

Echoes of the Song

Some songs ring through the ages - enduring and

endearing - with a beauty like

burnished silver

The yellow bowl...

Punkin had just thrown out a failed recipe of boiled frosting. It was the second flop in her attempt to make a fluffy mountain of icing for my birthday cake. This was the very recipe that frosted her blue ribbon cake at the West Texas Fair two years ago, and now she was having fits.

She was on the phone to me for the second time. "I know what's wrong, Gramma! It needs to be mixed in the yellow bowl!"

The yellow bowl is one of the treasures of inheritance from my mother. From her earliest dishwashing age, Punkin understood the sentiment of the legacy, cautioned by my words, "Be extra careful with the yellow bowl."

One surviving bowl of a gift set for Mom's first kitchen, it would be dated right around 1940, but not one of us kids ever thought about that the number of times it nearly slid off the counter, or while we rapped a mixing spoon against the edge. It endured

the rough handling of a large family who used it nearly every day for one thing or another.

It is heavy ceramic, with muted ridges ringing the top. The glaze is dulled, and it's a little crazed with age, but no more so than me. It has a couple of chips, and on one side is a Liberty Bell type crack from lip to base. As the heirloom survives each use, it becomes more precious for its memory of her. And over the years, it has impressed me with the lesson it teaches about the fragility yet the tenacity of life.

Lifting the bowl down from the cupboard for Punkin, I'm that girl of eleven again for a minute, mixing my first cakes and brownies and cookies, pancakes and biscuits. I can smell the spice cake mix I poured over pineapple and brown sugar, impatient for the aroma of pineapple upside down cake to come wafting from the oven.

Holding the mixing bowl hugged to me evokes a few more pictures from my past: hands forming pie crust dough into a ball, lettuce and tomatoes glistening in their salad dressing, mashed potatoes heaped to the top, capped with a pat of butter and prettied up with paprika.

I'm still surprised each time I pour batter into pans, because the bowl used to be much bigger. When I was a moppet, it was heavy to hold with one hand while spooning with the other.

That sun-colored vessel was big enough to set on the floor, circled by me and my sisters eager to lick the last of the chocolate frosting. It was large enough to contain all the splashes I made while beating 300-stroke cakes by hand. And it held all the leftovers of Sunday Soup till Monday. The soup was better Monday, especially knowing it was almost gone. I think I'm the only one of our large family who didn't like that soup.

A couple of hours later, Punkin came back to the house with her mother and made a finger-licking good, frothy boiled frosting for her grandmother's cake (that's me) in her great-grandmother's yellow bowl. It was a significant moment in history - a four generation link - a fleeting ancestral bond.

Sweet Pea's allowance...

Sweet Pea loomed larger as she approached the driveway. I'd watched her from way down the road, thinking how much she'd grown these past few years. It seemed like just yesterday that we moved to Texas. Sweet Pea came here as a third-grader. Now she's in high school.

MyKeeper, standing beside me, picked up on my thoughts and said, "She hardly resembles the girl who almost cleaned out the collection plate does she?"

His words drew a vivid picture of grade school Sweet Pea on my mind. When we first settled in Texas, MyKeeper and I decided on an amount to give the girls for an allowance. It was supposed to teach them to plan for the things they wanted to do, but it taught us more than it taught them.

Anyway, the allowances were parceled out to Punkin, Sweet Pea, and Peanut on a regular schedule. One week there was a shortage of cash that would

cover only two allowances. Sweet Pea was the one who consented to wait for hers. It was Wednesday.

On Thursday and Friday, Sweet Pea asked if I had gone to the bank for cash yet. Saturday morning she asked if I had forgotten. I reminded her it would be Monday before I would have her allowance.

Sunday morning we filled a pew, stood to sing a hymn, heard prayers and liturgy and sang another hymn. Just before the sermon, the ushers gathered the offering. As the collection plate came to me, I stuck a bill in it and passed the plate into the hands of the usher.

Two seats away from me, Sweet Pea gasped. She fixed me with an accusing glare and whispered loudly, "You mean you gave my allowance to HIM?"

Lesson Plan

A lesson trains
young minds, I thought,
but what the child brought
will always amaze.

How it turned

in little brains,
no matter the plot,
what I thought I taught
is not always
what they learned.

Might have missed...

The other day I was thinking of all the scenes I carry around with me, places on earth that sparkle in my mind, places I wouldn't have seen if I hadn't gone through the struggle to get there.

One view that sticks in my mind is Bridal Veil Falls. It would be beautiful even if we could have driven to see it, but my first glimpse of Bridal Veil Falls followed a lengthy hike in drizzly Northwest weather. We could have stayed by a warm fireplace, but then I would have missed the sight that took my breath away and stopped me in my tracks. We'd been climbing, climbing, climbing, and suddenly, shimmering lace drifted over the face of a broad, smooth boulder. Spray fell like chiffon and feathers, sprinkling into a deep pool below. The waterfall had been there for days and eons, but that day I was there to see.

Another hike, I almost walked into a perfect polygonal web drawn between two mountain shrubs by a common brown speckled spider who sat in the

center. The spider was patiently waiting for dinner to come by, unaware of the perfection it had created. I'd seen a lot of these webs, but this rare specimen glistened, taking from the gray gloom a fair mist that robed it in diamonds.

Inclement weather nearly canceled the hike. Instead I carry with me a picture I could never draw. My mind holds it in exquisite detail, ever since that day in my childhood.

Near the end of my teen years, I was included in an October hike. The trail was twisty, narrow, and vertical. We climbed the steep mountainside, dragging the horses that were supposed to follow us. We stumbled past tree roots and fallen logs and intruding underbrush. Pack loads kept slipping over the horses' sides and had to be righted.

About half up, I scrambled over a fallen tree, lost my balance and fell. My horse's lead rope slipped from my hand. I looked up to see him poised to jump over the log. His front legs were raised, hooves pawing the air. My screams were drowned by everyone else's, and the horse shied back. I can still "see" the horse, huge above me, treetops and sky a vast backdrop.

Five hours later we made it to the top. I was drained. I cried. Someone handed me a candy bar. I ate it, blubbering. All I could think of was that we would also have to get back down.

Revival came in little bits and pieces, broken by sighs. I shivered. We had climbed from cool, clear weather, to snow. I stood up and stretched, then walked a dozen yards to the peak of the mountain while the others put up the tent. Before me was a snow-capped panorama that didn't stop until I had turned a complete, 360 degree circle. We were at the top of the world, standing on a pinnacle.

This alpine view hides in my mind, cradled in mists and clouds and the haunting blue light from an overcast sky. Rusted tin cans were evidence that others had been there, too. This alpine view hides in my mind, cradled in mists and clouds and the haunting blue light from an overcast sky. Rusted tin cans were evidence that others had been there, too. But the scene doesn't play to everyone, only those who climb the hill.

It took a great deal of exertion to get to these places. I went there not knowing what I was going to see. Now these treasures go with me, around every bend and up over every hill in my life. I can't show them to anyone. I can't leave them for anyone. They are just there in my mind for me to enjoy, and maybe to pick up as threads to weave into the story of my own spinning.

Clabbered milk...

Do you remember clabbered milk? Likely not. Sometimes the world turns so fast, things of the past just disappear off the face of the earth. For instance, dinosaurs. No one has seen any of those for years.

Mostly, it's only those who have made their way bravely into geriatrics who carry the memory of creatively soured milk with them.

They also remember transportation before cars, spelling bees, treadle sewing machines, box suppers, and the horse- drawn plow. They cranked telephones and the first Ford engines. They stared at the radio in the middle of the living room, and at the first miniature black and white TV screens set in massive cabinetry.

They made their own butter until oleomargarine came packaged in white blocks at the grocers. Pretty soon, all they had to do was squeeze the button on a plastic casing to work yellow color through the blob.

I can still hear my Dad's voice lamenting, "It's a shame they don't teach penmanship in school anymore." My own generation, my kids, and their kids, grew up without having to draw spiraling circles across a whole lined page. But all the octogenarians remember.

In our neighborhood, Dawrmen milks his own goats. I try to keep his fresh goat milk at the front of the refrigerator and feed the older milk to the cats. "Oh, honey," he says, "don't worry about me. I grew up on soured milk." He has an iron gut. At his age, he hurts in his muscles and bones, but he can eat anything he wants. He spends a lot of time in the kitchen fixing his favorites.

All those cultured milk processes were ways to preserve old milk. People made cottage cheese, butter, cheese, yoghurt, clabber, and fermented milk products. They used the whey left over from the cheese curds, and drank the buttermilk left after the lump of butter was formed, which they remember was just before the churner's arm fell off.

All this because they lacked one crucial modern convenience. Refrigerators!

There were seven children and two parents in Dawrmen's family. He says it was nothing for them to drink two gallons of milk at one meal. Surplus milk made milk toast for breakfast, cornstarch pudding,

bread pudding, and baked custard. The rest was cultured and preserved.

Folks flavored their clabber or buttermilk with sorghum syrup or honey, and Dawrmen laughs remembering that one brother seasoned his with pepper!"

Pearl is a spry teeny-bopper in her 80s. She loves the taste of clabbered milk, and the memories it brings along with it. She says she still has the churn she grew up with, and other items, like their butter bowl.

B.J., in his 90s, was failing fast after a third surgery. But there is no frailty in the man. He threw away his medicines, went out to sit under a tree and make himself well. He dosed himself with fresh air, healing exercises, and goat milk - the magic medicines of healing, he says. These days, he walks with canes, but he walks, and visits, dines out, and travels.

I tried some clabbered milk. Sure don't care much for it. So far, I haven't found anyone under the age of 70 who remembers or appreciates it.

There's much more than flavor laced among the molecules of clabbered milk. One sniff of the beverage carries with it the treasures of youth and family for those who lived with no refrigerators.

Someday there won't be anyone who remembers

push- pulls, switchboards, or clabbered milk, but I

don't want that to happen without tribute to the

durable folks who grew up on sour milk, and learned

to love it.

Stringing words....

Fifty lights. There are 50 bulbs on each strand of lights that trim our Christmas tree. Fifty lights strung together that must work together or they don't work at all.

I'm deep in thought here, transfixed by the soft glow of colors against green branches, hypnotized by twinkling tinsel. The same 50 lights create a new picture each year. The trees we decorate from year to year never look exactly the same.

Like letters. Twenty-six letters, strung together, create all the sounds of our language, all the words we utter, all the stories we read. Only 26 letters, arranged in hundreds of way to make up the thousands of words we use in millions of sentences.

Abilene author Nancy Robinson Masters, as a workshop leader, often asks listeners to fold a piece of paper in half, and keep folding it. One small rectangle on the page represents all the people in the world who can read and write in any language.

She uses it to impress upon us that if we have the gift of writing, we can't keep it to ourselves, but must feel a duty to pass it on.

Writing the Great American Novel is not the only way to share. A poem, a letter, a note of comfort or congratulations - all of these are ways to pass around the gift of words. I always appreciate the historian in a family, the one who preserves memories the rest of us forget. Some dig into genealogy, and some have found enough interest among their relatives to publish a family newsletter.

Writers from our area have written devotions for inspirational websites, crafted greeting card messages, entered writing contests, compiled cookbooks, and written every kind of magazine article. Several have written educational curriculum and Sunday School lessons. Texans are consummate recorders of history from every aspect. A few have made a major commitment to correspondence that uplifts shut-ins and those with specific health issues.

The Christmas holiday once again passes before us. Hiding behind a thinning veil is another new year.

Twenty-six letters. It's got me thinking. Before it's time to string lights again next year, I resolve to string letters and words across pages and pages in dozens of new ways. I'm ready to tumble through

the doorway of another new year with a handful of

pens and a tablet.

And may all who love to write find a way to bless

others with the gift that has blessed them.

Granny's sepia profile...

Mom always said I looked a lot like Granny Bishop.

I'd look in the mirror at my little girl face, and compare it to the grim sepia visage staring out of a very old photograph, and I'd wonder how Mama could say that about me. To me, there seemed no resemblance at all. And what's more, I didn't think I could ever look like that.

Mama explained to me there were no camera smiles in those days, and that Granny Bishop actually had a pretty smile and bright, loving eyes. She said you couldn't even wiggle while the photographer stuck his head under a black hood and pulled a chain to expose a glass plate. She described the bulky cameras with their accordion pleats from those days before celluloid film.

Make no mistake. Granny Bishop was a good person. She loved me a lot. Mom said she liked to carry me around in her arms and hug me and tell

Grandpa Bishop how cute I was. My memories are fleeting, little gauzy bits of remembrance.

I vaguely remember their house in Seattle, most of it tucked in my heart and not in my mind. It had a warm, brown feeling, with lace curtains letting in a dappled light. There were dim lamps whose only brightness was in their ceramic character. I remembered, not really seeing, but sensing, a brown velvet couch, an oak upright piano, and brown frames around family photographs stepping up the wall with the staircase. Mama confirmed the veracity of my memory, reminding me that the couch and piano I grew up with were from her house.

A place I loved to sit was at the bottom of the dark, rich stained mahogany stair rail with its imposing carved newel. It was a focal point of the entry way, but to me it was a grand play area.

But in the photo, Granny Bishop had gray hair swept away from her face and piled on top of her head. My memories said she wore chunky-heeled shiny black shoes laced around puffy ankles, and her coat was huge and thick and dark brown. I'm certain she was never aware that the lapel always bumped me in the nose when she bent over to gather me up.

That was so many years ago. I was looking at those pictures again recently. Thinking how I didn't get to know her for very long, that I was so young, and there is so little I remember of her. I was tilting

the photo this way and that, looking at her face from different angles, picturing the flat Kodak image fleshed out into three dimensions.

As I studied her features and compared them to mine, I noticed something. Maybe Mom was right! Now that my high cheekbones have sunk and my jawline has turned to jowls, I think...hmmm...yes, I just might look quite a bit like Granny Bishop.

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My goat kids and grandkids made the living of the adventure worth writing about, and whenever I stopped to wonder "how'd I get here?" the answer was "MyKeeper." Of all the adventures of my life, I'd hate to have missed this.

