in 1911 could ever have imagined – a license signed by three male physicians that said she was "qualified to practice midwifery" – in the days when mothers and babies routinely died. That crumbling, yellowed testament hangs restored in my dining room, adorned with Jennie Bruno's smiling face watching patiently. She straightens me out with an occasional kick in the ass, knocks out the self-pity, and reminds me I'm doing this for the women. I sometimes hear her voice, just like the day I turned seven. "Go tell your stories so that everyone will understand."

~§~

During twelve years of Catholic school, the Sisters of the Divine Compassion punished violations of the Ten Commandments by banging heads against blackboards. They reined us in with lariats fashioned from rosary beads. Yardsticks did double duty, swatting us into silence and teaching math lessons while measuring skirt length. Sister Mary Assumpta set the consummate example: Never flinch or you're done for.

Dwell in possibility." Oprah Winfrey ~§~ "The more compelling the

Like a bird let out of a cage, I flew off to Lehman College, a New York City University in the era of free tuition and open admissions. There were no nuns and no one cared how short my skirt was. A big black dude weighed and sold marijuana as a daily special in the cafeteria. Following the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, did not get me into closed-out classes, but flirting with department chairmen worked very well. For everything else, there were sit-ins.

I stayed away from drugs and building takeovers protesting budget cuts. Nothing was going to stop me from getting that nursing degree. Against the backdrop of impending bankruptcy, New York City felt like a scene out of *Batman*: racial tension, vigilantes, murders, and arson. I walked the streets and saw the desperation caused by poverty, racism, and urban blight. When the blackout of 1977 hit, the glass started breaking, the looters took to the streets, and I barely got to my car in time. With no traffic lights, I battled my way home prepared to run over anyone who swung at my windshield with a baseball bat. I was going to be the one that made a difference.

I survived, and graduated, ready to take on the world. Progressing through a logical sequence of job titles and levels of responsibility, I descended towards hell and onto the mean streets of the South Bronx, Harlem, and Washington Heights. This “whitey” from the Bronx was fascinated (or crazy) enough to stick it out during the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s that made heroin addicts look like kindly old souls.

The dawn of the AIDS epidemic and the horror of working in the hospital on September 11, 2001, book-ended a career during which speaking up made me part of the enemy camp, not the liberating forces.

Video clips of domestic violence deaths, child abuse, infanticide, rape, incest, and the degradation of women played over and over in my mind. My theoretical model for dealing

with families in crisis was of little use at 2 a.m., standing in between the guy who just beat up his pregnant wife, the woman bleeding to death, and the clerk getting insurance information before we could get blood for transfusion.

I had bargained with the gods to keep the demons away but no good deed goes unpunished. They stole my soul and reneged. Divorce from my high school sweetheart, the inevitable loss of beloved family members, and my own personal health challenges gave me pause to ponder the endless impossibilities of life.

I focused on my family, thankful for the second chance at marriage and motherhood. I once battled sexism, racism, conservatism, and elitism. Well into my third life and tired of fighting, I moved past activism into escapism.

~§~

The night seemed full of endless possibilities, like life thirty-five years before. I stood in the lobby of the posh Marina Del Rey at the 75th anniversary of the Saint Frances de Chantal grammar school, Bronx, New York. The '50s vintage dress that called to me at an antique show fit like it had been custom made. I thought I looked pretty good with the gray dyed out and six pounds lighter than last year. Those anti-wrinkle creams seemed to work. They sure cost enough.

I never attended a high school reunion but instead, was drawn way back to my grammar school days. I remember only a few names and faces, most notably, Marianne. We don't see each other often, but just like tuning into a soap opera you haven't watched in years, we easily pick up the story line and move on.

I waited for Marianne, watching the lights of the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge glimmer over cold, dark Long Island Sound like tiny beacons. I moved across the bridge to Queens

we most often recognize happiness out of the rear view mirror!" Frank

seventeen years ago. I still work the streets of the Bronx but death, distance, or the ravages of time have broken all ties to friends and family. Alone, mesmerized by the tinkling fountain, I held back tears remembering when this neighborhood was an innocent idealist's only view of the world.

The cell phone bleated. "Sorry, I'll be there in a minute, got stuck in traffic." Marianne rushed in from the parking lot and gave me a hug. "You look fantastic."

We studied the collage of old class pictures. Marianne picked me out: the girl with a headband and hair in a pony tail, tights, uniform dress with a bow tie, and a big smile. We sipped drinks, nibbled hors'd'oeuvres, and found the "Class of 1971" table.

John, one of the two "boys" who had been my close friends smiled when he saw me. "Hi, Carole Ann. You haven't changed a bit."

Sister Mary Lucille, at least eighty, peered at me and waved a gnarled, bony finger. "You're one of the Moleti girls, and none of you took French."

"That's right, Sister," I said, "but Spanish served me well." Nuns never give up.

George suggested we take the few surviving sisters for a boat ride in the dark and dump them overboard to get even for all those bruises. We laughed, reminisced, and tears flowed on my way home in the pouring rain as I crooned Streisand's tune "The Way We Were."

I drove over the bridge, from my first life, past the second, and into the third. I let the dog snooze on the couch and walked through the dining room where Jennie Bruno was still smiling at me. The kids were tucked in; the cat warmed my side of the bed. I snuggled next to my sleeping husband and lay there in the dark and quiet thinking about all the stories still to be told.

"Get back to work," Jennie said.

And I did.

Distance

Barbara B. Rollins

Twenty-nine days in the hospital's care;
six times I've driven to check on you there.
Thirty-some times by the telephone line
asking of you and appeasing my mind.
Thirty-two years since I left our hometown,
tethered by love, flying high, anchored down.
How many months have I failed to call home?
Years slipped away and now my family's grown.
Longing now draws me to you once again
over the greening of flat Texas plain.
Anson and Stamford and Haskell I've passed,
towns on the highway, each like the last.
Cotton gins, stock tanks, and lacy mesquites,
pumpjacks and furrows with hope-sown new wheat.
It's eighty miles yet to the village Dundee
where mixed with the cattle eight camels roam free.
Not a surprise now, I know they are there,
symbols to me of a truth I should share.
Daddy, I love you, now get back your strength;
Mother and you will return home at length.
Normalcy's changed and I'll be in your life,
incongruous as camels in Texas sunlight.