

where my niece Laura Beth played a soldier. Naturally I planned on going, but several weeks before the scheduled December performance, the nearby branch library offered excerpts to the public. Laura Beth wouldn't be dancing, but Caitlin definitely would. I picked a bouquet of tiny, fragrant sweetheart roses from my backyard, packed my disposable camera, and drove to the library, eager to connect with her again.

I was standing in the back of the room when she skipped out, adorned in golden ringlets and a red velvet pinafore. My arms wrapped around me in my own big hug as I watched this beautiful, graceful seventh grader dance around the room.

I became Clara-Caitlin, the magical child. I think of what I remembered of that age. Seventh grade seemed anything but enchanting for me. I had moved from the safety of an elementary school I had attended for six years with most of the same friends and classmates to the overwhelming challenge of junior high with so many new faces, changing classes with tardy bells in between, dressing out in gym, and open seating in the lunchroom. Yet here I was, on a November night at the library I claimed as one of my safe places, reborn as a confident dancing beauty.

I haven't followed Caitlin's Sunday-to-Sunday life as she grows into the woman she'll become, and I have missed her. She's another child I was once very attached to. But her dance back into my life on a late fall evening reassured me of our sacred bond, the

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magical child we both carry within us. My understanding of Viktor Frankl's words, "love loved is never lost."

On my refrigerator is a picture taken that night after the performance. Caitlin and I are standing together smiling and holding onto each other in the children's section of this branch library. A bulletin board behind us reads, "Believe in the Magic."

## Heaven

I never have had to think so seriously about heaven before. My childhood image of angels sitting on clouds playing harps wasn't working.

*What really happens when we die? Where do we go? What happened to my son, the child I used to call Angel Baby? His life was just getting started. Where is he? Does he have friends? Is he happy? Did he know something about his choices that I don't know? Is where he is now preferable to where he was?*

I would lie still, listening. I could feel his presence. Pictures of his life ran through my head, flickering and clicking like the old 16mm film projector from my own elementary school days. He was as close as my beating heart and as present as my thoughts. What is heaven? Where do all the souls go when they've finished here on earth?

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His ashes, the last tangible part of his earthly form, lay scattered on the forest floor at Caddo Lake Nature Trail near Uncertain, Texas. The picture of him resting in a place that renews itself naturally with the seasons, was reassuring to my organic gardener's mind.

I saw Carlton as a small child holding hands with Kristi, his best friend when he was a toddler. She died of a seizure several years before Carlton, and left behind a toddler son. Are they holding hands now?

When Carlton was in seventh grade we got a dog named Cody, a stray hit by a car and rescued by a friend. Several years before Carlton died, the dog became anxious and disoriented, and I had to put him to sleep. Our vet said he was worn out from such a full life. Have Carlton and Cody found relief together?

There was Lonnie Bell, my friend Linda's mother, who died ten days after Carlton did. She knew him when he was a little boy and watched him grow up. Is she playing grandmother to my child now?

Is he with Patrick, a Cub Scout friend full of potential, who died suddenly as a young adult when he unknowingly ate seafood, to which he was allergic? Are they in a heavenly scout hut working on arrow points together?

Is he at the baseball game he alludes to in the dream? A week before Carlton's freshman year in high school, Kevin, a graduate of the school and a baseball star about to begin his major league career, was killed

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in a car wreck. Is Carlton playing ball in a league with Kevin?

Has he met Jennifer, a college freshman who was tragically killed one night about a month after Carlton died when some guys were fooling around with a gun? Carlton didn't know her, but I once taught next door to her mother. Are they comparing notes on what it's like to be the teacher's kid?

The Columbia shuttle blew up upon reentry several weeks after Carlton's death. Seven astronauts were sent to their fiery deaths. My poet uncle compared this event to a Viking funeral. Has my own Muse found his place with them?

Has he had a chance to talk to Dostoevsky or Einstein or Shakespeare or Alexander Dumas? Or the author of the *Gospel of Thomas*? Carlton's collection of books told me he would recognize their voices.

Then the day after Christmas, 2004, the tsunami hit, killing hundreds of thousands of people. We wrung our hands and tried to find someone to blame for such a tragedy. I watched, detached, not feeling the grief such a disaster should trigger. With Carlton's help I had my most reassuring image of heaven so far. He was up "there" with his big kind eyes and sweet shy smile, helping welcome all of those scared children as they signed in at the pearly gates. He was like an orientation counselor or a big brother at camp or college. He knew just what to say, how to help them settle in to their new surroundings and feel right at home, like I'm sure

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others did for him. It was now his turn to be the guide and introduce these new angels to some old friends of his.

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# *Renewed Energy*

## **Anniversaries**

There are six weeks of anniversaries that fall between November 28, Carlton's birthday, and January 11, the day he died. The first year I carefully planned how and where I would spend my time. I went to Biloxi for his birthday and Thanksgiving, and quietly celebrated my own birthday on December 5<sup>th</sup> with friends. For Christmas the family had a traditional dinner at my brother Bruce's house, and I gave everyone a little notebook and pen, inviting them into my world to tell their own story. On January 11, I stayed alone with my notebook, letting the answering machine take outside calls.

But after that first anniversary in 2003, a new family event was added. January 15, 2004, was the day my brothers and I took Dad to the War Veterans Home in Monroe.

So, on the second year of anniversaries, as autumn fell into winter, I needed a new plan. On the trip to Oregon in October I had successfully read "The Phone

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Call." Then when I traveled to Boulder, Colorado, in mid-November to meet with my writing group, I read the story again. It was, however, the only one I had been able to write. Everything else was still journaling. I wanted to turn this experience into a story to share with others, but I wasn't sure how to do it.

So I did what I knew how to do best. I continued to let my pen scribble in my composition book until I had a clearer idea. Day after day, page after page, I held tightly to that pen as I swam through murky words and bled all over the pages, desperately looking for relief. I ventured out only for groceries, a visit to Stoner Hill, the meetings with teacher friends on Fridays, or my local writers' group on Sundays.

*I tell people my pen is saving me, but I'm not sure what that means.*

## Keep writing

The second year I decided to celebrate Carlton's birthday, Thanksgiving, and my birthday alone. On Christmas, weary from the silence, but not ready for my own entangling family, I went to Linda's house for Christmas dinner with her two daughters, their husbands, and five children. It was an invitation a friend as close as Linda knew to offer.

*I'm still writing, but I need a plan.*

*It's time to read your journals, Laura.  
You've poured your soul into two years*

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*of composition books. Read what you wrote.*

Well, I had read the first two, and parts of others, and I read as I continued journaling. I thought I could just lift little sections from the books to tell my story, but I had a hard time finding excerpts that made sense out of context.

So I began with the intention of reading a notebook a day, looking for something more than witty little phrases or insights. Settling on the sofa with a stack of journals on the floor beside me, I opened the first one. After four days and four journals, I had to put the plan aside just to catch my breath.

*Who is telling this story? How did she get inside my pen? How does she know all this stuff?*

*It's you, dear. Has been all along. Patiently waiting inside to be invited out.*

The more I read, the more I knew my story was not just clever little sections to be lifted from journals. A significant person or idea would make a brief appearance on one page, but then wouldn't return again for another journal or two. I needed time and distance to see this unfolding as my pen connected the dots.

I began reading the next composition book, and my pen jotted down two-or three-word phrases on little scraps of paper. I continued to read and more phrases emerged. After several days of this "note-taking," I

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wanted to explore the phenomenon further. Choosing the phrase "Avery" and using Natalie Goldberg's method, I did a ten-minute writing on it. The pen told the story of my niece, start to finish, in the allotted time. Amazed, I tried the topic, "A Safe Place," and again the pen began its timed dance, describing my circle of teacher friends. Maybe this was not a fluke. Maybe this really was something bigger than myself. Maybe my pen really has been my salvation.

The second anniversary of events had something new to celebrate. The gift of my pen: how it recorded what was happening around me and inside me, showing me in my own handwriting who I am and from where I had come.

## **A Conversation with my Pen**

One morning soon after this awareness, I woke with an amazing thought. This day could be as magnificent as I wanted it to be. Any discomfort or fear was my own choice. Had I still not given myself permission to be fully present? Did I still think I didn't "deserve" it? Was I still reviewing that third-grade report card that told me I wasn't yet good enough with multiplication facts? My pen eagerly joined the discussion.

*Well, Laura, that's why you were in the third grade. That's exactly where you were supposed to be to learn them.*

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*Oh. So everywhere I am is where I'm "supposed" to be. That what I need to learn is right in front of me?*

*Yep. All you need is eyes to see and ears to hear.*

*Here I sit on my blue-flowered sofa in the middle of my living room with my fluffy princess dog stretched across my lap. What does that mean?*

*What do you want it to mean?*

*That this is where I'm supposed to be, in a comfortable place with a loving companion and a pen that talks to me as my most intimate friend.*

*So enjoy it.*

*But what if I get bored? What if I'm ready to leave this safety and go explore?*

*And your problem with that is...*

*Well, I might get scared. I might get too far into the adventure and panic.*

*Laura, you have such an active imagination. How do you calm yourself back down? How do you get through the fear?*

*I talk to you.*

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*Bingo. We writers need active imaginations. If we just sit in our living rooms on blue-flowered sofas with fluffy dogs in our laps and intimate pens in our hands, we get bored. We need to get out and have a little adventure every now and then, so we'll have something interesting to write about.*

*That makes sense.*

*Now I'm back with the Laura I recognize, the one who makes sure she doesn't get too far into the adventure without having a way to get back.*

*So I need the creative Laura to take a few risks and the rational Laura to live to tell about it?*

*Sure, if that's the way you want to see it.*

## Light Visions

One night after those first dark months following Carlton's death I had several dreams about light. When I woke in the morning I wanted to paint them rather than write about them. So I took copy paper from my computer printer tray, a yellow plastic box of watercolors, and a little cup of water to the safety of my sofa to explore this new idea. With a brush full of re-hydrated color, I touched the paper. Blurry images

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appeared. I watched as the paintbrush danced like my pen. The only words I could write on these pages full of watery color were titles.

The first image I painted was a little gray stick person. She must be a girl because she had on a dress. Her body was being unzipped from the head down. A splash of yellow watercolor emerged from the open top of her head, moving up to the left hand corner of the page. With my pen I wrote in the bottom right-hand corner, "Releasing the Light."

A little gray stick figure was standing alone in the next picture. This time it was not obviously a girl. There was no dress. There was, however, a gray question mark directly over his/her head. Above this mark to one side was a gray spotlight emitting yellow light. On the other side of the question mark was a yellow dollar sign. In the right corner of this page, I wrote "Fame and Fortune: the Artificial Light."

Another picture contained more than a dozen gray stick people. They were limply drifting up the page to the splash of yellow color in the top left-hand corner. I called this picture "Going Toward the Light."

The fourth one had a small androgynous gray figure being pulled toward the corner yellow light with the word "words" printed over and over and falling from the bottom half of the figure. There was no title for this page.

For the last picture I used a different color from my paint box. Along the bottom of the page with a wide

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sweep I left a trail of brown "ground" with black-ink arrows pointing downward through it. Along the top of the page was a band of yellow "light" with arrows pointing upward. In the middle there were four gray figures in progressive stances. The first one was standing upright on the brown color. The second was tilted slightly and rising above the "ground," and the third one leaned over even more, rising farther from the brown slash. Finally, the fourth one, in a prone position, was halfway between the yellow above and the brown below. The caption on this watercolor asked, "Why Walk When You Can Fly?"

I didn't consciously set this up. I think I was only responding from my experience catalog I call dreams. Each picture contained the yellow light image and the gray "person" image. The first one showed yellow breaking open from the gray body to join the larger light. Was this me trying to follow Carlton? Was the second one, depicting confusion over the lights, representing the challenges of living on earth? The third, appearing as if a universal force pulled all of us toward the greater yellow light. Was this the "perfect team" the raspy Carlton-voice alluded to in my earlier dream? And the picture with "words" falling from the little gray figure as it ascended to the light? Was it telling me that words are needed here for communication, and not in the Great Light? Was this about my job on earth as storyteller? The last picture's caption, "Why Walk When You Can Fly?" is the title of a favorite song by Mary Chapin Carpenter

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and has been a guiding light through my meandering search.

The figure was flying parallel to earth and sky, letting her heart and soul guide her, rising above the distractions on earth. In the world, but not of the world. In the word, but not of the word.

*Was the yellow light God? Love? My Carlton connection? Was it the inspiration I needed to keep me focused on my work here? And the brown in the last picture. To remind me to stay grounded? To stay present and aware of where I am?*

I considered the dream I had when Carlton talked to me. It must have come from the same "place" of stored images and thoughts. The universal stream encouraging me to trust my unfolding. The assurance of a force that continues to unite us. A promise that I'm not alone and never have been. What my "child" and I have been looking for.

I will continue to listen to my dreams, knowing they are one way God talks to me, as I daily choose the best ways to stay connected to the world.

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## Abstaining from Whine

The first audience to hear my story "The Phone Call" was my uncle's writing group in Oregon. It was a group of people I might never see again, so I decided it could be a safe place to share something this personal. We took turns reading our offerings as we sat in a circle in my aunt's living room, a view of the Pacific Ocean in the background. Several writers received immediate, encouraging feedback. They were told whose writing it sounded like or where it might be submitted for publication. I was feeling comfortable with this group. I could do this. So when it was my turn, I read my story with a voice that broke only once, near the end. When I finished the room was very quiet. I wasn't hearing the feedback I had expected. The only comment I remember was from a man who told me his sister had a child who died. I wasn't sure what that response meant. I sat still, waiting. Soon the next reader began. I felt like I was underwater with muffled noises swirling around me. I couldn't understand what was happening. After the readings, a man walked up to me and told me he was a psychologist. I needed that voice. I could hear those words and was back again in my aunt's living room.

The next day a retired architect from the group told me he liked my writing because it wasn't whiney. I

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heard that as feedback I had expected, and it felt good. My rational brain began to process it. He named a behavior I wished to display in public, while I searched for relief from this overwhelming fear and accepted my experience as an opportunity for growth.

But just because my writing didn't sound whiney didn't mean I wasn't abstaining from the childish behavior. To declare that I didn't spend a lot of time fighting it, or getting really angry at God, or feeling close to giving up would be an outright lie. Almost every morning for the first two years I would lie in bed, stare at the ceiling, and consider what I might be able to accomplish during the day. Then I would have to make an intentional decision to get up. Every night, again in the same position, I would need to spend time deliberately letting go of the day's accumulation of fears, shame, and regrets so that I could get to sleep. But these holding-on and letting-go sessions were not just limited to my bedroom. I found myself making them over and over throughout the day, everywhere I went.

I admit to screaming, slamming doors, and throwing pillows and books inside the house. Princess, the albino dove, and these walls have all witnessed this unruly behavior. I'm not sure what I have said during these tantrums, but I'm quite sure it wasn't "nice." OK, I could be a very angry child.

At night I cried long and hard into my pillow. "It's not fair, God," I choked. "I've tried so hard to be good,

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to do what I thought I was supposed to do, and this is the thanks I get?" Well, that certainly sounded whiney by most standards.

But I worked hard to keep this fussy child to myself. I didn't think anyone else should have to deal with her. After all, I was a grown-up and should act like one, at least in the presence of others. So I spent much time alone with my notebook, afraid of unleashing my monster child on some innocent bystander.

In the first months following Carlton's death, when I was so agitated, the writing in my journal should have produced enough heat to start fires. But two years later as I read these journals, I saw fierce rantings for sure, but there was something else. Calm, rational words were woven in between the rage, showing me other perspectives. How could they come from the same pen?

Often by mid-afternoon the living room began to close in on me. My internal energy was depleted. I was tired of sitting still on a sofa with my notebook because I was afraid of disturbing the world. My pen identified this feeling and suggested a walk in the park, or a movie, or a library visit, or a get-together with safe friends. I was taking care of the lonely child. This extension beyond the sofa reminded me that I *did* want to be with others again.

I needed this compass from within. Something that knew how to take care of me when everyone else was busy with their own whiney selves. I needed to be able

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to hear the loving, nurturing mother-voice who whispered those loving words through her pen.

No, I am not "cured." I guess this is probably all part of the process. As hard as I try, I can't seem to completely abstain from my childish behaviors, and there are still panicky times when I'm afraid I'll cause too much damage. I try to listen to those who can help best - God, me, and my mother nature.

## Doing Research

A new friend showed up in my life as I was becoming comfortable in this adventure called writing. Actually she was not "new." Scotty is two years younger than I and was in my brother's third-grade class. On a spring Sunday afternoon in 2002, about six months before Carlton died, she attended the weekly Trapped Truth Society reading. We recognized each other from the past and immediately reconnected.

She, coming off a messy divorce, and with two young teenagers, had picked up writing again, having been a journalist earlier in her adult career. The stories she shared on Sundays were about chaotic relationships. My offerings at this time were anecdotes from my teaching experience. With Scotty, Lee (an African-American man who wrote about growing up in rural Louisiana with 13 brothers and sisters), and me, what was once a writer's group of poets was now being challenged by our prosaic ways.

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Scotty was a great affirmer of my novice attempts at writing and I, having already experienced my own messy divorce and the raising of a teenager, offered some proof that she too could survive.

But when Carlton died in January, 2003, our relationship changed. We began sharing concerns about the expectations of mothering and our roles in the family, and wondered with frustration how we were supposed to be everything to everybody. We exchanged notes on the research we had done on our own, lending encouragement to each other.

We began spending more than Sunday afternoons together. She was more outgoing, and I needed help reentering the world. We went to hear my brothers' band and her friend's band, which landed us in casino lounges, biker bars, and singles dances. Not a problem, we thought, with an air of detachment. We writers were here to observe the human animal. We were merely doing research.

We also went to several art openings at her friend's gallery, where we sipped wine, nibbled cheese and crackers, and studied the newest exhibits. We had favorites, and they were not necessarily the same. I struggled to articulate why I liked the simple big red barn better than the swirling acrylic moon pictures she chose. Another creative friend dubbed us the "Art Divas," a name we modestly accepted. After all, it *was* for the sake of research.

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Scotty and I exchanged new "other worldly" ideas, testing the reaction of the other as we gave voice to our inner thoughts. We discussed our dreams, spirituality, Kabbalah, and channeling, even though we didn't really know what we were talking about. We were trying to find words to connect to something too elusive to pin down. Again, it was where the research was leading us.

We compared families and growing up in the same white middle-class Shreveport neighborhood in the '50s and '60s and found we shared similar secrets and questions, harbored through the decades. We wondered about others in this setting who may have these same hidden stories, and how we might find out.

Everyone should have a "Scotty" friend, an honest, trustworthy reflection of where you are and what you're thinking, a person outside yourself to offer support and encouragement through the scarier parts of the journey.

We did it creatively, assuming the roles of writers when we needed to, and witnessing growth in ourselves and each other. Who knows? Maybe it really was research for the sake of our art.

## **Dancing at Weddings**

The dancing started at Allison's wedding, her second marriage after a traumatic first one, and all her

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friends were there to celebrate. Because it was on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, we sent the happy couple off under an arc of lit sparklers at the end of the reception. But the real celebration for me happened before the fireworks. A local country western band began playing the traditional daddy/daughter dance. A few couples then moved to the floor, followed by several little girls in swirling party dresses.

Children naturally dance when they hear music. They haven't yet learned restraint. I remember a young Carlton dancing with abandon and rolling on the grassy hillside of the outdoor festival's amphitheater where his uncles' band played. He was so full of life.

As I watched these dancers at the wedding on the shiny hardwood floor, my body began moving to the music's rhythm. But I held back; I had no partner. I concentrated on Martha and Al dancing and the little girls twirling and spinning, while I danced in my head. A few minutes of this mental dancing, however, wasn't enough. I stood up and began moving around the table where my friends were sitting. It was not exactly a dance, more a continuation of the rhythmic swaying that had been going on inside me. My swaying around the table and Martha and Al's dancing merged and we moved onto the dance floor. Once out there, I saw other women dancing in groups. Some of my friends joined me and the other women, and our individual dances connected into one big circle. The frolicking

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children tumbled into the middle of it. It was so full of joy.

The next wedding I attended was for Mary Margaret's son James. At the church I watched three of Carlton's childhood friends serve as groomsmen and swallowed the ache in my throat as I wished for my notebook. But the reception with a disc jockey soon followed, and I was ready to dance again. First there was a mother/son dance, then a father/daughter one. As I waited my turn, I began that moving-around-the-tables thing again. A young groomsman I didn't know asked me to dance, an idea a friend had set into motion. He was very polite and talked about his mother. This time there was no women's circle or dancing children, and after several couple dances, the younger guests took over the dance floor. The bride Danielle, hiking her wedding dress up to her knees, led the young women in a line dance. I recognized it as one I had learned on my cruise. This was the opening I had been watching for, and with Allan, the groom's father, encouraging me I was out on the floor in line with the younger women.

The next wedding was Mary Margaret and Allan's other son, Allan, Jr. It was in Dallas, so several of the Steel Magnolias decided to make the road trip. I eagerly packed my dancing shoes, wondering how this one would work.

It was an elegant wedding in a traditionally ornate church, which was a bit unnerving for me, and there

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were many more strangers there than at the last two. At the fashionable hotel reception, a twelve piece band began playing. My body started moving again. But this time I planted myself firmly in the upholstered seat, intent on acting like a grown-up. Maybe I wouldn't dance this time, I sighed, and mentally began journaling about it. But while the band was on break, Shanan, the bride, came over to the circular table where her new mother-in-law's friends were sitting. She sat with us for a while, then still talking, got up and moved us to the dance floor. Soon several middle-aged women, Shanan, and her friends were swaying together to a recording of Abba's "Dancing Queen." It was perfect.

Dancing is a way of celebrating, letting go and giving in to the universal rhythm that moves our world. I want to be a part of that celebration, and weddings are appropriate places to join forces. Maybe this is a place where women and children can lead.

## Valentine's Day

*Oh dear. It's time for another national celebration of coupling and I'm busy wrestling with a concept of wholeness within myself. What if I don't get any valentines? I guess this is another hold over from third grade. How can I creatively address this Valentine Day phobia? I've still got two days. I can send myself a card.*

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I went into my spare bedroom/junk room for watercolors and paper, then settled on the living room sofa for inspiration. First I painted a big red heart in the middle of a page torn from my sketch pad, added a stylized splash of color in each corner, representing flowers. I smiled as I admired my creation. With a black Sharpie pen I wrote "I love..." in the middle of the heart and proceeded to list traits I love about myself all around it. "Your sense of humor," "your tenacity," "your smile," "your compassion." I was a bit tentative at first. After all, I have had fifty years of being told "humility" was a virtue. Of course, I thought, and added "your humility" to the attributes.

I grew bolder and the page filled. This valentine was for my eyes only; I didn't need to explain it to anyone else. When it was covered with words and color, I slipped the paper into a large self-addressed manila envelope, added an extra stamp to prevent something as tacky as insufficient postage, then drove to the post office to drop it in the outside mailbox. I felt an immediate surge, thinking of the special valentine I could look forward to.

Monday the 14<sup>th</sup> came. I went to my book club meeting and the Head Queen of the Pulpwood Queens began by passing out pink Mardi Gras beads and rhinestone pins for everyone. I put on my new jewels in celebration.

After the meeting I drove across town to pick up Princess where she had been boarded over the

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weekend. As she was handed to me, I received the kind of Valentine love only a tail-wagging, sloppy-kissing, fluffy friend could give.

By the time we got back home, the mailbox was holding two cards for me - one from a cousin and one from a new friend in Oregon - and a rejection form letter from a publishing house. But the big envelope with my homemade valentine was not there. I was consoling myself with the thought that at least I would have mail again on the 15<sup>th</sup> when the mailman walked up to hand-deliver it.

That evening I attended a community education forum. The crowd was smaller than usual, perhaps because of the holiday. But sandwiches, chips and cookies were laid out for the participants. A Valentine dinner, I mused, and helped myself to the spread. I mentally added this offering, along with the gathering of compatible people full of stimulating conversation and a shared vision, to my growing list of valentines.

As we left, the forum coordinator handed each of us two long-stemmed red carnations. Flowers, too! I'm not sure I could have imagined a more loving day, even if I had planned it myself.

## **God's Plan**

February 28, 2005, was Dad's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday and I felt it should be special. The whole family hadn't

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