

Crazy Lady
in the
Mirror

Madel yn Kamen



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Dedication

To Sam, Greg, and Doug – the men in my life
who provide so much grist for the writer’s mill.

Madelyn “Crazy Lady” Kamen

Foreword

I am perfectly sane. It's that crazy lady in the mirror who worries me. My world is perfectly normal. Hers is obsessive, compulsive, schizophrenic, depressive, anxious, manic, and hilarious depending on the time of day I see her, how the stars are aligned, if husband A or husband B (split personality guy, I'd say) woke up next to her in bed, what antics her kids have pulled lately, and how many calls she's gotten from her mother today.

I didn't write this collection of essays, poems, short stories, and rantings. The lady in the mirror did. So, if you are perfectly healthy, never get rattled, never fight with your husband, your kids, or your mother, then, this book is not for you. However, if you ever look in the mirror and see that crazy lady, then you are among friends.

I invite you to join the party at the insane asylum where we laugh at ourselves and each other, sometimes until we cry. Don't worry though. It is all through the looking glass. Come on in. The mercury is fine.

Chapter One:

“You’ re Not
Getti ng Ol der,
You’ re Getti ng...
Hemorrhoi ds”

A Ticket to Reverence

I am going to move to China!!

In China, I've heard, women of a certain age are treated with reverence. I assume that includes when they're in Chinese department stores, where women who have mellowed (let's call it) get attended to first. Here in western culture, young women get the royal treatment.

The other day, I was shopping for a cell phone. I went to my local gadget store, moving from display to display, trying to discern the relative features of each type of system. I checked type-by-type, comparing what were considered the good elements and shortcomings of each – what one phone had that another didn't. Finally, when I realized that I didn't know a platform from a peripheral, a bar from a flip from a slide, a wifi from a bluetooth (I never knew cell phones had teeth), I decided to ask one of the salesmen. A young clerk was standing nearby, and I tried to meet his eyes to ask a question. Nothing. I determined that either the guy had terrible peripheral vision, or he was so caught up in solving a personal problem, that he couldn't be distracted.

But, I'm a woman of persistence, and if I may say so, a little bit of pluck. After a while, I decided, *so much for the subtle approach*. I walked up to the guy, stood right by his side, *hrrumphed* to get his attention, and tactfully said, "Sir, would you mind answering a few questions about these cell phones?"

He looked in my direction and in what I thought must be his most polite voice said, "How may I help you?"

I smiled. At last, I'd get some questions answered. "I'd like to know..."

Before I could finish the sentence, the creep slithered right past me to the sweet young thing who had just walked up. She was about one-third my age and sticking out in all the right places. With nothing sagging. The clerk answered all her questions, laughed at her cute little quips, even demonstrated for her, every last feature of every last instrument in the department.

Since I got most of my questions answered by eavesdropping on their tête-à-tête, I made a selection, took it to the cashier, and purchased it. But, when I left the store, I couldn't help feeling a bit disappointed. And sad. And annoyed. No, not just annoyed – pissed off.

Maybe when I was young, I got the same deluxe treatment as that young woman, but I didn't appreciate it. Or maybe it was a different era, one when customers were taken in turn. Or maybe, I am becoming "age-challenged" and don't care to get in touch with my inner cougar.

At any rate, I have decided to simply smile and bear the slight even if I have to stretch those sagging jowls a bit to do it.

Or book a berth on the next boat to China.

The Art of Worrying

Goosebumps

It's my *shtick*. It's what I do. I worry. Worry about living. Worry about dying. Worry about my husband, my kids, my dogs. Sometimes, I worry about friends – if I don't think they are worrying enough for themselves. Lately, I have found myself worrying about the health of my family.

My husband had a couple of operations on his heart a few years back. He has worn a pacemaker since that time. He said he was a little dizzy when he stood up the other day, and I felt a cold chill run down my back and goosebumps cropping up on my arms.

My thoughts immediately went to a faulty pacemaker. He says that the doctor has to periodically recalibrate it. It is time for a tune-up he tells me. But, I still worry about it.

The Skinny and Fat of It

One of my sons is too heavy (in my opinion). I think about the diabetes that my father and brother had. I wonder if I should talk to him about his diet, the main reason for his heftiness. But, he is a sensitive soul and gets his feelings hurt easily. He knows that he is eating the wrong food and too much of it. Besides, I'd only alienate him. And I don't want to do that. I'd like to see him worry a bit more. Then, I could give up a little of the responsibility.

My other son is too thin (also, in my opinion). I have already asked him if he has had his blood tested for anemia, autoimmune disorders, and a variety of other causes. I ask if he is depressed or unable to eat. He assures me he has been to the doctor for his yearly checkup. He is in very good health. And he feels fine about his life. He tells me he's been busy lately and hasn't been working out as much as usual. He has lost a little muscle mass. That's all. I remind him that working out is good for him.

But then again, who knows what all that working out will do to his body.

I know it's silly, but I worry that I might be too intrusive in my kids' lives.

Information Please

There is so much information out there that encourages me to worry. It is found on television, on the internet, in newspapers and in magazines – to name a few of my favorite sources. Ads say I

should call my doctors and find out if (whatever) is right for me. Or if I have certain symptoms that may be an indication of a much greater problem. Honestly, I would be calling my doctor every day if I just took the advice I get from *Good Morning America* and *The View*. Actually, I have a sneaking suspicion that the doctor's office is not thrilled to hear from me "on occasion." And I worry that his nurse is starting to get disgusted and soon won't take my calls.

Dog Days

My dog recently had an adverse reaction to a rabies shot which caused his white blood cells to attack his red blood cells. He broke out in an awful rash (in my opinion). I have been giving him antibiotics and prednisone for the last few weeks. He doesn't like it very much when I pick him up and turn him upside down every day to see if he has developed any more rash sites or has had a recurrence on the previous sites.

Art Apart

I hate to admit it, but I jump to the most extreme of the possible causations of any random condition when many simple and maybe innocuous explanations exist. When my husband complains, and he does that regularly (in my opinion), I tell him that somebody has to worry about the health of the family. Since no one else will take the responsibility for it, it always falls on

me. I have designated myself “worrier-in-chief.” The rest of them don’t have to worry as long as I do it for them.

There is so much to worry about. Not only the big things. Also, little things that could become big. Accidental and incidental events. Fender benders that could cause whiplash, colds that could become pneumonia, tripping over an uneven square of sidewalk and breaking something, getting an infection from cutting one’s finger. There is so little time, so much worrying to do.

And then, I also worry about worrying so much. Secretly, I believe my worrying is going to stop bad things from happening. But then I wonder: Do I have some sort of God complex? Will that make the Lord angry at me? Will he exact vengeance, thinking I’m trying to take over his job? I worry about that, too.

Today, I am sitting here looking out the window, watching the ravages of winter that have wiped away the fresh green growth of spring and summer. That’s how it is, I tell myself. A time to live and a time to die. But, anything could happen to any of us at any time.

Perhaps, it is fear of losing what I hold dear to me. Most of my extended family is no longer alive. It is too painful to think about what would happen if I lost everyone I love. What would I do if I had no one and nothing to worry about at all?

Aha!

My crossword puzzle
Half-finished,
Challenging my synapses
To recall the names of
Places I've only
Read about in books.

Four across – Russian Range.
Aral Mountains?
Ural Mountains?
Four down —
Seventh planet from the Sun.
Aha! Got it.

Keep thinking, they say
Or your brain will go dead.
Or is it dead now?
Or will I even know when it is?
Or will I not know?
And what will I say
When I have no control?
What secrets will I divulge
That I have held sacred?

What inland sea do they want?
Gozo or Azov or Chad?
Depends on which Greek wine.

Ouzo is it?
 That means "Z" is the third letter across,
 And third letter down.
 Got it.

Or will I be told
 Over and over
 The same story?
 Or the names
 Of my children?
 Will I wet my pants?
 Or utter curse words?
 Or fart out loud?

What baseball great
 Jesus or Moises or Matty?
 Or Felipe?
 Isn't he an Alou, too?
 Only five letters, fourth letter "t."
 Aha! Got it.

Will they laugh
 Because otherwise,
 They would cry?
 At seeing their once
 Fun loving, wisecracking,
 Love-giving mother
 Reduced to a baby?

First part of quip,
 Second part, third.
 37 down, See 54 across,
 54 across, See 37 down.
 I'll guess at a few words
 Once I have more letters.
 That puzzle maker is a rogue.

The long day's journey
Is far from over.
There are still many hours to go.
But, I won't worry
As I traverse the miles.
Not for now. Not too much.
Not so long as I can do
And I can do
My crossword puzzle.

A Different Wrinkle

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 rejoin.

"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 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 would I have believed 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 there 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.

The Most Beautiful Sound

It is midnight. The only sound Elizabeth hears is the in and out of Joe’s breath. It is the most beautiful sound in the world.

The lights are out in the room, except for the tiny, high-intensity bulb that sits atop and illuminates the page of the book she is reading. Elizabeth doesn’t know how many medical books she has read or self-help magazines she has leafed through, or just how many “chicken soup” stories from well-meaning friends that she has tried to concentrate on in the past four months. More than she would like to remember. She stares at the page.

Now and then, she hears the *squeak, squeak* of rubber soles walking the dimly lit corridor. A heavy-set figure wearing grape-colored scrubs passes by the door, a tray of tiny white cups in her hand.

Tonight, the aide sticks her head in the door.

“Everything all right, Mrs. Frank?” she asks.

“Well, I have one question.”

Elizabeth is happy she has the opportunity to ask something about the tube that is going through Joe’s esophagus into his stomach. She gets an answer, albeit not one that satisfies her. The doctor will be there in the morning. Maybe. And then, she will ask it again.

It’s never certain if and when the medical staff will show up. Sometimes they promise and don’t materialize. Other times, they promise the morning and get there at six in the afternoon. For Elizabeth, it is a process of waiting and watching. And waiting some more.

It doesn’t much matter though, does it? The day merges into night, the night into day. The days into weeks, the weeks into months. It’s been four months now. Four long, anxious months. Elizabeth’s friends tell her she needs to get some rest, to get away for a while. They simply don’t understand. She doesn’t want to leave Joe. What if something happened? What if she were gone and he was alone to...to deal with the crisis?

No. That can’t happen. She would rather stay here in this room with one hospital bed, and one cot, but together with Joe. After all, this room is so much better than any of the others they have

camped in while they are waiting for his improvement. There have been five before.

At least, this room has a window. The intensive care unit at the hospital had only what they called a “consultation room,” four bare walls where Elizabeth was allowed to stay. The room had no cot. Just an uncomfortable two-seater with not even enough room for her legs to be in a straight line with the rest of her body. She had to pull up a chair and sleep at an angle those nights. Please God, no more of those.

The health care system has no conscience, Elizabeth decided then. What a name for it: health care. It doesn’t have much to do with health and they sure don’t care about you. The system merely moves people back and forth with money the only object.

Where is the humanity? she wondered. Joe is a person. So is she. How can they let the two of them be moved and moved, like a pair of vagabonds, just to satisfy some requirement that legislators and the insurance companies decide is financially beneficial?

Doesn’t anybody care?

But, despite all that, Elizabeth is thankful. They’ve made it through another day, the two of them. Joe is still here, and he is breathing peacefully for now. In and out, in and out. The most beautiful sound in the world.

The Making of a Power Couple

So, there they are, Henry and Geraldine. Sitting across from each other, staring.

“You been here long?” he asks her.

“Long enough.”

He grins. “Hey, what’s that mean?”

She crosses her arms in front of her breasts and hrrmmphs. “I don’t know you. What do you want – my life’s history?” She sticks her nose a little ways in the air.

“Look, lady...”

“The name’s Geraldine. Call me *Geraldine*.”

“Lookie here, you old bitch. I didn’t come sit here to be insulted.”

“*Lookie?* Lookie, here, you old fart, I don’t have to *talk* to you, either.”

“*Geraldine*, you say?”

“I’ve been here six months, two weeks, three days, and...” She looks at her watch. “Three hours and twenty minutes.”

“The name’s *Henry*.”

“Where’d you get an ugly-ass name like that?”

“Same place they keep the Geraldine’s, I guess.” He smirks, a little proud of himself for his retort.

“My daughter only comes to see me once in a blue moon,” she tells him.

“You know what that means? *Blue moon*?” Henry asks.

“Of course, I do.”

“Ya do, huh? Then, what is it?”

“It means she hardly ever comes here.”

“Ya don’t know. Do ya, Geraldine?”

“*Henry* really is an ugly-ass name.”

“It’s the second full moon of a two-full-moon month,” he informs her.

“Doesn’t happen often.”

“She and my son-in-law and their kids -- they got their own life. They forget about their mother. I’m just a burden to them.”

“My grandfather was a *Henry*. My father was a *Henry*. And I’m a *Henry*.”

“Maybe, it was four days, three hours, and twenty minutes.” She rocks back and forth, trying to recall.

“The name *Henry* has been in the family a long time. I was a *Henry, Junior* until my dad kicked the bucket. Now, I’m just a *Henry*.”

“I heard of blue moons before,” she grumbles. “You think I’m illiterate or something?”

“So, how did you get *your* name?” he asks.

“I don’t care if you’re Henry the Eighth. It’s still an ugly-ass name.”

“When was she last here? Your daughter?” he wonders aloud.

“Illiterate, hmm? I know plenty. I had two years of college.”

“I had an aunt called *Geraldine*.”

“She never comes to see me. My daughter. You got family?” She doesn’t wait for an answer. “You just wait. You’ll see.”

“Meanest lookin’ woman I ever saw, my Aunt Geraldine,” Henry allows.

“Blue moon, red planets, black holes. I never did care much for Astronomy.”

“I don’t have any children so I got nothin’ to worry about. Only my diabetes and my heart,” he admits.

“I had a friend called *Henry*,” she shares. “He was a kleptomaniac.”

“And my arthritis. I got bad arthritis in my hands.” He holds them up for her to see.

“She said she’d come today. I’ll believe it when I see it.”

They sit for a while.

Henry picks up the newspaper. Geraldine watches *Jeopardy*. Soon he gets up and walks out.

When he is far enough away so that she can’t hear him, he looks back and says, “Foxy lady.”

She watches him go. “Nice ass.”

The Reunion

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. Annie wasn't there either; but then, we didn't ask her. Annie 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 Kings Dorm, fifth floor, section B. Tight as friends could be.

We went back there last year. To Kings. 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.

Kings, 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-di-dum years ago. The stories we could tell about life in them.

There were the marathon bridge games during finals. And times we all sat on one 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 didn't see much difference. Ellen had a better idea. She took nylon hose and stuck them into her bra cups.

This year, we decided to meet in Fort Worth. 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 they sat on the bed and sang about "the moon shining through her nighty."

Lovely, isn't it, seeing old friends?

Vani ty

Vanity arrived one day
When I was of a certain age.

She was a lady of cunning,
threatening to devour
at the least provocation
and with no conscience,
the layers of assurance
that I'd built over the years.

"Go ahead," she said.
"Take a close look at yourself."

She laughed out loud
as I traced the wrinkly areas
around my eyes and mouth.

"Laugh lines," I said.

She grinned.
"Look a little lower."
I examined my once
well-toned arms.
Now, empty layers of skin.

"Move them back and forth," she said.
"You can flap them."

“A few days at the gym should take care of that.”

Vanity simply winked and said,
“Hilarious.”

Cautiously, I peeked lower still,
Finding a mountain range
Of bumps and fat deposits.

“I’m planning to go to Weight Watchers, too.”
My muse looked wary.

“Soon,” I added.

“Would you like an introductory coupon?”

Her smile was so broad
that it brought tears to my eyes.

I’d had it.

I decided the lady was not going to defeat me.
But, Vanity is no lady now, is she?
So, I picked myself up, marched to the door,
And kicked her arrogant ass out.

That Darned Pouch

I bought myself a mirror when I got married – one of those long, skinny kinds that sit on the back of the closet door and allow you to give yourself a once-over before leaving the house.

I bought the mirror before I gave birth to my first child. That was in the days when my stomach was silky and elastic and concave. That was in the days when I had absolutely no fat on my bones.

I only gained eleven pounds during my first pregnancy, so during those nine months, I was forever looking in the mirror hoping to see a little pouching out place that announced the upcoming blessed event to the world. That didn't happen for the longest time. It was the beginning of the seventh month before I began to show.

Only then did my boss finally ask, “Are you maybe a little bit pregnant?”

I remember grinning sheepishly and responding, “A whole lot pregnant.”

When I had the baby, six and one-half of those eleven pounds were baby. The rest was placenta and amniotic fluid. I could virtually fit into all of my pre-confinement clothes when I left the hospital. Well, almost. Something new had been added. I brought home something besides a new baby.

It was a little pouch that was located right between my belly button and that other mound that I could no longer see by just looking down. The new addition hung there like an empty hobo sac.

Well, never mind, I thought. I'll get rid of that soon enough. The elasticity of my stomach just needs time to repair and recondition itself.

So, I waited. And waited. And waited. The pouch didn't go away on its own. Being a resourceful, and I might add, vain person, I decided I needed to exercise. Surely that would pull everything back together to its original form.

I undertook a strict program of running, sit-ups, push-ups, and aerobics. I got lovely arms, tight thighs, incredible stomach muscles out of the deal. But lo and behold! The pouch was still there. No amount of exercise eliminated it.

I determined it must be fat. All the exercise in the world won't help you if you are just plain fat. On came the diets. There was the high-protein/low-carbohydrate diet, the low-fat diet, the no-fat diet, the three-day diet, the starvation diet, the chocolate diet, the eating-only-what-makes-you-hum diet, and countless others. Nothing eliminated that pouch.

After several years and another child, my doctor informed me that I needed a hysterectomy. I was not at all pleased about it, but when he told me that it would probably lift about five pounds off of my front, I became excited. Perhaps he was going to scrape off some of that tummy insulation, as I now referred to it.

The operation occurred and my innards were extracted. I did, in fact, weigh five pounds less, but when I looked down I was appalled. There it was in all its glory – the steadfast little pouch. My doctor said he left it because he didn't want to mess with my electrolytes. But, later on, he added, if I wanted, he could recommend a good specialist who could lipo-suck the rest out. This really wasn't an option for me. I'd heard from friends that if they take the fat cells out of one place, whenever you gain, that pesky fat just moves to another site. And you might not like where that is either.

So, here I am, stuck with that little sucker. I guess I should name it and rub it down now and then. If it is going to stay in my family, I guess it needs to be nurtured.

I am convinced that there is no getting rid of the pouch. It will always be there. I imagine that when I die and they bury me in the ground, it will still be there. And if they were to exhume my body for one reason or another ten years later, I think they would find mostly bones. Only one part of my body would remain intact. Yes, sitting right there, smiling up at the undertaker, there it would be – that darned pouch.

"A Toast"

"A Toast"

Here's to you,
You people who ride
Face backward in the elevator
Staring at the faux mahogany panels
Not knowing what floor you were on
When the doors opened
And people got out
And people got in,
And the doors closed.

Here's to you
For not getting angry
Or offended
Or pitiful
When they looked right through you
As if you were invisible,
Or when they turned their eyes away
Because then they might have to say something
Like "hello."

*"Hello, you poor, pathetic paperweight of a
person.*

*Hello, and thanks for taking on this random
condition*

So that by the grace of God, I could go without it.

*He had only so many plights to hand out today.
I didn't get one. You did."*

And, here's to you, handler,
Smiling that smug, knowing expression
That says you are in charge, not him,
That you control where he goes and what he
does.

If someone wants to speak,
It should be to you,
The puppet master;
Not to him —
The Charley McCarthy doll,
Your hands at each shoulder,
Pushing the dummy.
Let him gaze at the blank wall.
He's not much good to us anyway.

Here's to you, receptionist
Sitting behind your modesty panel
Where the rider can't see
The color of your pencil holders or desk pads
Or how much junk has accumulated on your
desk
Or in your in-basket.
Or who is next on your computer calendar.
The world is full and bright and varied for you;
But not for the rider who stares
At the faux mahogany panels.

Here's to all of you – the team.
May you live and be satisfied
Within your happy, little worlds.
And may you never know
The anguish of your partners.

After The Fall I

All of this happens after the fall.

It is late September; but that's not the "fall" I am referring to. This fall is a tumble, a pirouette early one Saturday morning from a bumpy sidewalk to the middle of the street. The ambulance comes and takes me to the hospital where they discover almost everything between my waist and knees is broken and unable to be stabilized by surgical procedure. I will just have to lie there for three-and-one-half months.

Fortunately, I stick out the fourteen-week regimen of physical therapy and the ministrations of the health care Amazon who comes to my home every day to give me my bath and dress me.

Now, I am back walking my dogs, but only a fourth as far, due to a little residual muscle weakness and because of the unbearable weather. If you ever have walked your dogs in a Houston heat wave and survived, you know what I mean.

I also gain some extra and unwelcomed baggage in the trunk due to inactivity. My self-appointed personal guru (that would be my husband) suggests that I use the treadmill instead of enduring the sauna-like outdoors. Sounds good to me.

So, here I am, ready for my first jaunt on that lonely contraption ignored for so many months. I decide I will walk at a slow pace, for twenty minutes to begin. I put on my gym clothes and tennies, find the “on” switch and ever so gently, step on the machine.

My dogs are delighted at a potential new toy. Chubacka sits at one end and Mupsy is poised on the little stoop at the front of the machine. They look like little bookends for a chubby book, me, but since they are fairly well behaved, I am ready to go.

At the end of the first thirty seconds, I am already tired. “Twenty minutes!” I say. “What can I have been thinking?”

One minute later and I’m feeling the sweat start to break through around my neck and ears. Dumb machine. It must not be working right. I don’t remember feeling this much resistance, even when I was running three miles every day. Bravely, I continue. I don’t look at the timer for a while, thinking the whole process will pass quickly if I don’t watch the clock. Trudge, trudge, trudge. Wheeze, whiff, gasp. I’m getting sweatier. Must be half through. I give in and take a peek at the timer. Oh, no! It’s only been four minutes, thirteen seconds. Fifteen minutes 37 seconds to go. At least I think that’s right. When I am sweating and tired, I’m not so good at math. Also when I am not sweating or tired.

At seven minutes, I look closely at that complex mechanism. I never noticed how ugly a treadmill could be. Maybe it will break down and I will have to stop. What a lovely thought.

Ten minutes and I think I've hit the wall. I wipe my neck and lower the sweatband around my forehead to catch the salty brine making little paths to my eyes.

Eleven and one-half minutes elapse. This machine certainly has a sinister look, like an angry dragon. And it is squealing. Who ever heard of a talking treadmill? *Gasp, gasp, wheeze*. Oops, that's me.

Suddenly, I remember. My machine is one of the fancy ones – two levels of fans. I'll turn on the fan and cool down a bit. Chubacka and Mupsy immediately sense the difference and want a part of the action. I have to tell them to get off the treadmill, lest I fall. Now I have level one of the fan to myself. It cools one square inch next to my right nostril. I'll try level two. Oh much better. Two square inches and the bridge of my nose.

Sixteen minutes. I am soaking wet. Maybe I should call 9-1-1, just in case. Nah. They'd laugh at me, and worse, they might not come if I ever need them again. You know – the girl who cried wolf...

Seventeen minutes and fifteen seconds. I'm sure this machine made an obscene gesture at me. But, it's under three minutes now. I can hold on, if nothing more than to win. Woman over the machine. But, so little time left. I can put the machine in cool down mode, going slower and slower until time runs out.

The dogs run out of there, no longer interested, no longer willing to heckle me. I drag myself off the treadmill. *Huff, huff. Puff, puff*. I grab a towel and wipe off every little droplet of sweat I can see.

I made it. I made it, I think to myself. Now, if I just had a little energy. I turn off the machine, drag myself to the kitchen.

I have a Coke and a candy bar.

Chapter Two:

Fami l y

~~Fries~~

~~Spies~~

~~Cries~~

~~Sighs~~

~~Flies~~

~~Dies~~

Ti es

We' ll Always Have Chi cago

Some people should never travel together. Two of them are my husband and I.

Now, there are many ways in which we are compatible. We both enjoy Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers movies. We both chew our fingernails when our local teams, college or pro, are playing. We both like Vietnamese restaurants and Shih Tzu dogs and crossword puzzles. And walking and laughing. And politics. Otherwise, we wouldn't have stayed married for so many years.

But if you want to put divorce on the radar, then ask us to go somewhere together more than fifty miles from our home or for more than two days.

The reason that we are so mismatched in this area is simple. I am a free spirit, and my husband is a control freak.

My idea of getting ready for a trip is to make sure the majority of the clothes I might take are clean, and that I don't need any medicine, cosmetics, or shampoo. I always take my own shampoo. I don't like that overly soapy, stinky stuff that they put in hotel rooms. On the day we leave, I throw my belongings in a suitcase, and I'm out of there.

As far as I'm concerned, that's a pretty thorough, pretty reasonable preparatory effort.

My husband, on the other hand, sets his luggage out a week in advance. He lines up what socks he will wear each day, what underwear, handkerchiefs, shirts, pants, and pajamas. He even pre-packs a dirty clothes bag. He keeps a fully loaded toiletry kit in his bathroom cabinet, always ready to go. I guess, in case he needs to make a fast get-away.

On the day we are to leave, he goes through his computer-generated checklist, making any last-minute corrections or additions. He also bundles together his tickets, hotel reservations, and maps. The package fits wonderfully well in the secret compartment of one of his bags.

When we get to our destination, I usually suggest that we look around the town and see what's up, but, that never happens when I travel with my husband. He pulls out his handy-dandy itinerary and tells me where we can go, what time of day these places are open, and what the entrance fee is. He has researched all of our choices on the worldwide web. Believe me, he knows his details.

If I am tired and don't feel like taking in one of the many places he has scheduled, he becomes very apprehensive. What is he going to do with himself for that hour? And will we be able to catch up to the rest of the agenda since we will be starting out from a different place?

But, there is hope. Circumstances have changed a little lately. As a result, I'm not nearly as frustrated by my husband's antics as in times

past. I have found a way to exact delicious revenge whenever our little travel fiascos occur.

It all started when we were going to Europe, my husband for a business trip and I was along for the ride. Since I had my own business meeting that was to end later than my spouse needed to leave, we had to depart on different days, at different times, and under different travel accommodations.

My husband started his usual nagging, a week before the trip. “Don’t forget this. Have you got that? Remember to pack this. Yada, Yada.”

“I’ll get there in one whole piece,” I assured him.

“I certainly hope so,” he said. Skepticism was written all over his face.

I got to London with no complications. However, my husband, the engineer, I might add, had a slight problem. He got to the airport with no snags, was there two hours in advance, just as the airlines suggested, checked his bag in accordance with his little checklist, and got on the plane.

He was settled comfortably in his seat as the airliner took off. He ordered a drink, picked up the novel he had packed for the trip, and was happily on his way to Newark, the international connecting airport.

All this, when the pilot turned on the intercom and greeted his passengers.

“Welcome to Intercontinental Airlines,” he said. “We are at a cruising altitude of 30,000 feet, with great weather ahead in Chicago. We expect to be in the air for three hours. Temperature in Chicago is 72 degrees.”

My husband was taken aback. He stopped the stewardess as she came down the aisle.

“Has there been a change of itinerary?” he asked.

“No. This is the same time, same way we always go,” she smiled.

“But, my ticket doesn’t indicate any stopover in Chicago,” he said.

She looked at his ticket.

“Sir, this ticket says Flight 343. That flight goes to Newark. This is Flight 720. It goes to Chicago.”

I later learned that the check-in desk for the Chicago and Newark flights were side-by-side. My husband and other passengers bound for Newark waited, boarding passes in hand, in the same area as the passengers headed for Chicago. My husband’s meticulous plans somehow interfered with the reality of boarding.

He eventually met me in London, but not before some fast reshuffling on the part of the airline.

Now, every time he starts to nag about my preparation for a trip, I cheerfully remind him of the incident. I never have forgotten it. And don’t intend to.

Someone might say this is crazy and ask why I put up with it.

I say, “Yeah, it’s crazy, but I love him.”

Post Script

Dear Sons,

First of all, let me take this opportunity to say thank you for the lovely accommodations you have furnished me. Really, I think your generosity is way over the top. I mean, upholstered walls, mahogany furnishings, Dutch doors, and such. This place is fit for a queen and is so much more than I deserve.

To my credit, I have always tried to be a good mother, to enable you when you showed an interest or talent, to cheer you on at your moments of triumph, and to listen long and hard when you were disappointed or sad. I say this because neither of you seem to appreciate my efforts on your behalf. To you, enabling seems more like pushing; cheering, like pressure; and being with you when you aren't so happy, like interfering in your affairs. Where along the way did you start to see me as intrusive rather than just interested?

Unfortunately, and in order to stay within the arbitrary rules of engagement that you have set up, I have had precious few areas of acceptable discourse with you. There are only so many fixes for computer glitches, and only so many basket-

ball, football, even baseball games to discuss. In chatting about the weather, there are only so many beautiful, ugly, hot, cold, warm, rainy, snowy descriptors. And the subject is finished.

I enrolled in a mail-in movie service and fiber-optic television with more movies and reality shows than one could ever want, only to find you don't do movies or television either.

I have noticed that my friends have a variety of subjects to discuss – their daughter-in-law's or son-in-law's attitudes about anything and everything, their grandkids and all the cute things they have learned to do. They're already walking. They can say, "Nana." Blah, Blah.

Truth is, since you guys have not married, I don't get to experience the whole grandkids thing, except vicariously through friends. And although I would love to hear about it, your date life and profession-related activity, is strictly off limits.

I have tried going to various restaurants with you. After we discuss the house specialties and how everything tastes, we invariably end up in some esoteric morass – a bunch of philosophers sitting around the table, discussing how the world is and what we would do to fix it.

I wish you'd have called me now and then just to talk. Most of the time, when I hear from you, you are in heavy traffic on the freeway. It doesn't feel very flattering to be a kill-time agent in your bored wait for right of way.

Of late, the lack of enriching familial stimuli has caused me to pretty much shrivel up. I feel all alone, cold, and am as good as skin and bones. How I wish I'd had a Parent's Manual so that

things could have turned out differently. In the grand laboratory of Life, you have been my guinea pigs and I yours. But, the experiment is over. And the results are in.

I hope these fancy digs aren't your way of placating your feelings of guilt because of what we never had. Now, I've had my say and am finished.

Again, thanks for the lovely housing. Now be good boys, close the door, and let them lower me into the earth.

Love,

Mom

The Walk

Just two wobbly kids
Propping each other up
On a journey into the unknown
Not enough sustenance
In their knapsacks
To nourish their hungry souls.

And yet, they accept
The challenge
Because the alternative
For the wobbly,

Is to go it alone,
Feeble and exhausted
At the end of each day.

Arm-in-arm they walk
Two wayfaring travelers,
Cautious,
Over an unknowable road
Some of it astonishingly glorious,
Some, unimaginably treacherous
And some, neither.

They continue together
As their knapsacks fill
With vitality and confidence —
The rich substance of life —
UNTIL they find they may
Hold hands
Instead of propping each other up.

But, as the adventure progresses
The sojourners find
They must once again
Renew their support
Of each other
Until sweet aging relieves them
Of their gentle burden.
And one travels alone,
Again wobbly,
But grateful for the richness
Of the journey.

Late-Breaking News

It's morning now. After breakfast. The time of day I check my e-mail. It's a mixed bag, checking e-mail. There are always the usual spam messages. No matter the ways I attempt to excise those evil demons who live in my computer, wanting to sell me a larger penis, cheap underground medicines, or low-interest loans, they, like fungi, don't go away. So, I zap them with my handy-dandy "delete" button. Ah. Feels good.

Next, I deal with e-mails from well-meaning friends who send me chain letters with spiritual messages that need to be passed on to twenty people within five minutes, or some terrible fate will befall me. I never do send them on. I admit, for a moment I worry. But, then, it passes, and I go on to the jokes and cartoons and political gossip pieces that are making the rounds this day.

At last, it's time to settle down and read the legitimate messages.

Today, I hear from Ellen. She has just heard from her daughter. A new grandchild is on the way. That makes seven. What bliss.

And there's mail from Kate. Her son just bought a new house in Austin. She sends pictures

of the exterior, the kitchen, the den. Lovely home, I must say.

Carol's e-mail says she is back from a trip to Peru. She went with her niece and nephew. They backpacked all the way from Cuzco to Machu Picchu. More pictures. Beautiful country.

Here is one from Dianne. I haven't heard from her in months. I open it. They've been having trouble, she and her husband. He can't find a job, and they have moved in with her mother. But, wait! Here's something new. Their older son is engaged to be married. How nice for them.

That's all the e-mail for today. I close my mailbox. So nice. Happy people having happy events. I'm happy for them. Engagements. Marriages. New houses. New babies. Trips. Happy, happy, happy.

The phone rings. It's my older son, Ron.

"Hi, Mom," he says.

"Hi, Ron. What's new?"

"Same ole, same ole."

"Well, what have you been up to?"

"Same ole, same ole."

"Been out to karaoke?"

"Yeah. Last night."

"That's nice. Go with somebody?"

"No."

"Meet any new friends?"

"No."

"Anything else?"

"No. Not much."

"Okay, then."

"See you soon."

"Sure. Bye."

Later on in the day, I hear from Larry, my younger son. He's stalled in traffic on the freeway and has nothing better to do than talk on his cell. To me.

"Hey, Mom. Wazzup?"

"Not much. Wazzup with you?"

"Been working hard. Stayed at the office until midnight last night. My group has a deliverable and we're running behind schedule."

"So, did you get it done?"

"Not yet."

"Anything new?"

"Not much. I just rented a couple of movies and plan to stay home tonight and junk out on them."

"That's nice, dear. But, don't you ever get lonely for company?"

"I see plenty of people every day at work."

"You know what they say about 'all work and no play.'"

"Don't worry about it, Mom. I have lots of friends."

"I know. I know. But, being a mom, I worry about you."

"I'll be just fine. Hey, traffic's moving again. Gotta go."

"Later."

"Yeah, later."

I sigh. Why doesn't anything good ever happen to my family? I wonder. Why doesn't anything good ever happen to me? Why can't there be a few engagements, or new jobs, or new houses, or just about anything?

Am I jealous? No. I'm not unhappy about the good fortune of others. Far from it. Am I envious?

Yes, I think envious. Like the lady says in *When Harry Met Sally*, “I’d like some of what she’s having.” It may still happen some day, even though my kids are in their thirties. I’ll just have to wait and hope.

There’s an odd parallel I am going to admit to you here. When I was a young girl, I was very slow to develop. All the other girls had breasts and big-lady hips. More important, they all had their period. Not me. Every day, indeed, every time I went to the bathroom, I’d look in my panties to see if anything had happened yet. And girls can be so vicious. In gym class, some curious sorts would climb up on the toilet in the stall next to mine in the bathroom. They’d look over the top of the stall to check and see if I had it yet. How mortifying! I heard tell that one girl who was late in getting hers attended a slumber party. When she was sleeping, the girls poured a few drops of red food coloring on her pajama bottoms. When she awoke, she thought she had finally gotten “the curse” – as it was affectionately called. Shame on those mischievous little imps for taunting her like that. I lived in mortal fear that they would do something just as sadistic to me.

Waiting for that inevitable coming of age event was difficult. And here I am, waiting again. Only this time, there are no assurances of anything actually happening.

One more sigh and I return to my computer. I reopen the mailbox. Time to write my friends back.

Just another day in wonderland.

Who is Going to Kiss Me?

Who is going to kiss me
with warm, tender lips
on a frosty autumn day
when we walk along the lake
after cooking hot dogs
over a campfire?

Who is going to take my hands away
from covering my eyes
and hold them in his
on a Saturday afternoon
in the movie theatre
when the scary monster threatens
to eat the little girl?

Who is going to laugh
and call me "Shortcakes"
when he reaches a jar I need
on the top shelf of the pantry
so that I can make
my favorite chicken dish
to serve when our friends come over?

Who is going to know
what circuit breakers to close
and what color wires to connect
to what other wires

when a violent lightning storm
burns out the connections
in my favorite lamp?

And who is going to make
lazy, gentle love to me
on a Sunday morning
when the first happy sunbeams
of daylight
play peek-a-boo with the blinds
in our bedroom?

The toilet seat is down,
and the top is on the toothpaste tube,
and there are no soggy washcloths
balled up and left on the sink.
But who is going to kiss me
on a frosty, autumn day
after we stuff ourselves with hot dogs
at the lake.

In Defense of Norman Bates

My mother is not June Cleaver. She's more like Meat Cleaver. And I'm the carcass.

It's not easy being a daughter to her. She's in what some would call her "twilight years." And while I wouldn't go so far as to say she has Alzheimer's or dementia, I also wouldn't go so far

as to say she is sane. She remembers a lot. It's just what she remembers that is the problem.

In my mind's eye, I liken her brain to a run-down motel, filled with rooms, but my mother, the motel manager, only rents out to evil thoughts. And she has a waiting line for occupancy.

One of her favorite places in the building is the old grudge area. My mother can remember a slight that happened to her seventy or more years ago. And no apologies are ever accepted.

"You can't apologize for that. It's already done. It's already out there."

Then, there are the bad birthday presents rooms. She has never liked a gift that anyone has given her. I like to play a game, guessing what will be the complaint for anything I may offer.

"Oh, honey, I'm allergic to it."

My mother is allergic to all fabrics. It is an amazing triumph of woman over the human condition every time she dresses.

Then there's: "Oh, honey, the flowers were already wilted when they were delivered."

"I can't eat that. Makes me sick to my stomach."

"I'll never use that."

"I don't need any more clothes, jewelry, candy, yada, yada."

The best I ever can hope for is: "Where did you get that?" Or: "What'd you pay for that?" That suggests she might, somewhere in the back of her head, think the present is nice or expensive or both. Or maybe she thinks just the opposite, as in "Where in the world did you get that?" Or: "Did

you actually pay good money for something like that?"

And the ultimate slap is: "Would you mind if I exchanged it?"

I've tried sending a gift certificate for the holidays. I got back a gift certificate of equal value one month later on my birthday.

"Honey, just send me a card. That's all I want."

But, then comes the second verse: "Look at all the nice things my friends' kids give their mothers."

She has lots of room at the inn for quantity complaints. Number of visits I pay. Too few. Too many. Too long. Too short. Too little time for her to have prepared for company.

There is one whole floor dedicated to personal criticism in that mad motel I call my mother's brain. The complaints are centered on me and anyone related to me. My hair is too long, too short. I am too fat, too skinny. Well, not lately on that last one. My husband is too fat, too skinny. Not lately on that last one for him, either. My lipstick is too bright, too dull, the wrong color. My clothes are too cheap looking, too expensive, unflattering. One of my sons walks funny. The other one drives poorly.

And there is another special area in the motel for unreasonable complaints and demands, designed to shame me into doing what she wants. In my mother's motel, most sentences start with four words: "A good daughter would." "A good daughter would take me in to live with her." "A good daughter would go grocery shopping for her mother." My house is three hundred miles from her grocery store.

It's way too late to remodel the rooms in my mother's motel. They were furnished with the idea in mind that they cannot be changed. Not even by Bob Vila.

I must admit that, from time to time, I have understood where Norman Bates was coming from when he hit upon his solution at the Bates Motel.

As he so correctly noted, "We all go a little crazy sometimes."

And while I do have my moments of madness, the kind of response that Norman made is not in character for me, not even as a remote possibility. Probably.

My salvation, I fear, is to forget about staying at my mother's motel, even for a short visit. From now on, I'll stay where the price to pay for a room is not so costly. If I want June Cleaver, I'll simply book a room at the Holiday Inn.

Where i s Si lence?

They told me I could find silence
by sitting on the bank of a quiet lake
and watching ripples expand
from a tiny drop of water
to the farthest sides of the lake.
I sat by the lake.
I didn't find the silence.

They told me I could find silence
by standing at the side of a baby's crib
as it lay sleeping
while gentle dreams brought
a tender smile to its face.

I stood by the crib of a sleeping baby.
I didn't find the silence.

They told me to look in the cote
where a mama ewe lay feeding
her ravenous newcomers
while the proud ram
watched with approval nearby.
I sought out the cote.
I didn't find the silence.

I asked "why?"
"Why is it
that I can find no silence
as I view all the stillness
before me?"

They told me that
silence is not the hushed scenes
from Mother Nature's palate.
Silence is not the quiet
of the moment.

Silence is the calm that comes
from the peace within.
And that is something
One can only find for oneself.

Real i t y B i t e s

March 3

Dearest Son,

I was hoping that you would never find out the identity of your real father, but under the circumstances, I feel it is time I reveal this to you. It is for your own good because I see you going down the same dangerous path as he once did. I am asking you to change your ways.

For starters, please stop growing your hair so long. It is beginning to cover much of your body. People are beginning to talk. Those arms could use a good waxing. You needn't let your back and chest get like that.

Son, you are eating me out of house and home. I know you love meat, red meat, but the budget will only stretch so far. And we need to get you to a dentist. Your bite is way out of line. Those eyeteeth really could use some filing down.

Son, I beg you, please stop staying out so late at night. You and your friends are waking the neighbors with your incessant howling and carrying on. Some have remarked that you are just like your father. And you see that he came to no good end.

Let me tell you a little about your father and our early days together. I didn't always see him as I see him now. I can remember when we met. He was crouched in the corner wearing that heavy, grey wool sweater of his.

He was so handsome with those chocolate brown eyes and that lean, muscular body. But he had a hunger in his eyes.

Your father was a drifter who moved in his own world with his own pack of friends. But he never failed to respond to a cry for help. Particularly from a woman. I must admit, there were many times I manufactured a story just to get him to come to my aid. Friends told me that behavior could get old. They said he wouldn't come if I cried...well, for help, too often. Still, when he heard his name, your dad always responded to my cry.

All went well for a while. The living was good. And even though I had to put up with the constant companionship of his pals, we were happy. Your father always tried to provide for us. There are times we were close to starvation. Hunger was at the door. I could almost hear the... well, the howling. But I only had to open the door to find one of your father's pals there.

Your Dad was a sly and dangerous guy, but he always saw to your safety. He taught you how to stand up for yourself. You never had to worry about being left on your own to be treated roughly or criticized. No one could throw you to the... throw you around. He was there for you, as were his buddies.

But there came a time, as everyone had warned me, when your father's wandering ways would overtake his sense of security. He told me that he was a hunter at heart, going out there in the world to provide for us, that he would be back. But I had seen the voracious look in his eyes and the wanderlust whenever he stared out the window. He would gaze at the moon, as if it were calling to him.

And even though I knew he and I were mated for life, I also knew your father would eventually meet his maker. Guys like him scare people with their shenanigans. You could almost say they are an endangered species. To his credit, your dad escaped with his life many times before he was shot one day.

Son, by now, I'm sure you have guessed your father was no ordinary man. But for the most part, he kept his uniqueness under wraps, just as I am asking you to. I want to assure you that I am not ashamed of you or of your heritage; and I will never, ever disown you. But son, it is time you faced facts: Your father was a member of the *Canis lupus* family.

There's no other way to put it – he was a wolf.

Lovingly,

Your Mother

Di shi ng wi th the Enemy

If ever you want to discover the dirt about a family, ask someone who's divorced out of it. That's what my husband and I found out a couple of months ago when we attended a family wedding.

Now, to be honest, we never have been too close to this branch of the family tree, believing that a few of the boughs are a bit twisted and some were missing a few leaves. No different from every other family tree. But fortunately, we have managed to keep our distance. That is what made it so unlikely that we would be the recipients of some delicious information.

We were sitting around a table at the dinner following the wedding ceremony when Cara, a cousin's ex-wife, sashayed up to the table.

"Long time, no see," she offered.

"Long time no see anyone in the family," my husband informed her.

"Oh? On the outs?"

"Not really. We just haven't been around these parts lately, and frankly, we don't correspond with anyone."

"Then, you don't know?" she asked, her eyebrows about an inch higher than before.

"Know what?"

“About Teddy and me. We’re divorced.”

“Boy, we really are in this family’s version of Lower Slobbovia,” my husband said. “Didn’t know a thing about it. When did this happen?”

“We’ve been divorced for a few years now. Teddy couldn’t keep his pants zipped up – outside of the house that is. Inside, was just the opposite.”

“He was a womanizer?”

“Well, that’s among the kinder names I’ve called him.”

My husband looked puzzled. “It’s hard to believe.”

“Why’s that?” she asked.

“Well, Teddy was always a model kid. He made good grades. He was respectful to his parents. And most of all, he was a real family guy – just like his dad.”

Cara glowered. “He was like his dad, all right.”

Now, this allegation was too much for my husband to buy. Teddy’s father, Stan, had always been a role model to my husband.

“What you say about Teddy may be true,” he challenged, “but I knew Uncle Stan very well when he was alive. He was one of the most honorable men I have ever met.”

“I’m not surprised you’d say that. He had Teddy and the rest of the family fooled, as well.”

Now, I was starting to get interested in the conversation. I can smell dish a mile away, and this was going to be a gourmet delight.

“Tell us,” I encouraged my new best friend, Cara. I could see my husband tighten up. His mother had always told him that it was not nice to

gossip. However, my mother never gave me that message. I was all ears.

Cara came closer, lowering her voice so that only my husband and I could hear. “You knew about Stan’s other family, didn’t you?”

“No,” I said.

“I didn’t even know he was married before,” my husband said. I could see that he was in total shock by this new information.

Cara grinned. “Who said anything about ‘married?’”

Now, my husband’s face started to change colors. I was hoping one of the relatives in the room knew CPR – just in case.

“Go on,” I said, licking my chops.

“Seems that good, ole family man, Stan, good upstanding morally-pure Stan, good holier-than-all-of-us Stan, had a second family. Not a legal one, mind you. A common law family, complete with wife, three children, a house, two cars, and a dog. His common law kids are grown up now, all having been put through college, all married, all presenting Stan with beautiful grandchildren to entertain him in his old age.”

My husband and I sat there, shell-shocked. No one spoke for a while. But my curiosity got the best of me.

“How in the world did you find out?”

“While Stan was alive, he entrusted his safe deposit box key to his son, Teddy. A copy of his will and various other papers were in the box. He knew his son might need some of those documents to take care of business matters at Stan’s death. Stan also had put the birth certificates,

and house and car titles of his other family in there. Stan figured that when he got older, he'd turn all those papers over to his other "wife."

"But Mother Nature pulled a fast one on Stan. He died young. He had a heart attack much earlier than anyone could have expected. When Teddy went to take care of his father's affairs, he found that he literally was taking care of his father's affairs."

"I wonder why he kept a second family?" my husband mused.

"You know Aunt Sally and you have to ask that question?" I responded.

Cara filled us in though. "Stan was in love with Elisabeth before he ever met your Aunt Sally. He wanted to marry her, but his father didn't approve of the match, feeling Elisabeth wasn't suitable. Stan's dad said that he would disown and disinherit Stan should he decide to marry Elisabeth. Stan was too weak to stand up to his father, so he made a compromise with himself. He kept Elisabeth and his other family as a private affair while satisfying his father's demands, marrying an acceptable wife and having another family with her. Lucky Stan was able to walk between worlds, enjoying the best of both."

At this point, other relatives showed up at the table. They took one look at me and said that I looked like the cat that just swallowed the canary.

"No," I said. "Just the roast beef."

December 1, 2001

The living room lights are out, but the Christmas tree lights are still twinkling, sending tiny, ephemeral leprechauns dancing across the wall. A dance of doom.

There are presents beneath the tree. One for her, one for him, and a few for the little one. Nothing more.

“Sure is different than last year, isn’t it,” she whispers.

He can barely hear her, which is fine by him. “Yeah,” he answers, his voice husky with pain. “Different.”

She sits on the floor and pulls her knees up to her chin, fastening her arms around her legs. She rocks gently, whimpering. He touches her on the shoulder. She pulls away with an unspoken “don’t.”

They stare, the two of them, with hollow eyes, into the darkness.

“Remember, last year at this time? We had just moved into the house,” he says. “I thought it was the most beautiful house I’d ever seen. The fireplace, the winding staircase, the granite island.” His voice trails off.

Is he telling me he wants to sell it?

“We thought everything was perfect,” she says.
“And it was.”

How disappointed in me is she?

They sit silently, intently, watching nothing.

She smiles a wry smile. “We’d just had the baby. He was so cute when we first brought him home. All bubbles and burps and dirty diapers.”

Is she sorry we started a family?

“And we’d just bought the furniture. And the Beamer,” he adds. “When I was growing up, my family had an old jalopy. I never dreamed I’d have a car like that.”

Is he sorry we spent the money?

“I guess Christmas will be sparse this year,” he says. He shakes his head from side to side, as if negating the turn of events. “You know, it all happened so fast. No time to make alternative plans.”

She cups her hand and stares at her fingernails for a long moment, reflecting.

“Weren’t there rumors?” she asks.

Is that a hint of criticism I hear in her voice?

“There are always rumors in an organization.”

Is that a defensive tone he is taking?

She wipes her nose with her shirtsleeve, not wanting to get up to get a tissue. This is the closest they have come to talking about it.

“All the Enron executives were gung-ho. ‘Everything will be fine,’ they assured us. They were leading a flock of innocent lambs. We were so trusting. So naïve.”

Couldn’t he have figured it out?

“One day you are living the American dream; the next day, the nightmare.” The minute she said it, she was sorry.

Does she wish she hadn't married me?

“There will be lots of competition around town. So many people laid off, so few jobs to go round.

Does he think he's not competitive?

“I'm sure you'll find something,” she says. “You are intelligent and resourceful, industrious and...”

Is she just saying that or does she think I'm a failure?

“All of them – of us – are smart and inventive,” he says. He sighs. “Oh, I'll get something eventually, but in the meantime...” He knocks on the wooden floor and cups his hand around his ear. “Is that the wolf I hear at the door?”

“Can't we ask our families?” she asks.

“Our families are barely eking out a living themselves. You know that.”

Are we going to be the same as they are? they both wonder, silently.

“I can always get a job,” she offers.

What about the baby?

“We could take turns baby-sitting,” she answers the unasked question.

Baby-sitting? Really. I need to be out there looking. And what of her idea for home schooling? She was going to start in infancy.

He sighs, lifting his shoulders and dropping them back down. “I honestly don't know what to do.”

“Yeah,” she says, “what do we do now?”

Azaleas

You should see the beautiful Houston azaleas in the morning. After they unfold their arms and open their dazzling eyes to take in the universe. All puffed up and soft and purple. Their virgin skin begging to be touched.

The Ellis's are still sleeping, Mr. And Mrs. Renewing their bones for another day. Pushing back the anxiety they felt yesterday and will feel today, and tomorrow, and on and on until...

Young Jody tosses in his sleep, guilt-ridden for his youth, picturing in his mind's eye what he is yet unable to know in person. Dreams that feature the twin warriors, Pride and Shame. Pride's chest swelling for Tom, the older brother who fights half a world away; shame rearing its ugly head at Jody for not being able to share the burden. Jody is fourteen.

The younger brother awakens and stares at the ceiling, realizing, once more, that those twin combatants are not dissipated by his consciousness, and will surely return as haunting companions. Nightmares that are not dreams.

Through his window, he can see parts of the house: the screen door to the back porch, the azaleas phalanxing a wall on either side of it. So

simple and carefree. Uncomprehending to the perils outside of their cosseted quarters.

There are no azaleas where Tom is. Only the stark irregularity of the rocky terrain, rough surfaces to be negotiated. Narrow roads – unconcealed, dangerous, and vulnerable. While the nubile azaleas enjoy dependable moisture and renewal, Tom’s backdrop is scorched, dehydrated, but arguably, the least of the perils that surround him. There is no renewal here. Only loss.

The summer heat of the day is met by the evil that skulks in the Iraqi night, lurking behind boulders along the road, pot-holed with IED’s. No place for azaleas.

The Ellis’s and Jody watch their azaleas, apprehensive and fearful. Jealous. They know that those lovely flowers will be back next year. They don’t know about Tom.

I Remember Li | acs

I remember lilacs
most of all,
their sweet, seductive bouquet
romancing the gentle Nebraska air
on a lazy afternoon
in early spring.

Soft, billowy sheets
smelling of bleach and detergent,
and I,
lightly covered
with a cotton receiving blanket,
in the very middle
of my grandparents bed,
two great rolls of towels
flanking my sides
so I won't fall off.

A gentle wind
caressing my body
spread-eagled on the bed,
carefree
with the fleeting
and wholesome purity
of infancy.

A happy, little robin
perching on the window sill
telegraphing a dulcet melody,
just for my ears:
"cheerilee, cheerilee, cheerilee,"
then fluttering off
to his berth
in a nearby elm tree.

The calm and joyful wholesomeness
of so long ago,
the heady fragrance
and cheerful sounds
when life was simple
and when uncertainties
did not clog my mind
hiding the beauty of the moment.

Lost and Found

Where are you my cherished friend?
I have looked for you in the morning
When I leave the house for my walk,
In all our old haunts
Where we used to play,
And when I want to sing
A barking duet.

I have looked under the bed
And behind the sofa,
In the backyard,
In all our secret locations
Where we hid from our masters.
I haven't been able to eat, or to sleep
without you nearby.
I miss you.

I must say
there have been times
that I have enjoyed
my new found status.
I have been pampered and treasured
like never before.
They have coaxed me to eat.
They have rubbed
my soft, little belly

and scratched behind my ears.
I still miss you.

Now, suddenly, I am faced
with a tiny new intruder.
She wants to play with my toys
And eat my food.
She pulls on my ears
and bites my tail.
She chases me around the house.
I can get no peace

I think she and I will eventually
work out our differences
and like rival nations
learn to co-exist.
I can deal with this tiny creature,
and we will probably become friends.
But to tell you the truth,
I still miss you.



To Mrs. Claus from the Other Woman

Dear Mrs. Claus,

I've actually waited 750 years before writing to you. And believe me, it isn't going to be easy to tell you what I have to say about your husband. But he left me no other choice.

Santa Cheeks (that's my pet name for him) and I have been carrying on an illicit love affair for years. How do you think he got those rosy cheeks? I'll leave that to your imagination.

All those late nights he claimed to be working in the toy factory, overseeing the elves – not true. He was with me.

He bought me any number of beautiful and sometimes kinky presents, for example, that scant see-through red teddy, all decorated with white fur. He furnished me with enormous amounts of milk and cookies. I'm not sure where he got all of them, but he assured me that he had an endless supply. And he brought me batteries of every size and shape. I found out they came from the toy boxes where they were once part of the package. But, Santa Cheeks just pulled them right out of the box and slapped a "batteries not included"

label on instead. Of course, kids' parents had to spring for the batteries, but Santa Cheeks rationalized it as a mere cost-sharing budgetary practice.

Don't feel too sorry for yourself. At least, you get to live in a cozy warm cottage, with a fireplace and soft mattresses and creature comforts. Me? I have to share a reindeer stable with eight unruly beasts and one neurotic one, Rudolph, who is constantly trying to set his nose on fire. Actually, I gave Rudolph a couple of my rechargeable batteries. It has curbed his pyromania, but has not controlled his inferiority complex.

That stable smells awful, but I have always loved Santa Cheeks and would have withstood any challenging circumstances just to be with him. He told me that he was going to leave you, and would tell you about it soon. That was 750 years ago. He never did.

What finally was the straw that broke the reindeer's back was his lie about Christmas Eve. Santa Cheeks told me that he had toys to deliver and couldn't spend Christmas time with me. I bought that, but later found out that he hired a Rent-a-Temp actor to put his Santa suit on and deliver the gifts for him. Then, he went home to spend Christmas Eve with you and the kids, leaving me with nothing but a promise of "next year."

So, here I sit, alone, after all these years. I realize now that I am never going to have Santa Cheeks to myself; but, neither will you. Knowing him as well as I do, I'm sure that he will simply search around for another someone just like me.

My advise to you is to get out while you are still young enough to find someone. Go to an online dating service and find your soul mate. I heard there are any number of good sites for guys in your area: Yukondate Online, Arctichoneys.com, Eight-Minute Partner Search. And to tell you the truth, Jessica Mary (I hope you don't mind my being so informal), here's some friendly girl-to-girl advice. Drop about ten pounds, get a shorter more chic hairdo, buy some attractive clothes, and get out there.

You deserve better. Yes, come next Christmas, you can give Santa Cheeks a decree of divorce for Christmas. Or if you decide to stay with him, considering being a little s"elfish." Get my drift?

Sincerely,

The Other Woman

The Two-Husband Blues

I am not a member of some free-spirited religious sect. Nor am I unwittingly breaking the law. But, I have two husbands.

I go to bed with husband A and awaken with husband B. I think I am starting my grocery-

shopping excursion with A, who is willing to try any new food I am interested in. Suddenly, I discover it's B who is there, analyzing what peanut butter I buy. And often, A is back again, smiling sweetly, before I get through the check-out line.

When I'm sad, husband A is a wonderful listener and even offers gentle bits of advice, in a manner that I can accept without feeling pressured. But, if husband B hears my tale of woe, about half of the time, he doesn't even acknowledge that I have said anything; the other half, he reminds me what a demanding nutcase I am and tells me to leave him alone.

Husband A will go shopping with me when I need a new dress. He'll sit outside the dressing room, waiting. When I come out to model the clothing, he will give me his opinion. Often times, if I am choosing between two or three outfits, he will tell me to get them all.

"You'll have something to wear at one of those times when you say you have nothing to wear."

"Oh, no, honey. All three would be too expensive."

"Don't worry about it. We can afford it." Smile, smile.

Husband B, on the other hand, will stand behind me, hovering, as I look through the racks. How I hate it when he hovers. He will stand about eight inches behind me, and he'll observe – not saying a word. And every so often he will look at his watch.

He doesn't always hover. Sometimes, he brings a paperback novel with him and just sits there

and reads until I'm through looking. The result is the same though. I get his message.

To his credit, occasionally, when he doesn't want to be bothered, Husband B will tell me to go shopping alone and leave him at home to relax. That's code for stripping down to his boxers and tee, putting his feet up on the coffee table, eating corn chips, and watching Bugs Bunny on the tube.

Husband A doesn't mind if I drive the car when we are going somewhere together. He'll sit shotgun and quietly look at the scenery that we pass. Husband B braces himself with one hand against the dash and his foot on a phantom brake.

Some would say these two husbands are sitting at opposite ends of the bi-polar seesaw. Some would call it DID, that's Dissociative Identity Disorder. In the olden days they used to call it "split personality." But, I think the soap operas have it right. Husband B is the evil twin of Husband A.

The two of them are constantly playing tricks on me. It keeps me off balance. I think, at night, when I am sleeping, they meet in the living room and plan for the next day. Or just joke about the great deception they pulled off this day.

I have tried to fight it, but am resigned. I guess I have no choice but to bring out the heavy artillery against them. I'm bringing her out.

"Wife B, won't you join us for some fun?"

Food for the Nose

I have heard that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach*, but I believe that the nose is an equally important path to the heart. I make this claim because of a recent question I asked my two sons and my husband. Why I asked it, I can't say. It was just one of those crazy questions that occurs to me now and again and that I am often sorry I asked.

I wondered if there were any particular scents or aromas that reminded them of me.

First, I put the question to my older son. I expected him to say something sweet about being cuddled in my arms when he was a baby and smelling my perfume or my freshly shampooed hair. Not so. His answer was quick and decisive.

“Turkey.”

He would always associate me with the smell of turkey.

“What? You think I smell like a turkey?”

“No, but sometimes you act like one.”

So much for asking your kids dumb questions.

On further inquiry, he explained that he would always hold dear the aroma of turkey baking in the oven for special occasions. He would walk into the kitchen. There I'd be, standing in front of an

open oven door, basting syringe in hand, giving it to the turkey with great aplomb.

Actually, my memory is quite different than his. I don't remember a time that I baked a turkey, that I didn't spill turkey grease on my arm or my dress. Or a turkey that I didn't curse. Or any turkey that I didn't have to give CPR when it started to dry out in one place while it was still running blood in another.

But, that was his memory. And I couldn't help but conclude that he associated mother love with turkey.

So, on I went on to my younger son.

"What scent or odor might someone remember about me?" I asked, quite certain that this son, a more introspective, philosophical soul, would provide one of those lovely perfume and shampoo responses.

Wrong, again. His first answer was "Beef Stroganoff." He has always loved the way I do that. He doesn't remember that the first time I ever made it, I substituted "tomato sauce with chiles" for "tomato sauce with chives." That was the day I learned, the hard way, to be sure to wear my glasses to the supermarket.

"Is that all?" I asked. "Beef Stroganoff?"

He thought for a while.

"Tough question, Mom."

"Well, let's go this way. Are there any smells or odors that you thought about that you didn't tell me?" Now, for sure, I'd get to the good stuff.

"Yeah, there is one. I guess I'll always remember that gross-smelling stuff you put on your hair to color it."

“Gross-smelling?” Who knew? “Does it smell after I wash my hair, too?”

“I’ve gotten used to it.”

Now I am wondering if that stuff smells when I go out. Do my neighbors smell me and think *she colors her hair*? Or, *I don’t want to sit by her, not if I have to breathe*. Oh, drat. Why did I have to ask him at all?

On I went to my husband. He’s the man with whom I have shared my life, the one who has smelled every intimate part of me. What would he remember?

“Please don’t tell me that the scent you remember is food,” I pleaded.

“Not a chance.”

“Then, what?” Now, I was ready to burst with joy as my man told me which of my womanly charms he appreciates.

“Lilac,” he said.

“Lilac?”

“Yeah. That perfume you wear some of the time, smells just like lilac.”

“Which one? I don’t have any lilac perfume. I have tea rose perfume, jasmine, gardenia. But, no lilac. Are you sure?”

“I know lilac when I smell it.”

I turned his response over in my mind, trying to think why he would say that. I’ve always loved lilacs. One of my earliest memories is of the lilacs in my grandma’s garden. I remember waking up after a nap in the bedroom at the back of the tiny grocery store my grandparents owned in Council Bluffs, Iowa. The window was open. A quiet, mid-western breeze brought the fragrant bouquet of

lilac wafting through the air, permeating every pore of my being and every molecule of the room. But, that was when I was a kid. My husband couldn't possibly know about that. And as for lilac perfume, I don't have any.

"Yes, you do," he said and retreated to his den.

Now, either he doesn't really know what lilacs smell like or maybe, he remembers that smell from some other woman wearing lilac perfume. And if that's the case, is his memory from long ago or could it be current? Another question to consider, another worry along with my newly acquired, hair-coloring phobic concerns.

I wonder what I'd answer if asked about smells I remember. There are so many. I think we women have particularly acute senses. I remember the smell of my first boyfriend's pimple soap. And the coffee-like aroma of puppy breath. And the masculinity of sweat when my husband comes in after working in the yard. And baby poop. And the dank smell of the carpet by the window that was accidentally left open during the rain. And the smell of sex. And the smell of death. So many, many wonderful and terrible smells. The world is indeed full of them.

I guess I must not really have been looking for my family's answer to what they will remember or what reminds them of me. I was probably looking for the way to a man's heart in a bottle. In my next life, maybe I will open an aroma therapy store and try to sell romance, happiness, mother love, sex, and oh, yes, lilac.

* Dinah Mulock Craik is credited with observing, in "John Halifax, Gentleman" (1857)

Popped Baby Bubbles

The baby life is gone now
evaporated,
exterminated by worn out brain cells
and severed synapses.
Vanished like popped baby bubbles.
No more kisses and cuddles
if there ever were any.

The childhood is still around,
albeit limping.
How could it not be
with a mother obsessed
with control
feeding on power
and a father never there
even though he lived with,
ate with,
stayed home with
his family?

The child needed to be a hero
for parents who were needy,
and depressed.
How could one so young know
that no amount of achievement,
no extraordinary deed,

no measure of excellence
could satisfy the thirst of persons
drinking from a well
with no floor.

Young adulthood is gone.
No thrill of first love.
No excitement of choosing
dishes and forks and wine glasses.
No parents and grandparents
carrying pictures
and putting posters on cars
to “ask me about my grandkids.”
The tasks at hand were to play shrink,
minister, nanny, and parent
Not for one’s husband and kids
But for one’s parents.

The middle-age madness
brings on the questions.
What was missed?
Lost? Ruined? Not done?
Janus looks both ways.
Backward is love lost,
foolishness,
and too many, many regrets.
Forward is the road,
inevitably descending,
with many perilous bumps
to negotiate
and few peaks
to anticipate.

But, soon the passion passes.
One accepts one’s destiny
and welcomes it.

One finds one's own voice
and embraces it.
One can laugh at the dead brain cells
and severed synapses,
the childhood limp,
the adult crises and setbacks
and madness.
One moves on,
Head in the air
throwing caution
and logic to the wind.
One makes it through
and is grateful.

Contracti ons and Contradi cti ons

If only I could revisit the last days
Of my father's life
To tell him all I ever wanted
Or needed to say
And I couldn't.

He asked me to visit him
When he was fifty-four.
He said he'd like to see me
And my new baby.
But, I couldn't.

How could I see him
Ravaged by his excesses?
So unlike before
When he was young and vital
And I was so proud of him.
I couldn't or maybe,
I just wouldn't.

So many times I came
As the rescuer of him
And the child who was my mother.
A hopeless pursuit for which I
Had to try,
But I needn't have bothered.

So, I let the time pass by,
And I kept my equanimity.
I told myself I wasn't obliged
To see, to endure.
And now, I wonder
Just one last time,
Should I have been there
To comfort him?
To let him sleep in peace
For eternity?

Maybe, I should have.
But I didn't.

Facing Our Sins

My mother was not pro-choice when it came to religion. I never had a say in the matter. I had to go to services, whether I wanted to or not. And believe me, given the option, I'd choose "not."

My distaste for attending services led to my developing a serious malady – an uncontrollable tendency to laugh during the liturgy.

As a child, it caused me an incredible amount of embarrassment. Was there some kind of psychological masochism at work? Like guilt for not wanting to be there? Only God knew, and He wasn't talking.

Every week, I would sit in the pew next to my mother and behave like a good little girl. But then, suddenly, the dreaded affliction would rear its ugly head.

It would start with a little grin, then a smirk to hide the grin, and soon, a silent giggle. Do you have any idea how much a person has to hyperventilate to keep a giggle silent? Then would come the chuckle. It is really, really hard to stifle an unwanted chuckle, especially with the clergy standing at the pulpit ready to give the evil eye to anyone who is not participating in the adoration or listening to the sermon.

It didn't help that my best friend, Peggy, and her parents always sat in the pew directly across from ours. Peggy would pick up on my distress the moment I started to grin and would be a willing accomplice to the mischief. Sometimes, she would make a funny face. Peggy could push up the nostrils part of her nose with her index finger while extending her mouth to double its length with her middle finger and thumb. Then, she'd stick her tongue through that long narrow slot her lips made and wiggle it back and forth, all the while crossing her eyes.

That would raise the ante to a higher level. Soon, I was laughing, trying desperately not to make a sound, sometimes having to hold my nose to stop it. Invariably, my mother would look over at me, and seeing me laughing and not paying attention to services, would shoot me a glare that, if she were the penitent sort, would have required her to spend several humble days in serious prayer.

Peggy's mother wasn't any better. If she caught Peggy doing her "face," she would give her a quick, discrete whack to pull her hand away from her nostrils and mouth. This would make Peggy and I both double over, tears in our eyes from trying to suppress our hysterics, the whole idea of a noisy chortle threatening our very being, not to mention our bladders.

Nothing about services was funny. In fact, just the opposite. There were serious matters covered there. The sermons were full of stories from the Bible about people who did bad things and were punished severely for their transgressions. Adam

and Eve, Cain and Abel, Lot's wife, Job – all having to face their own weaknesses. And now, Peggy and me.

What Peggy and I took from the whole experience was that God was punishing us for our sins. Just like He did those people in the Bible. He clearly didn't want us to laugh during services.

Peggy and I got through our childhood without God exacting too much penitence from us. But we grew up to be somewhat irreverent adults. Nowadays, Peggy and I occasionally sit across from each other in services and remember. Once in a while, when no one is watching, Peggy discretely does that funny grimace that got us into so much trouble years ago. Not the whole thing. After all, we're adults. She only pushes up her nostrils and crosses her eyes.

And we laugh.

We're going to Hell.

Chapter Three:

Ai n' t I t Awful
(and sometimes)
Awesome

Flight into Novel world

If there are three lessons I should have learned in life, they are to keep my eyes open, my mouth shut, and my assessment of reality separate from my fantasies. Unfortunately, like all the other lessons that circumstances have caused me to confront, casually or headlong, these tidbits of information are much easier to talk about than to put into action. In fact, I have an imprint on my forehead of the place on the same brick wall where I have repeatedly batted my head.

In keeping my eyes open, I am reminded of the old Indian legend of the blind men who went to visit an elephant. One felt the sharp, pointed tusk of the elephant and thought the beast must look like a spear. One found the trunk writhing back and forth and thought the elephant must resemble a snake. Still another touched the massive elephant's leg and thought the animal must look like a tree. Each had found a different part of the elephant that he could describe with some accuracy. But, no one had the whole picture.

My novel writing is much like that. Over time, I have proved I can be just as blind as the blind men's party, even with my eyes wide open. For

example, I can examine my characters, their dialogue, their points of view, the setting, the style, the plot, the moral of the story. Each effort may be technically correct, but taken together – wow, what a mess I can make. Sometimes, I think I was put on this earth just to show other self-described writers how a person can be fairly successful in the development of the parts of a story, but wind up with a “where did she go wrong?” conclusion. So much for keeping my eyes open.

Now, about keeping my mouth shut. There are some persons, one meets them at writers’ conferences and in classes, who really can sell a story. They can take the most god-awful piece of work and make an agent salivate to be the first person to sell it. I have been at a few of those conferences. I have been told to have a one-sentence synopsis that will serve as the hook. But, I develop a disease the second I walk into the interview. I call it “cottonballitis.” Not only do I not remember that one killer sentence that will enthrall them, even when I prepare a Palin-palm reminder, but I can’t think of my name, my reason for writing the piece, any of the characters, or why I am at the conference in the first place. It brings to mind how I felt in high school when one of the cute guys talked to me. Even though I could talk a blue-streak on the phone with any of my girlfriends (and the not so cute boyfriends), when one of the hotties at school said “hello,” all I could do was try to swallow those cotton balls stuck in my throat. By the time I could answer, the guy was down the hall talking to one of the less self-

conscious girls. I am not so sure that the lesson of keeping my mouth shut will help me much in my writing pursuits.

The third lesson I should have learned as time has passed, is to be able to differentiate between fantasy and reality. That's a little complicated for a writer. I can't say how many times I have lulled myself to sleep at night dreaming of how Matt Lauer would interview me on *The Today Show*. What I'd wear, how I would have my hair fixed, how charming, while humble, I would be, deigning to grant the interview – but just to Matt and to Barbara Walters for her special. I wonder what question she would ask me to make me cry like she does all of the celebrities.

Unfortunately, this is where reality really conks one in the head (right next to where the brick imprint is) every time the dread rejections show up in the mail. Of the three lessons, that one seems the hardest to learn. But, maybe it is a lesson that should never be learned, a disease that must never be cured.

As an aspiring writer, I believe in allowing myself to continue making the same mistake over and over, albeit with improvement in my editing skills. And as hard as it is, I must promise myself to keep on dreaming. Fantasies are what writers are made of (I think). And in Novelworld, the daydream, as long as it is creative or enlightening, is necessary food for thought.

Miles to Go, Too, Mr. Frost

He was going to watch the woods fill up with snow, but his little horse gave the harness bells a shake and that was enough to deter him. So off he rode to keep his promises and to traverse those many miles before he slept.*

I was sad for the poor chap who couldn't spare the time to feel the easy wind and revel in the downy flakes. I wondered what tasks he had to carry out that were so important, so utterly vital, that he couldn't linger there for a while and allow his senses to experience the delicious knowledge of the snowfall. To feel his skin kissed by the errant flakes and frosty air. To hear the peaceful quiet.

Then, I sat and reflected on my own life. I realized how many years I allowed myself to rush from place to place, from activity to activity, to easily be deterred from enjoying the world around me – the profound and even the mundane, my own private snowfall in the woods.

I have discovered that age has a mellowing factor. And like it or not, my body and my mind gratefully temper my own self-denying tendencies.

At those special times, I can look around me, and I see the beauty that is there if I just wait quietly and appreciate it.

The majesty of the downtown buildings lights twinkling in the midnight-blue, velvet sky. The almost too sweet serenade of a violin when played by a master. The sun dappling through cathedral-ceilinged trees at the end of a rain shower. The fluorescent headliners of a bus scaring away the darkness. The butterfly kiss of a baby's eyelashes on my cheek. The cacophony of a chorus of birds holding convention in the trees at dawn. Watching my family fall asleep in front of the television after Thanksgiving dinner. The coffee breath of a new puppy. The thrill of lifting my voice in prayer in unison with others, filling the sanctuary with praise to God. The continuity and poignant grandeur of the Missing Man Fly-by at a football game. A "Peanuts" cartoon. The whisper of bluebonnets gracefully swaying in harmony on a brisk spring day. A good laugh with girlfriends until our cheeks hurt. An evening launch of the NASA space shuttle – giant red and yellow and orange flames thrusting an aircraft out into the vast nothingness of space. Waking up alive after an operation. Waking up next to my husband. Just waking up.

Now, I begin to understand what it means to stop in the midst of my everyday disorder and to put the beauty of life in perspective. Now, I find I have a whole new set of promises to keep and many more miles before I sleep.

Sweet Silence

Their chorus is lyrical,
a smell so sweet
it deceives the senses:
the tart scent of tea roses
caught up in a tiny bouquet,
each adding more
to the appeal of its fellows;
the exotic sensuousness
of wild-growing lilacs,
unable to hide their glory
from those who would
partake of their gifts;
the spicy luxury of carnations,
full of secret promise
concealed within
their clustered petals.
And here am I, the lucky recipient
of this symphony of aromas.

I sense the warmth of the room.
The steam wafting upward,
carrying with it
the melody of their music.
Every pore of my being
inhales the extravagant harmony.
I disrobe and dance around the room

in humble appreciation and celebration,
an accomplice
in the magnificence of the moment.
Then, I immerse myself ,
and lean back,
a rolled pillow of terrycloth
embracing my neck
and enjoy the quiet pleasure
of a long, hot bath.

Hai r - a - See, Monsi eur Gi venchy

All right, Monsieur Givenchy, so you think you know it all. I had to laugh out loud when I heard what you said: “Hairstyle is the final tip-off whether or not a woman really knows herself.”

A woman often does know herself. But, you cannot possibly guess if she does or doesn't. Don't pretend you are tipped-off by what hairstyle she wears. You have no clue.

For example, if a woman has a feather-cut, does it mean that she is the essence of elegance and grace – like a swan? Or does it mean that she is a birdbrain?

If she has a one-pin up-do, does it mean that she is low maintenance, or is she just a lazy slob?

If her hair is styled like Farrah Fawcett was in that famous shampoo commercial, is she wild and wonderful, too? Or does she simply like to take long walks in the Houston humidity? Or is she currently out of hairspray?

If a woman wears a ponytail, is she the closest thing around to a horse's arse, Monsieur Givenchy? Or does it mean that she would be fun to ride? If she wears a bob, is she neat or has she had a sex change operation?

If she is still sporting one of those old-fashioned beehives, does it mean that she has quite a sting? Is in need of a buzz? Or is she simply looking for some honey?

If a woman wears a close-to-the-head, helmet-style hairdo, is she precise and well groomed? Or could she be a martinet in some despot's army? If she has a French twist, is she a patriot from across the pond or is she a contortionist?

If she wears bangs does that mean she is quick with a rim shot? Or a loyal member of the National Rifle Association?

If she sports long, straight hair, does it refer to how she is laced, what type of narrow road she travels, or maybe, her sexual preference?

And then there is the problem of dye. If a woman tints her hair, a guy like you can only guess what color is operational – the original color, the new one, or the grey that is under all that color.

I don't even want to think about what it might mean if her hair is blown dry.

Monsieur Givenchy, as you can see, you can't really tell anything about a woman by her

hairstyle. You'd be better advised to see what she selects from the rack of clothes that you design. That might be more of a tip-off.

Ode to the Weatherman

Whenever the sun blazes bright in the sky
Whenever the wind and the rain change our plans
Whatever we need to prepare to be safe
We can count on advice from our weatherman.

So, if he informs us of danger to come
And if he alerts us to imminent threats,
Then, please tell him when he's expressing concern
Here are some phrases we wish he'd forget:

Don't call it "wicked" – that weather out there
Although the alliteration is sweet.
Don't you have *other* ways to express
The way Mother Nature doles out cold, storms,
and heat?

Call it "abhorrent" or "cruel" or "mean,"
Characterize it as "cursed" or as "vile,"
Describe it as "evil" or even as "base,"
But please don't use "wicked" in stories you file.

Don't tell us people should just "hunker down;"
Don't tell us to "brace for the storm."
Aren't there some other ways to reveal
How people should handle the news you inform?

And please, most of all, when you talk about storms
Reminding us to close windows and latches,
Remember that very few people these days
Have homes that allow them to “batten down
hatches.”

So, now at the end of this weather tirade
We want you to know that it really won't bore us
If weathermen drop those clichés that they use
And if they would just consult a thesaurus.

Short People Got No Reason To Live

There I am, at the theatre. I make my usual stop off at the Ladies Room so that I can sit through the performance. Well, at least, Act One. Out I meander into the lobby, ready to find my husband and head to our seats. Oh, there he is. We're set.

He's got it easy. He's taller than a lot of guys. He stood six feet four inches tall when I married him. He's shorter now. I don't know if that's because he's much older, or if living with me has beaten him down a few inches. At any rate, he's tall enough to be spotted in a crowd. I simply look up.

Now, for me, it's a different story. I'm a short person. Believe me when I tell you it is much more difficult to be, as some might put it, "undersized."

Randy Newman says in his infamous hit, "Short People Have No Reason to Live." I don't agree, and if Randy were a short person, I'm sure he would see things differently. He also says we short folk have, among other things, little hands and little eyes, and tiny little feet. If Randy saw my feet, he would surely change his tune, if you excuse the pun.

If I go anywhere with a normal size person, say a girlfriend, I have to tell her where I will meet her so she can see me.

"I'll meet you under the clock on the third floor at eleven o'clock sharp. I'll be wearing a red sweater and jeans and tennies."

Each year, I go downtown to watch the Thanksgiving Day Parade in our town. I tell my friends, "Hey, let's get there early so we can stand in the front row, so that I will be able to see." If the weather is nice, there's no problem. It only gets to be contentious when it's raining, and the wind is blowing, and the temperature is dipping lower than is comfortable. Well, maybe I should be at home stuffing the turkey anyway.

And there are sports events. Having two sons who love sports and a husband who watches every sport event known to man on television, I see a lot of baseball, football, basketball, and a variety of other contests. Occasionally, the family winds up at live games. I hate it when the team plays well. Everyone excitedly and happily jumps to his feet and starts cheering. Everyone, but me.

All I can see is the backs of people's heads or their backs. What I usually do is hop up on my seat so that I can watch. The persons behind me don't take too kindly to my solution.

And there is the grocery store. Invariably, I have something on my list that is on the highest level of the grocer's shelf. Imagine how embarrassing it is to have to find some random tall guy I don't even know and ask him to get something down for me. Or worse, to have to go see the manager every time I want hearts of palm.

And while I am on the topic of shelves, who among the short people of the world would even consider moving into one of the new homes they are building today? Those kitchen cabinets stretch way to the ceiling. I'd need a ladder and maybe a scaffold to get anything out of there. And those floor to ceiling two-story windows. It's just a good thing I don't do windows.

This is clearly housing discrimination. **ONLY GIANTS ALLOWED.**

One more shortcoming in which my husband has the advantage over me with those high shelves – He can see where everything is, and I can't. So, when I say we need to go to the store and get something, he can always go to the cupboard and pull the item out. Like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. What is worse, he can put all kinds of foodstuffs on the high shelves in the back where I can't find them. I'm always wondering what happened to that package of chocolate chip cookies I thought we bought. More than once I've caught him munching away with a

late-night snack, telltale crumbs on his chin and chocolate melted on his lips.

Maybe the song was right that short people may have no reason to live, but I say it's time for the revolution. Cut 'em down, mow 'em over, tie 'em to their seats. Then, maybe Randy Newman will have to write the song I've been waiting for my whole life: "Tall People Have No Reason To Live."

I n t e r m i s s i o n

It's not a very delicate topic. In fact, there are very few discussions about it in "polite" company. But, it is a real issue that deserves attention – the Ladies' Room at intermission.

Intermission at the symphony or the theatre or any large place of congregational revelry.

The scenario is a familiar one to women. There are usually eight stalls and three hundred women waiting to use them. The women stand in line, squirming, legs crossed, breath sucked in. It's a waiting game, but lots of analysis is going on. The ladies in the line glare at each other, judging ages. (Old ladies take longer to go.) The waiting crowd note who is wearing a girdle that will take time to pull down and up, who has panty hose, who has layers or zippers to manage. Clearly, they are making mental estimates on how long their own personal hang time will be.

Their husbands, who can pour their pails into the same sandbox all at one time, if they have to, loll around the foyer, grimacing, wondering how long they will have to wait there alone.

But, that's not the half of it for women. Other perils await. Say, a lady finally makes her way to the front of the line. She and most of her fellow sufferers have used the time lapse as an opportunity to get to know one another. That's how women are. Chances are, they will know the profession, marital status, number of children, age, medical condition, and perhaps, sexual preference of the persons directly around them.

As her turn approaches, the head of the line receives best wishes and bon voyage from her newly made friends. She steps into the hallowed stall while her waiting companions rejoice at the tinkle of relief and the swish of paper making a hygienic swipe.

If that is the end of it, all is well. However, if the new tenant of the stall should feel the urge to pass an errant flatulent bubble, all around will know who is the culprit. And worse, if that bubble is the harbinger of Mother Nature demanding a further contribution to her authority, power and control, not only will the others know, but the suffering line will say a few words of private or public damnation for the wait and for the offense.

It is humiliating, should all of that happen, when the now relieved person steps out of the stall to wash her hands, while all give her the look she has been dreading.

There is, of course, a solution to the problem, but it requires some planning. One simply

purchases a walker and takes it with her during intermission. A pained face and slower steps allow her to make her way to the handicapped bathroom. This takes a little longer, but the wait is very short.

The Magical World in the Back

It has been a long time coming, but I have finally realized there is a magical world. It's in the back. I've referred to it for years, and I admit, it has taken me a long time to appreciate the all-encompassing nature of its existence. I am talking about the place that I ask store clerks to go check when the right size, color, or model of item I want is not on the shelf.

"Would you mind checking in the back?" I ask.

The back is that wonderful magical place where there may be just one more of the sold-out style shirt in size 16 collar, sleeve length 34-35 that my son wears and that, apparently, a lot of others do, too. The back is the place that probably has the sweater I want in blue when only red and white ones are displayed on the table. The back surely has the model 550, relaxed cut, blue jeans for my husband and in his size. The back is where

some item is located that I have been looking for and have not been able to locate anywhere else.

Every store has it – the back. At least, I think it does. But, lately, I have begun contemplating a much grander back than I originally thought existed. I am wondering if each store has its own back or if all stores in a shopping center share a common back? A place where the clerks from Macy's and the clerks from Dillard's all meet and say, have coffee.

Maybe, it's not in the back at all; maybe it's underground. A giant underground, computerized facility that services the entire City, connected by a massive network of pulley's and carts. It could be an impressive sight.

Then, I wonder just how it is that this place could be kept secret. Surely, anyone who has worked for a large department store has been privy to the system. Are all of those people sworn to secrecy, just like CIA agents? Is it considered a criminal offense to reveal the existence and location of the place? Or do clerks who leave their jobs have to be transferred to another venue in a kind of clerk witness protection and relocation program?

It would seem a shame for that to have to happen, especially since the facility in the back or wherever it is, obviously is filled with empty shelves. Have you ever had a clerk come back from the back with a big smile on his face and the item you requested in his hands? Of course not. The clerk always returns shaking his head no, a sad look of frustration and maybe, compassion, on his face.

“Nope. Nothing more in the back,” he says. “Try us in a few weeks. It’s possible a new order will be in by then.”

Frankly, I doubt that. New orders never have what you were looking for. It must be that once they arrive, the stockers put them somewhere in the back.

The Truth About Football I

I hate football.

I say this with the full realization that I’m going to be looked upon as some kind of bra-burning, feminist “ho.”

First of all, if you look at the size of my bra, it’s not about to kindle or maintain any bonfire, even if I wanted it to. Second, there is nothing wrong with being a feminist. That’s just a person who thinks women deserve equal rights and opportunities. That’s what this country is supposed to stand for, isn’t it? And about the idea of “ho,” well, everybody sells out to some cause. I plead guilty in attempting to stem the nation’s love affair with football.

Actually, it’s really not football, I dislike. It’s the spectacle and mind set that surrounds it – so predictable, so boring. And usually considered to be only in the purview of guys, not chicks. But, more about that later.

Here it is the weekend and I'm sitting in front of the tube, watching one of my favorite teams. Now, you may have noticed that I didn't say I'm sitting with anyone. Women, more often than not, watch football alone. By default. It's a solitary thing. That's because their husbands and sons and other male friends have made off to the sports bar for their weekly male-bonding sessions, stuck in front of a wide plasma screen, drinking beer, and firming up who they believe their life-long friends are.

For those who can attend the game live, and it's beginning to take a loan and monthly payments to afford that, the picture is always the same. Three guys in a camera shot only large enough for two, crowded together, index fingers in the air, claiming they are "number one." Hey, guys, get real. You're not "number one;" your team is. You are a bunch of yahoos one step higher than couch potatoes with beer guts big enough to stop you from getting out of your chair. But, for the weekend live game attendees, that's irrelevant. They stand the whole time anyway, naked to the waist and painted in the colors of their team. One half of their bodies are one color; the other, in the team's other color. Oh, men can be so original, can't they?

Whenever a play is successful for their team, men put their two fists in the air and make sounds like Tim the Toolman.

"Wuh, wuh, wuh, wuh, wuh."

Actually, they sound a lot like my dog when a stranger walks by. All I can figure is it's their

testosterone out of control, or maybe, men reverting back to their primal nature.

The war dance begins at the tailgate party where they have stuffed themselves with baby-back ribs or chili hot dogs or nachos, and of course, beer.

A word about beer. Beer is the standard bearer for all that is male. It represents machismo and sex. Now, what red-blooded young man could resist that? Just watch the commercials for beer if you don't believe me. Four guys sitting at a bar. In walk two Barbie Doll lovelies in short shorts and halter tops. Men look at the girls; girls look at the men. Men have not ordered beer, so girls walk past them. Men order beer. Next scene. One girl sitting between two of the guys, admiring them; other girl between the other two guys, enchanted. I guess if you drink enough beer, any guy can look good.

There is always a woman or two at the games making an effort to be one of the guys. They paint their faces the two colors just like the guys; and horrors, they paint their hair, as well. They wind up looking like the Wicked Witch of the West or worse: Cher. They are trying very hard, but at best, just come across as "Men Lite." And when it comes down to it, they will never be invited to the Friday night poker game. No matter what.

That's the situation. There's not much I can do about it – living with the pageantry of football. As I see it, there are three alternatives:

1. Watch the game at home alone and know the facts so that in the unlikely event that

the subject comes up later on, I can discuss it.

2. Turn to the soap opera channel and watch a review of last week's happenings. This can be very boring because nothing ever happens in soap operas.
3. Or turn off the tube and pick up a good book. That's probably the best option. Just so long as it's not about football.

The UnWal den

Everywhere I look, there are white walls —
white walls and mostly quiet
except for the whirr of a machine
every few minutes.

It is cold here.
I am wearing only
the blue paper clothing
they gave me.
I think maybe they are
laughing at me,
saying it will keep me
warm enough.

Enough for what?

They give me a little white pill.
They say it will make things easier

if I let it dissolve under my tongue.
I wonder what it will do to me.
I don't feel anything at all,
But maybe, I'm not supposed to.

They say it is for my own good
While they expose
What is both transparent and apparent
at the same time.
They say I have
their undivided attention.

And finally, it is over and they pull me out
From that bare little room
In the MRI machine.

What's in a Name?

His name is Gus. I don't know him all that well, but of late, he has had an effect on my life.

Gus is a member of a small discussion group which I joined. We meet once each month and rotate as to who will host and provide the discussion topic. A light dinner is always offered immediately following the discussion. It's all very nice.

The truth is, I have never heard Gus make one comment during the discussion segment. But, that's okay. Not everyone has to talk. Milton once said, "They also serve who only stand and wait." And that's what Gus does. He waits for the discussion to be over so that he can make a bee-line for the buffet table. There, he stations himself and does his part. Gus eats. And eats. And eats.

Everyone knows someone like him – the guy who comes to the party and eats everything on the table. Even if the host has prepared enough for each guest to have one of his signature, fancy desserts, Gus stands over at the table and eats them all – doing his dirty work before the rest of the people can get their hands on them.

Gus never stops to compliment his host because his mouth is always full. Last time he

was at my place, he simply did a thumbs up every time I passed by so that he didn't have to stop in mid-sandwich.

When my husband and I threw ourselves an anniversary party this year, we actually bought a couple of extra trays to accommodate Gus's habit. Eater's Anonymous, would probably call us "enablers." I actually told my kids to engage Gus in conversation at the party so that others could have a chance at the food.

I am convinced that he's like that because his parents named him "Gus." It's always the "Gus's" who overindulge themselves with food. To my knowledge, no one ever has heard of a "Frank" or a "Jim" attacking a table of food with the same determination and steadfastness as do the "Gus's" of the world. It's his name that made him that way.

There is other evidence that giving a kid the wrong name may influence his whole life and lifestyle. For example, after I named one of my sons "Robert Wayne Kamen," I realized I had made a terrible mistake. It turns out that this name may predispose my son to be a serial killer. Check it out. Serial killers always have three names, the middle of which is surprisingly often "Wayne." So far, Robert hasn't shown signs of violence, but I keep a firearm in the house to protect myself should his serial killer instincts suddenly kick in.

Movie stars are always cognizant of what image their names evoke. They choose strong names or macho names. "Stone," "Rock," "Forest," "Cliff." Imagine Hugh Grant as one of the sexiest men around if his given name had been "Melvin?"

Melvin Grant in *About a Boy*. Melvin Grant in *Love Actually*. I don't think so.

If Donald Duck had been called, say "Charles," "Charles Duck," do you think he would have had his own comic strip? And what of his nephews, Huey, Dewey, and Louie? Ever heard of his fourth nephew, Sidney?

Or of Egbert Da Vinci? Or Tommy Van Gogh? Or Barnie Bach?

The same is true with Kathy and Judy Galore who never made it into the big time, the way their sister, Pussy, did. It's the name.

And have you ever heard of Jeanne D'Arc's underachieving twin bother, Ron? Jeanne and Ron D'Arc were inseparable as kids, but he just didn't have what it takes. And I attribute that to his name.

Then, there was Roy of Troy, Helen's gay brother. Who is going to follow a gay Greek named "Roy" into battle?

It is too bad about these siblings and relatives of famous people. It's all in a name. So, I guess I might as well accept Gus with his eating problem. It's not his fault. His parents are the ones who named him.

Why Women Don't Scratch

A few weeks ago, I attended a fancy dinner party wearing a new pair of lace panties that I hadn't washed before wearing. Something in the dye or sizing, or maybe just the placement of the lace was irritating my most private parts. Yet, I acted very ladylike with absolutely no furtive moves to relieve my discomfort. It got me to thinking about why it isn't acceptable for women to scratch in public the way guys do?

Baseball pitchers often stand out there on the mound, taking a healthy scratch on the crotch. No one even notices. It's a part of the game. Rock stars make it a habit of it. Every so often, they brush by that place. Maybe it's to make sure something is still there. But, my guess is it's to accommodate an itch. Actually, some rock stars make no bones about it, if you'll excuse the pun. They grab.

You will never see a woman scratching in public. Having carefully studied this topic for obvious reasons, I am prepared to offer a few explanations as to why. I think it all has to do with differences in construction. Of clothing and of the body.

Men's clothing is made so that they are always able to satisfy an occasional itch. Women's clothing, on the other hand, is not.

Let's start with evening apparel. Have you ever seen an evening gown that allows an uncomfortable lady the ability to scratch? The answer is "no." There are two kinds of women's gowns – full skirted and sheathed. The full-skirted gowns are often comprised of yards of tulle or chiffon. A lady would have to do a lot of searching around, fingering through all those layers and layers of fabric, to locate the origin of her problem.

Or, she could wear one of those lovely sheathed frocks that molds tightly to her figure, thereby, getting rid of the locating problem. However, even if she finds the place she is looking for, a taut-stretched gown does not allow her to adjust or even touch, any part of her dress without calling attention to her actions. Even a gown with a slit up the front or side would require yoga-like maneuvering...nothing discreet about it.

These problems may explain why women are always scurrying to the ladies room at parties. It is only there where they can take care of those little discomforts to their heart's content.

Men's eveningwear is much better suited to indulging itches. A gentleman with an irritation problem may simply pretend he is adjusting his wayward cummerbund at the dinner table, all the while taking a few surreptitious swipes under the table cloth at the origin of his discomfort. Even morning suits feature a cut-away jacket, thereby providing easy access to the area in which there might be trouble.

Daywear also creates a problem for women. Even a pantsuit, a wonderful innovation in today's fashion scene, does not allow a discreet scratch for women, given the long, tunic-like jackets over layers of vests and big shirts she must negotiate.

Men, again, can easily reach down, just a little ways, to find the cursed spot right out there in front of them. And as styles become more casual with the advent of blue jeans acceptable in a variety of venues, accessibility of a certain area is greater, as are the politically more acceptable readjustments that men make.

There are very few instances in which Mother Nature is in error. Most of her work is incredibly exquisite in the way it fits together and functions. But, even Mother Nature would have to admit the boo-boo she has made in her construction of the female body and its inability to easily access its many parts.

Still, one could say that if these differences weren't there, other aspects of our lives would work less well. The nature of men, typically, to be the aggressors, may necessitate that their weapons are out front and at the ready. And the whole notion of procreation would be less desirable if the intimacy of the merger weren't in a location that is more complicated to access.

Perhaps, the trade-off between the ability to scratch or not is trumped by these other factors. It is a small price to pay for women – taking that extra little trip to the ladies room. Or better yet, they should just forget about convention and go ahead and have a nice healthy scratch.

When Stars Align

Don't anybody out there tell me that the supernatural is non-existent. I am absolutely convinced that the stars line up on certain "special" days to annoy, confuse and exasperate me and there is nothing I can do about it.

They are out there, the stars, all decked out, looking angry, ready to align for no-good and mischief. I'm not sure what I did to deserve their scorn today, but stars may have long memories. They've been up there for a quite a while, watching me. Looking through their keyhole in the Earth's sky. It may be something I did years ago. Maybe, as a little girl. I did lots of things I can think of to be guilty about, some that I thought went unnoticed. But, those twinkling imps up there know what I did, and are set to have their way with me.

I awaken at 5:30 a.m. feeling pretty rested after an uninterrupted night's sleep. Eight full hours, a real miracle for me. When I went to bed my husband and son were watching the basketball game together – male bonding they call it.

When I closed my eyes to go to sleep, the toilet seat was down. When I got up this morning and went to sit down, my backside ended up taking an

unintended bath into the toilet bowl water. My son has done what he used to do when he was growing up in our house. He left the seat up. It is a good thing he bonded with his father, because today the mother/son bond feels a little frayed. I guess I should have reminded him. My bad. I'll chalk this incident up to lack of communication on my part but I'll call him later today and mention it.

Now, I go to wash my hands. I turn on the water. There is the smell of some sulfuric compound in the water – garbage I think. I'll need to call the Water Department after breakfast. But, first I have to take my pills.

I take pills for everything. I'm a hypochondriac, or at least my doctor is trying to make me into one. Whenever I mention the slightest little pain, he prescribes some remedy. I take so many pills that I need to keep track of them in one of those cute little cases that have a compartment for Monday, one for Tuesday, etc. – for two weeks worth of pills.

I open Monday. Nothing there. I open Tuesday. Still nothing. All of the compartments are empty. I have forgotten to refill them. I have to go to the medicine cabinet and fish out the pills from my “master file,” a little shoebox-like container with the filled bottles in it.

The first bottle contains one pill, but the second bottle doesn't, nor the third. How could I not have reordered? It just got away from me. I plan to call the doctor's office and ask him to prescribe a few pills to last me until I can get my order in the mail. After breakfast I'll do that, after

I call the Water Department, after I call my son and admonish him for leaving the toilet seat up.

What I need right now is a nice, hot cup of coffee. My husband and I take turns making the morning coffee. And this morning, thankfully, is his turn. But, I don't smell that lovely aroma. I go to the kitchen and find a yellow sticky note on the coffee pot: "Sorry about the coffee honey. I'm off to the hardware store to buy a saw blade and some nails for my woodwork project. Back later. Love."

So, I grudgingly decide to make the coffee. You guessed it. No coffee. This can't wait like the other chores can. I need my coffee in the morning. I quickly throw on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt and hop in the car.

You are not going to believe this, but the battery is dead. I must have left on the headlights last time I drove it. I decide to walk.

It is only a mile to the store. I can use the exercise. I will ask my husband to help me charge up the battery when he returns from the hardware store. That is, after I give him a piece of my mind for going off without making the coffee.

I make it to the store, find the coffee (it is not out of stock as I expect it to be on this day), and I buy a few other items. That's good. I'm starting to feel better. Something goes right.

The cashier is a poker-faced, sullen brat and not very accommodating when I point out that she has charged me twice for the bread. She reluctantly calls her supervisor who is leisurely checking out another person before he slowly saunters to the register to approve the deletion of

the item. It only takes them twenty minutes for this three-second transaction to be completed.

I leave the store. I am going to report that nasty cashier and her lazy supervisor to the store manager. But first, I'll admonish my husband for not making coffee and ask him to recharge the car battery. Then, I'll call the doctor for prescriptions, and the Water Company for the stink, and my son to scold him for leaving up the toilet seat.

At last, I can sit down with a cup of coffee and watch my favorite soap opera. But, it is being preempted by the local station showing twenty minutes of the police chasing a guy in a stolen car. I am going to e-mail that station, telling them it is not really a service to the community to show the chase. After all, if you are in the car, you don't know where not to drive.

I'll send that e-mail after I call the grocery store manager about his staff, after I give my husband hell for not making coffee and tell him to recharge the battery. But, that will only be after I call the doctor for more pills, and the Water Company to investigate the smell, and after I call my son about the toilet set.

My entire day goes like that. I won't bore you with the steam iron incident and the Coke spill, and the tripping over the dog, which led to the current hairline-fracture of my wrist. Just trust me when I say the stars were lining up against me, and there is nothing I could do to make it right.

I just hope that they have punished me enough for whatever sins I have committed and that they don't have anymore unfinished business.

Right now, I'm going to bed.

If we don't put spaces between stanzas, this fits on one page. We could indent alternate stanzas. I've done that just to show you how it would work. I can go back the way it was and leave two lines on the next page or put in extra space so there are more than two.

The Birthing Process

Suddenly here you are
 All five and one-half pounds of you
 Lying on your birthing table
 A testimony
 To will and determination
 To love and angst.
 For all those months
 I felt you within me
 Struggling to emerge
 Sometimes squirming
 Other times writhing.
 At times I fancied myself
 A channel and you my medium.
 I couldn't contain you.
 Or maybe secretly didn't want to.
 At other times I wasn't sure
 I wanted to face you.
 But you were inevitable.
 Once you began on the inside
 You were destined to appear
 On the outside.
 And now I look at you
 Lying there.
 I wonder if it will be as hard
 To sell a novel
 As it is to write one.

Reflections in the Hospital Waiting Room

“It’s just a little minor surgery, is all,” the nurse tells me. “He’ll be in and out in no time.”

Nothing to it. Good. My tension is allayed a little. But what’s this? Here comes the parade. First, there’s the check-in clerk.

“Are you Mr. Davis?” she asks. “How about you show me some identification?”

My husband does so.

“Very good,” she smiles, pulling out a wristband. “You need to put this on. We don’t want to lose you or mistake you for another patient.”

“Does that happen?” I ask, my eyes big as saucers.

“Oh, not very often. This is simply a safeguard. We don’t want your husband to get a procedure scheduled for someone else.”

“For someone else?”

The nurse smiles again. “We once took off a man’s left leg when all he was in for was an appendectomy.”

“Well, do you have the right procedure down for my husband?”

She tells us, and its right. I sigh relief.

My husband gets settled in as a patient in the pre-surgery waiting area. They give him bright blue booties in about size 8. My husband's feet are size 14. They give him a gown that they say he should tie in the back. Which he does, but it doesn't do a bit of good. He has way more air conditioning than he would have liked.

A nice lady comes in, bringing papers. Before she reads them, she administers a happy pill to my husband. Once she is satisfied that he is subdued, oops, I mean sedated, she reads the papers aloud to the patient while I listen.

This one says that the hospital is not liable for any unforeseen event that should occur. The next one says the hospital and the doctors have the right to share your medical history and photos of your procedure with whomsoever they feel is appropriate.

Now, I can accept the insurance company needing to know my husband's information; and I can accept the doctor's office and even the doctor's consulting colleagues having access to this shared information. But, it occurs to me that the doctor teaches at the university. Will he be showing my husband's odds and, if you excuse the expression, ends to his medical school class? Will he be taking pictures to show at his next cocktail party, along with the snaps from his vacation in Puerto Rico?

The happy pill is beginning to work, so the patient doesn't much care if his doctor wins the Oscar for cinematography in an original operation.

The lady with the papers has more for my husband to sign. She shows him where to put his initials if someone taking his blood should accidentally prick themselves with some of his fluids. Then, they'd have to do all kinds of tests to assure themselves that he isn't going to give them AIDS or some other communicable diseases. He signs all of these. What can he do? He is a captive, dependent on their good will. I mean, who would want a member of the medical team angry with him when he is going into surgery?

But, the real challenge comes when the medical staff asks the patient to sign a paper that provides full disclosure as to what possible hazards may befall him should he decide to go ahead with the surgery. All the perils are laid out. Possible heart attack, stroke, paralysis, disfigurement. You name it, it could happen.

By now, my husband is seriously rethinking his decision to have surgery, even if he is a little groggy.

But, it's too late.

So in he goes, has his procedure done, and despite all obstacles, manages to pull through.

I breathe a sign of relief. He has negotiated the obstacles and is still alive and in one piece. But, once more, the lovely people at the hospital remind us of our plight.

"You know," says the nurse to my husband, "you are a very lucky man."

"How so?" he asks, still woozy from the anesthesia.

“While you were under, we lost a few surgical pads inside. We hunted for a long time until we found them.”

“Are you sure you got them all?” I ask.

“Well, we think so; but he’ll know soon enough if something is in there. He’ll start feeling bad or possibly could get an infection. You know, oozing and pus around the opening. Or bleeding. If so, just give us a call.”

“And what would you do?” my husband asks, suddenly awake.

“We’ll just have you in for another surgery and get it out.”

My husband and I are appalled.

“Well, don’t worry about it. If we have to do that, we won’t charge you a thing for it. It’ll just be a short hospital stay. Like now.”

We look at each other. We are both aghast. We head for the door.

“Wait, wait,” the nurse shouts. “You need to be released in a wheel chair. You know, hospital liability and all.”

That’s the last utterance we hear as we leave. No need to wait for a wheel chair. After all, it was just minor surgery.

Chapter Four:

Fi ends and Lovers

A Tisket, A Tasket

I don't know what it is about me, but I always get baskets for gifts. It started a few years back when my son's girlfriend decided to give me a holiday gift of mugs along with a variety of coffee beans, all contained in a cute, little basket. I liked it, and it was a smart decision for her. It sent the message that she liked me without also sending a message that she was serious about my son. Good thing, too. It turns out he was only coffee mug serious about her.

That was the first in a succession of basket presents. Maybe it was a new fad, or maybe I just have friends who think alike; but ever since then, I started receiving baskets.

I got baskets for my birthdays, filled with over-the-hill paraphernalia and baskets for Mother's Day with little violet plants in them. I got Christmas Baskets and Hanukah Baskets, and even a Kwanza basket. I got a "get well" basket when I had minor surgery and a "get lost" basket when I had hurt someone's feelings. There were candy-filled baskets, and cookie bouquet baskets and wine baskets and cheese baskets and popcorn baskets. Silk flower baskets and my favorite, a chocolate bunny basket.

You imagine it. I received it when it came to baskets.

Now, this would all be very nice, but there were problems for me in receiving these gifts. Being a bit anal when it comes to these woven wonders, I wanted to keep them all. It was like a fetish. I'd give you the clothing off my back or the family jewels, if there were any, but don't ask me for anything from my basket collection.

At first, my husband thought the baskets were rather charming. He thought we would eat or use whatever was in them and simply dispose of the little wicker containers that they came in. That was a big mistake on his part. That wasn't going to happen.

"Why do you want them?" he once asked me, perplexed.

"I might be able to use them for something around the house. Like for decorating," I informed him.

"Well, you can keep them if you can find a place for them or find something useful to do with them," he told me.

First, I tried storing them. We don't have a lot of closet space, so I wound up tacking them to the wall in the utility closet. Soon, I realized this solution was not viable. Every time I went for the Dirt Devil, I got hit in the head with one of those little woven devils.

But, I resolved to find uses for my baskets since I find it so hard to give them away.

So far, I have filled one with balls covered with dried beans and moss and put it on the coffee table. People are always asking me why I have

moss balls on my table. I just shrug and grin. I ask them, "Why do you think I put them there?" It's a sort of projective technique – tells me a lot about my friends. I told my husband my moss ball creation is an icebreaker. He looked at me like I was crazy.

I filled one of the baskets with eucalyptus, putting it atop my entertainment center. Of course, you have to be about seven feet tall to see it, but it smells good.

And I have placed a basket on my dressing table. It holds an eyebrow plucker, two or three fingernail files, and some hair barrettes. I've never used hair barrettes, but if I ever do, I'll know exactly where to find them.

That's three baskets I've put to use and only fifty-two other ones to go. At this rate, baskets will take over my house long before the roaches do. And in Houston, that's going some.

I am hoping that some new fad comes along so that my friends will stop feeding my habit and buying these woven wonders for me. Or that someone will come up with a way to use these pesky, little containers. Maybe a twelve-step program is the answer. Basketholics Anonymous.

As you can see, the problem has me agitated, irritated, and frustrated. I can't keep 'em; I can't give 'em away. I just don't know what to do. I guess I could say – and you probably wish I wouldn't – that I've become a basket case.

The Many Faces of My Kitchen

My kitchen has many faces.
It is a cozy, protective lair
where I am the lioness queen
making all important decisions.

*It is a hostile cave in which
I am a vulnerable captive
whose any wrong move
could end my life.*

It is the palace gallery
where I hold reign over
oregano, cumin and garlic,
and a wonderland of spices;
where I may
according to my own whimsey
play with flavors
adjust times and measures
and determine portions.

*It is a make-ready corner
where I imagine myself
a kitchen wench
obliged to wear a cap
and matching smock
and to meet with a smile
capricious desires
of a clientele who demand
to "have it their way."*

It is an alchemist's lab
where I have the power
to transform objects from
one structural entity to another
into golden masterpieces.

*It is the tent of a wizard
where I ply magical skills
to alter edibles, and, if I choose
to serve overcooked, burnt,
or incompatible combinations.*

On the lush island of Aeaea
I, Circe, goddess of arrangement,

*On the desert isle of Diet,
much fiber is prescribed*

present sumptuous arrays	<i>and meat and fish,</i>
of food on beautiful plates	<i>poultry and cheese,</i>
with colorful chargers	<i>must be measured by scale.</i>
on finest linens	<i>Here what remains</i>
to enhance the meal and entice	<i>warrants nothing more</i>
the innocent eater.	<i>than to be served on a paper plate.</i>

Yes, my kitchen has many faces
most of which are in my mind,
which serves up surprises daily.

The Guest

This morning there was an impromptu neighborhood meeting, and God was the guest of honor.

We residents of the subdivision were brought together by the sound of an explosion, a great popping noise that seemed to come from a nearby residence. If it hadn't been so tragic, it might have been comical – seeing all of us running out of our cosseted private worlds, in various stages of dress and undress; skin cream on or makeup off; a few hair curlers bobbing in colorful topknots; robes partially tied, with slips and bras and even some boxer shorts peeking out ungracefully. Slides, slippers, flip-flops and stocking feet all running the same direction to watch the terrible tragedy of the burning home.

We stood huddled in front of the defenseless structure that was quickly becoming an inferno. It belched a column of rich dark curls of black and charcoal smoke into the atmosphere, as if the house were ridding itself of a dread disease. Great fingers of amber and maroon and blue threateningly reached out of the writhing column and were pulled back into the fold by their fellows.

Some of the neighbors, white-knuckled and panic-stricken, agonized that there might be people inside. No one among us was trained nor had the equipment to rescue the victims of a burning building. But, we all had the same thought:

Please, dear God, don't let anyone die.

And if our neighbors could escape, were they able to salvage the memories of a lifetime – those captured in their photographs? Or their beloved possessions? Or even their clothing?

Please, dear God, help them to escape. And at least, rescue their pictures.

As we stood there, a circle of powerless onlookers, we worried that the flames would spread to our homes. Some people cried while others tried to make jokes that predictably fell flat. Some of us stood in silence, staring hollow-eyed, fearing the awesome authority wielded by the Master of the Universe.

Please, dear God, don't let the flames spread.

Soon, a mammoth red truck pulled up, equipped with ladders and hoses and certain unknown chemicals. It was surprising to see how imposing and majestic the truck looked in our neighborhood. On commercial streets and

freeways such vehicles blended in, getting only passing-glance attention. But, in our little subdivision, they were huge, red giants, bringing essential resources.

A few of the uniformed first responders quickly disembarked from the vehicle, one carrying a first aid kit. They disappeared into what was left of the building, later helping the coughing and traumatized residents to safety.

There was a communal sigh of relief as we all clapped and cheered. The professionals had done their jobs masterfully. But we knew that it was only with the assistance of the guest of honor whom we had all invoked, that the job got done.

Thank you, dear God. Amen.

Bel i eve the Psychi c

As I sit alone at the old desk in my library, I wonder if I will live until morning. It was stupid of me to stop off at the psychic's home for a reading, that day. But, the price was right, and my friends were all going.

It was a spooky looking place, with dark, crimson curtains everywhere and matching velvet, tufted seats and settee. All of the furniture was embellished with gold fringe. I've always thought there is something weird about fringe.

I sat waiting as each of my friends, in turn and alone, entered the psychic's private den. And each came out with a wondrous reading. Tall, dark and handsome strangers in their future, exotic trips, great fortunes left by unknown relatives.

Then, it was my turn. I walked in, pretty cocksure of myself and skeptical about fortune-tellers in general. I was indulging my friends.

The psychic asked me to sit. She placed a fine china teacup before me and poured a fragrant, deep amber liquid into it. She leaned over to observe the tea leaves that congregated in what I thought was a meaningless formation at the bottom of the cup. Suddenly, a horrified look was on her face. But, she hesitated to tell me what she saw.

"Sometimes, it is best not to reveal the future," she said.

I thought about it. If something was going to happen, I'd rather know. Then, maybe, I could avoid the inevitable.

"It's okay," I laughed. It was a nervous giggle. "I really don't buy this stuff anyway."

The seer shook her head in exasperation. "They all say that," she explained. "It's best to decide for yourself."

The seer foretold that I would die on the day I was born, October 31st. Well, maybe she didn't actually use the word "die." Maybe, she said, "succumb."

She also warned that friends I trusted and thought were straight-forward were plotting something behind my back. She said it was best

not to look too deeply into their conspiracy for fear that the situation could only get worse

We left the psychic's place, and I laughed out loud as I told my friends what she said. They joined me in a hearty chuckle.

That was a week ago. I must say that I am usually not a very suspicious person, but I couldn't pretend I didn't see my friends whispering behind my back. And running off shared plots on the Xerox machine and handing them out amongst themselves.

I asked one of them if those papers were something I might need and she assured me they weren't. "Just general office junk mail," she said. "Nothing important." I remembered what the psychic said and decided not to delve further into their plot.

Now, I wish I had, because it is October 31st, the day I was born, and I am terrified. It is Halloween. How appropriate. My mother jokingly use to say that she issued forth a new little spook into they world the day she birthed me.

I think I hear someone in the house. I run to the door and open it. No one. I look out windows. No one. Suddenly, the lights go out. Every light in the house. *Oh, no.* I feel my way to the cupboard for a candle and matches. My hands are shaking as I light the candle and inch my way out to the garage to reset the circuit breaker. I try a few of the levers, finally finding the correct switch. I flip it. The lights of the house come on. But, I am not totally sure that is what I wanted to happen.

I walk back to the library. The door is shut. I clearly remember I didn't close that door. My heart

is in my hands, beating so fast I can barely breathe. I open the door. There are a large number of animals in there and a few pirates and gypsies.

“Surprise!” Now I put all the pieces of the puzzle together. All my friends have turned out in costume for a combination Halloween/surprise birthday party for me. The psychic was in on the plot. My friends tell me I drove them crazy with questions while they secretly tried to pass out the particulars of the party and directions to my house.

I laugh uproariously and, relieved, give myself up to the fun.

I guess you might say that I, in fact, “succumbed.”

A Top-Drawer Story

It’s been said by mothers everywhere: “Wear decent underwear. If you are ever in an accident or fall sick on the street, you don’t want to show up at the emergency room wearing stuff that’s dirty or has holes in it.”

I heard it professed recently by a young television newscaster. She was a novice to the business, so she got the fluff pieces designed to make one chuckle, not any of the vicious, or heart-wrenching stories that go to more seasoned reporters. Her piece was about the lovely new

styles of lingerie available today. Did you know there's even edible underwear? She prefaced her story with that age-old mother's warning about not getting caught with unsightly undies.

I thought to myself, everyone says that. It's a joke. A well-established joke. A gentrified joke at that. I'll bet no one has ever been caught in that circumstance.

I decided to do some research on the matter. I would put forth the question to various persons that I ran across in my day-to-day world. I would ask them if they had ever been caught with shoddy drawers.

I had a hair appointment that day. It was a wonderful chance to ask the hairdresser if she had ever been discovered wearing such unsightly garb. No, no she hadn't. Had she ever seen a customer in those straits? No, but most of the time when she saw people, they were wearing their smocks. Their underwear was well hidden from scrutiny.

While I was at the beauty shop, I decided to check with the girl who does the shampooing. Had she ever been caught in soiled or holey panties? "No," she explained. But then, she didn't wear underwear. It's much breezier that way in the steaming shampoo rooms.

Well, what about her patrons? Surely, she had, on occasion, seen a few of the ladies she shampoos with faulty underwear. The answer to that was "no" as well. She told me that she tries not to look at her clients. Just washes their hair. In that way, she is not distracted by the boogers in their noses.

“Why don’t people clean out their noses before they get shampooed?” she asked.

When I went to the dental hygienist the next day, I heard a similar story as I opened and the hygienist poked around inside. My hypothesis was beginning to look better and better.

A few days after, I visited my gynecologist. I was sure to hit pay dirt here if such a problem ever occurred. The “gyn” man told me that when he saw women they were draped and supine. Most of them hid their underwear beneath their clothing or in lockers. And they hated the exam.

“I try to be in and out in a flash,” he said.

Now, I was pretty sure that I had a valid theory working. No such problem with underwear malfunctions had ever occurred. It was all a gentrified joke, as I thought. I decided to drop the issue.

I told my physical therapist about my research the next day as she pulled my trousers and underpants to my hips so that she could ultrasound my lower back.

“Some issues are just obvious. That’s all,” I remarked smugly.

She snickered. I assumed she found my story humorous and insightful. I was beginning to think that maybe I could write about my research and adventures and sell the story to a magazine or a television station. What a delightful thought.

I returned home from physical therapy relaxed and much better – for the ultra-sound and for the final acknowledgement of my theoretical tenets by the therapist. I decided I deserved a bubble bath to celebrate my incredible tenacity and acumen. I

poured a hot bath and a glass of wine and allowed myself to sink into the bubbles. It was lovely.

I must have been there for half an hour, relishing, no, savoring the appreciation the P.T. had for my informed insights. I recalled again and again how she had laughed at my stories. I climbed out of the tub, pulled a large terry towel from the rack, and allowed my skin to be dried by the contact of the fabric.

Totally satisfied, I picked up my clothing to put it back on. Then, I saw it. It was just a flash, and seemed to vanish in the folds as I stepped into my panties and pulled them up. There was something that caused my warm, contented body to feel slightly cooled. It was behind me. I quickly trotted over to the mirror and took a good, long look.

“Oh, no!” There it was – a hole, at least three inches in diameter, right in the middle of my drawers. Had the P.T. seen it? Well, of course she had. And what a fool I felt. “Hoist with my own petard,” I think they call it.

Next time, I will heed those age-old, time-tested saws. Perhaps, one is wise to check one’s underwear before going out. Just in case.

A Wrong Turn

I made a wrong turn that fateful day. I could have gone home. But home would have been to a life-sick father and to an embittered mother. Instead, I turned and went into the Student Union Building, into the canteen. I sat not far from a group of young people who appeared to have that same expression of angst that I wore more often than not those days.

They huddled, tied by some unnatural bond. Hollow-eyed. Vulnerable. Shut down. Temporarily cosseted by their coming together. Drinking the coffee of oblivion and chewing on the sweet meats of avoidance, pulling up from minus five to plus two. It was as good as it gets for those who do not know “good.”

I sat alone until a girl I knew from high school, when life was much less heavy upon me, approached and asked, “Would you like to join us?”

“Thanks,” I said, slipping into one of the three booths the group occupied.

I could see the seating arrangements were impermanent, interchangeable, with booth-swapping the rule rather than the exception.

The booth I occupied with my friend housed another person. He was a graduate student at S.M.U. Law School, a rather verbose, complicated guy, cynical and angry about the world – just like I was in those days. And he was from a family with nearly as much pathology as my own, if that were possible. His father suffered from Parkinson’s Disease and his mother was a frightened mouse, run over by the men in her charge.

He was losing his hair, not from normal baldness, but in patches, from the pressures and stresses he felt. I sensed his inner weakness – his disappointed child.

We took to each other, just as many in the group did, holding on for dear life, even though each of our own personal lifebuoys was coming from another sinking ship. We treaded water for a while, he and I. But then, the waters became too rough, and I found it harder and harder to grip his sinking arm.

I once heard that a good relationship is greater than the sum of its parts. My connection with this man was never one in which each made the other more. In my secret heart I yearned for an anchor that could be dropped, but also could be weighed. It was a naive wish.

A good connection, I discovered, must preserve flexibility to thrive. It was not an idea that he could grasp. Dependency, for him, was a jealous lover, and in its unrestrained form, left no room for growth. For me, it was a form of death.

Our individual lifebuoys were not enough to sustain us. And I could only tread water for so

long before becoming exhausted. I allowed the bond to loosen and slip away. I let go.

Yet, even in the darkest hours, in the morass of releasing his hand, the uncertainty of having nothing to cling to, the freedom from his death grip was liberating to me.

It was too much for that lost soul, seeking shelter from the storm in my affection. In his fog of misperception, he thought what I wanted was his commitment, that I would remain his rescuer in return for his pledge. I didn't want that.

I don't know what inner steel allowed me to steer through the troubled waters that lay ahead, but somehow I did see and maintained my resolve, albeit going aground on an unsteady shore. Alone.

Later, he tried again, this time without reason or logic, to offer his pathetic half-self, to find a safe harbor in my heart. I continued on, alone, but not without damage to my own psyche and not without sadness and guilt for my own shortcomings.

For months, even years, I bore the scars of that fateful two-month encounter resulting from my foray into the canteen. I may never be over it entirely. But, survival is a powerful force, and I'm thankful that I followed my instinct.

It is much later now. I have moved into a relatively calm sea. He is gone, but not before navigating through a tortured life of pain and distrust.

The canteen is still there, with other young persons, insecure in a world of confusion and lost values, alone in their own private hells, sitting in

the three booths, drinking coffee and holding on for dear life.

An Insignificant Incident

It was such a small, insignificant incident it almost doesn't deserve to be mentioned, but maybe, after all these years, I can tell it without feeling embarrassed. On the other hand, whenever something brings it to mind, and every so often that happens, I want to pound my fist in anger on whatever surface is closest.

It happened at the Texas State Fair. Three other girlfriends and I, all teenagers at the time, decided to make a fun day of it. We were having a great time, walking four abreast down the midway, stopping at various booths and trying our hand at the games. Hannah won a small teddy bear at the ring toss. Glenda stumped the weight guesstimator. She had more baggage in the kaboose than he could readily see with the naked eye. Margie treated everyone to cotton candy, and I impressed the group by braving a ride that held me against the wall with centrifugal force while the bottom of the ride dropped out. I slid a little of the way down, not totally propelled by the force. I had a little too much baggage in the trunk, also.

But there we were, walking and laughing, when one of the boys coming the opposite direction reached over and gave a quick and insulting tickle to a place that he had no right or permission to go. Before I even knew what happened, he was past us, he and his friends getting a good laugh at my expense. I gasped, and my friends wanted to know why. I simply couldn't tell them. I said I had tripped over my own foot. I hoped they would believe that. I hoped they didn't see what I knew must be a deep crimson blush by the fingers of heat traveling across my cheeks.

Soon we got to the end of the amusement rides and booths. There was a photographer there who had cut out scenarios for people to stand behind and put their faces through while he took a commemorative picture. There was a fireman and a policeman for two people, a singing trio in front of a microphone for three people, a cut out of Bugs Bunny, Elmer Fudd, Mr. Magoo, and Popeye playing poker, and a picture of four island girls, all with voluptuous figures, wearing grass skirts and little else. Naturally, the girls wanted to stand behind that one. We posed, the photographer snapped, and each of us got a copy of the picture when we went home.

That is the whole story. The picture is still in my album, but whenever I come across it I wonder. Were we trying to be sixteen and sexy? Otherwise, why did we pick the Bali Ha'i cut out instead of Bugs Bunny and friends? And did I invite that guy's violation?

I don't think so, but I'm not sure. And if that little incident still causes such a strong reaction in

me, then how awful is it for women who are sexually accosted or raped? What humiliation and guilt do they carry within them for the rest of their lives?

I hope I never know the answer to that.

Views from a Table at the Ship Channel Bar and Grill

They stroll in —
groups of two or three.
Never more.
Once in a while one comes alone
Through the old screen door
that's torn on one corner,
its mesh rolling itself up
into a triton seashell.

They embrace each other.
kiss one cheek, the other cheek,
the first cheek again.
Arms around each other
wrapped in fleeting
camaraderie and joy,
their hollow eyes
masking untold loneliness.

They sit at old wooden tables
on mismatched chairs

that rock from one side to the other,
eating great plates of *spanakopita*,
and *moussaka* and *dolmades*,
washing it down with *ouzo* or *retsina*,
laughing louder than is warranted,
listening to music that plays
on the juke box.

A man stands.
A tangle of black curls
coiled and twisted,
accented in the blue ballroom light;
his great arms sausaged into
a black muscle shirt,
a white handkerchief tied
carelessly around his neck.
He removes the neckpiece,
offering it to a man friend
who grabs the other end
and stands beside him.
The jukebox begins to play
the Zorba theme – dada dada dada.
A slow pace, languid, followed by frenzy,
and back to slow once more.

The men hop forward on one foot,
step behind on the next
across and to the side on the first.
The white cloth between them is balance
to assuage the effects of
the old linoleum floor,
half eaten up with old age and sea salt,
half concrete.

A beautiful woman sits at their table,
her long, sable hair caught up

by a clasp of seashell and onyx,
yet, cascading to her waistline
in a silken mane.
She wears a flowing, white tunic,
fastened on one shoulder
and girded with ribbons
that criss-cross her bodice several times
and end in a silken band
that reaches to the floor.

She watches one of the dancing men,
as do all the other women in the room,
wondering what it would be like
to spend the night wrapped in his strong arms,
her fingers tangled in those exquisite curls.
She imagines, as do her sisters throughout the room,
spending her life with him,
seeing him infrequently
when the ships come in
and when he chooses to be with her,
knowing there are surely others
he favors with his charms
at ports along his route.

She knows he can never be hers alone,
can never be anyone's.
That is why he takes to the sea —
in wanderlust and for freedom.
But, tonight, she will be in his arms,
all night long,
receiving his love and giving of her own.
“Be jealous of me, you sisters. Tonight he is mine.”

The men finish their dance.
The white kerchief back around this one's neck,
he offers her his hand.

She takes it, as he pulls her up to him,
clutching her around the waist tightly,
his desire clearly apparent.
They walk arm and arm
through the screen door
never to return this night.

Musi c to Hi s Ears

He had handwritten it
In his diary
During the months
Of preparation.
Every word,
Every detail,
Every move.

He had recorded it
For posterity
On the camcorder
That they would find
In his bedroom
In the bottom drawer
Of his bureau.

And maybe,
They would find what was left
Of the stuff he had purchased
And cached away
In the crawl space

In the attic
Behind the trunks
And the suitcases.

Then, they would know
How it felt
When the girls laughed
At his pimples,
And when the boys called him names
And when no one would sit at his table
During lunch period.

Then, they would see why
He had to do what he did —
To take away the pain
And to cancel out the noise in his ears
With the beautiful sound
Of the cartridges
Exploding again and again
In the school cafeteria.

My First and Last Case as a Detective

The Office

Monday, October 20

Mr. Jerome Andrews is my boss and the CEO of this Fortune 500 company. He has been acting very strange lately. Like today, instead of the beautiful alligator briefcase he usually brings to work, he carries a large valise (like lawyers use to carry files). And he locks it in his coat closet. He has never locked the alligator case in there.

My Desk, the Office

Thursday, October 23

Mr. Andrews leaves work early today with his valise. He is all decked out – expensive suit, pointy collars on a monogrammed shirt, gold cufflinks. He says he has an appointment. After he's gone, I examine his appointment book, (in case I need to contact him). He has penciled in MBAD, 6:30 p.m., and an address, 25 East 123rd Street. Wow!

That's way across town in a not-so-nice neighborhood. I wonder what he's up to.

My Car

Wednesday, October 29

He does it again. Dresses up. Leaves early. Takes valise. And the same letters, MBAD, are penciled in. I wonder who or what MBAD is. My imagination is going all over the place.

It could be something harmless like an exclusive society for people with masters' in business administration. Or a middle-aged basketball league. Or a poker club.

Oh, who am I kidding? I wonder if Jerry Baby has a sweetie-pie on the side. Or a sweet-him, or has some deviant sexual proclivity. That would explain the secrecy and meetings in the bad end of town.

I decide to drive out there and take a look-see at this place myself.

The Hood

Thursday, October 30

The neighborhood is old with decrepit-looking houses needing paint, some with shingles falling off their hinges. Broken appliances and rattletrap cars decorate the lawns.

Right before 6:30 p.m., nine or ten fancy cars pull up to the dilapidated old excuse for a house on East 123rd Street. Men, including ole Jer, dressed up, and carrying valises, go in. I wait there behind some shrubbery until all the men are

inside. I sneak up to the door. Something is stuffed in the keyhole, presumably to keep people like me from doing just what I am doing. I go around to the side window and peek in. Nary a soul.

I can hear music. I wonder if those guys could be in the basement. But, the windows are painted white. It is impossible to see in.

Then, I see it – that lovely little place where some of the paint has rubbed off. I look in.

The men are exiting from dressing rooms. They have stripped to their underclothes and wear slippers that are squared in the front. I hold my breath as an elderly lady brings in a large box and hands something to each man. He immediately takes it and attaches it at the waist. They all begin to dance around.

And amongst them, there he is. Mr. Jerome Andrews, CEO of a Fortune 500 company, standing *en pointe* in all his glory, wearing toe shoes and the cutest little pink tulle tutu I ever saw.

Leaving, I look around and see something above the door that I overlooked before – the letters MBAD and underneath, in smaller letters, Madame Bernard's Academy of Dance.

This will be rewritten to the Viet Nam war.

Motel Five

It was a windy December day when I returned to the place. I had to look twice to believe it was the same building that I remembered from so long ago. It stood on the countryside, ramshackle and lonely. Too old and decrepit to be salvaged by some minor repair and a new coat of paint.

The trees surrounding the place were mourning widows, barren, reaching to the skies as if asking their Maker why their beauty had been torn from them. Around their trunks, a six-inch-thick golden carpet of rolled leaves, shaken from their youthful homes by time and the wind and rain, waited, soon to be ravaged by the weather into effluent decay.

It was one of my earliest memories – when Bill and I went there as children. I had been six and he, seven. We had delighted at finding the recently abandoned place, making it a fort on some days, a castle on others, or an ocean-sailing vessel or a jungle or a hospital or a space ship. Whatever new exploration we could conjure up. We were soldiers, or royalty, or pirates.

It was there that we, years later, shared a kiss, the first for either of us. And it was there that we

explored and finally brought to fruition our first foray into the adult world of sex.

We called the place “Motel Five,” laughing because we said it was not ready enough for prime time to be a “Motel Six.” But it was ours, and ours alone.

I remember the bittersweet promises we made to each other when I told Bill that my family and I were moving away. We would write. When we could, we would call. We would never forget one another. And one day, perhaps we would marry.

Three years ago, I received a letter from Bill, informing me that he had signed up to go to Afghanistan. He would serve his country and then, come home to me. I hated that he was going, but knew that he was a patriotic man and wanted to do his part.

I counted the months, the weeks, the days until his return. Each time the phone rang, I was afraid that I might receive a call from his mother that he was killed in action. But, he wasn't.

When at last, the time came for Bill to return, I was overcome with joy. Now, I would see him, and we would start our life together. I remember waiting by the phone for his call. But, no call came. I decided not to stand on ceremony. I called him.

Bill's mother answered. “This is Jeannie. May I please speak with Bill?”

“Hello, dear. Bill asked me to tell all his friends that he isn't ready to speak with them. I think he needs a little time.”

“Alright. Please have him call me when he is ready,” I said.

I waited. No call. I decided to be more persistent. But, he was not ready to talk to me. Suddenly, the movie, *An Affair to Remember* popped into my mind. Suppose he was wounded in combat and like the lady in the film who was crippled and did not meet her love at the Empire State Building, perhaps he did not want me to see him without a limb or blinded or burned. But, his mother assured me that his limbs were intact, and he was not burned or blind.

I persisted, calling his mother every day until Bill finally relented. Yes, he was sorry that he had been so hard to reach. Yes, he would love to see me. Some day soon. No, not yet. He would call me before very long.

After months of calling him, rarely getting him on the phone, Bill finally agreed to meet me. The perfect place: "Motel Five." At five-thirty in the afternoon on a certain day in December.

I was excited and nervous. I had lost four pounds in the last two weeks, not eating, waiting for the big day when we would reunite.

And then I was there, at the old building that was ours alone. Bill was not there yet. I checked my watch. I was early. I paced, kicking great clumps of leaves as I trenched through them. Moments later, I checked my watch again. I decided that Bill must be running a little late. After thirty minutes had gone by, I began to wonder. Did I have the right day? Yes. Yes, I was sure I had the date and time right. It had been written indelibly on my brain.

I waited for an hour. Now, the bitter cold was biting at my nose and my finger tips were numb.

Darkness was creeping in. Not really wanting to, I turned and left the place, now as stark for me as for the barren widowed trees.

When I arrived at home, I checked my messages. Nothing. I picked up the phone and called Bill's number.

His mother answered. "No, dear. Bill's not here. He's gone and left no forwarding address."

A Moment in History

Mike was fun to work with. He was the top intern in a post-grad program at the hospital where I worked. What made him so special was his thoroughness, his competence, and above all, his sense of humor, often punctuated with a puckish grin.

Some might say that the way Mike referred to patients was irreverent. But, for those of us who knew him well, it was clear that he used cheeky expressions to hide a profound and abiding concern for his fellowman. When Mike wanted me to consult on a psych patient, he would ask me to see the "squirrel" in room 101. Or the "crock" – Mike's word for a hypochondriac, on medicine service. He referred to the "lung" in room 203 instead of saying that Mr. Jones, a very sick patient in room 203, has a diseased lung.

Usually Mike, a few other interns, and I ate lunch together. It was hilarious to listen to them in the lunchroom eating sandwiches and discussing body parts. If one thought about what the “Spare Parts Gang,” as they called themselves, were saying, one would not be able to finish lunch. But, one never thought about it that way.

On one particular day in November, I was ensconced in my usual niche in the lunchroom, eating with the interns. Enter Mike who whispered in my ear, “You’re needed downstairs.”

“Come on Mike,” I said, sure he just was wanting my seat at the table, “I’m having my lunch.”

“No, really,” he answered. He wasn’t grinning like he usually did.

“What’s going on?”

“The President’s been shot.”

Now, Mike knew I was a devoted fan of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. I didn’t appreciate this kind of sick humor.

“Mike, that’s not funny.”

“No, it’s true,” he said. Still no grin. “Come on. Just leave your lunch.”

A sudden, silver-cold chill ran down my spine at the possibility Mike could be on the level. Probably not, I thought. But, I decided to go along with it, for no other reason than to see what Mike was up to.

We left the lunchroom and were immediately joined by two fellows in navy-blue uniforms. They escorted us to the elevator at Parkland Hospital, not letting anyone else in. I began to feel apprehensive.

Reporters and others were stacked up four-fold at the double doors that led into the wing housing social services and the emergency room. The doors, usually open, were now closed, with additional uniformed officers standing guard. When we arrived, the doors were pulled ajar, just a crack, so that my boss could identify Mike and me. We were allowed to enter.

Just inside, several men in business suits with little microphones in their lapels shielded the door. By now, I figured out they were plainclothesmen.

One of the uniformed officers who had accompanied us in the elevator followed us in. Seemingly overcome by his curiosity, he was trying to make his way to the emergency room to have a look-see. Before I knew it, one of the plainclothesmen grabbed him by the collar, pushed him down, and slid him half way along the corridor. A couple other feds followed the sliding policeman, quickly ushering him out.

My work area was completely transformed. One of the cubicles held a enormous coffee urn, positioned on a steel-gray tray, surrounded by styrofoam cups, sugar packets, cream, and little red stirrers. Dignitaries gathered, whispering, in groups of three and four, exchanging information, trying to find out any little tidbit they could glean from one another. Was the President alive or dead? Where was Jackie? Where were Governor Connelly and Nellie? Were they all okay?

We social workers went into autopilot for the rest of the day, offering words of solace and coffee service to the people allowed in. No one cried that

day. Not the dignitaries, not the social workers, not the plainclothesmen. Who was there or what they said, is now a complete blur to me. We were all a part of history that we would just as soon forget.

Mike disappeared into doctor's duty in the emergency room. I didn't see him again until several days later, and then, we just nodded to one another in passing in the hallway. It would be a long time before I'd see that puckish grin again.

Old Joe

It was one o'clock in the morning. The midway lights were turning off, one set at a time, according to the schedule set by the new computer program. I was on assignment for a magazine story about the disappearing small town traveling carnival. I caught up with Old Joe, one of the carnies on the midway. He was scratching his head, looking up at the light show.

"Never did understand computers," he told me. "Too dern old to learn now."

"But this is progress, isn't it?" I asked.

"Everything's achangin'. I almost don't recognize the carnival anymore. What with the young guys, running things, thinkin' they know everything. Hell, they don't even know carny language. Too big for their britches, if you ask me."

Joe took out a sweaty red bandanna and wiped his brow. He gestured across the sawdust walkway. “They’re jumpin’ ’em. Leaving first thing in the morning.”

I looked around. The roustabouts were tearing down their stands. One of them waved to Joe. He grinned and waved back.

“On their way to the bone yard,” he said. “They’ll be agatherin’ together tonight, drinkin’ beer and braggin’ ’bout them hot gals, givin’ ’em everything they want. And then some.” Red fingers of embarrassment crawled across his face.

I just smiled and took notes on his terminology – boneyard, jumpin’ a stand. I could Google it later.

Old Joe sat down on a barstool, just behind the counter in his joint. He looked at all the kewpie dolls and stuffed teddy bears and rabbits lined up, ready to be won.

“They are so cute,” I said. “Do you give many away?”

“Naw, I just keep ’em out here. Red, yeller, pink, green...They attract lots of folks, but hardly anybody ever wins. It’s setup that way. So it don’t cost much to restock; but then again, I don’t make much money either.”

Old Joe picked up the pink rabbit and scratched its head as if it were an actual pet. “Hey, Fluffy, whatcha doin’?” Then, he put it down. “I like to think of them little critters as family. Closest thing I have to one.”

“Is that so?” I asked him. My journalist curiosity was getting the better of me. I waited patiently for him to continue.

Old Joe studied the ground for a long time. "I guess so. Carnies don't ever talk much 'bout those kinda things."

Still, I gently pursued it. "Do they have kinfolk to go to after the season? If not, where do they go?"

He reflected for a while. "It isn't easy makin' friends when you're amovin' from town to town."

"Are you married?" I asked.

"And it sure ain't easy findin' yourself a missus." His face became redder, but he continued. "I can't remember the last time I felt the warmth of a woman's arms. It's not like you can promise 'em anything. You'll always be aleavin' in the morning."

"How do these old carnies live once they don't have a job any more?"

"We're our own bosses. Private contractors, the carnival calls us. No pension. No health insurance. No old folks home for carnies. No gold watch at the end."

"It's a shame, isn't it?" I said.

"Yup." Old Joe sighed. "I've always made my way before. No need to think I can't do it again." He yawned. "But, no need to think about it anyway tonight. Or to hurry. I turned in my resignation this morning. They'll be amovin' on without me at dawn. And no one'll hardly even notice."

I added a few jottings to my notebook and put it into my purse. The guy was really tired, and I had enough for a story.

Wel come Vi si tors
or Maybe the Earth's Not
So Great After All

All of her friends said that Mary Louise Cartwright needed some private time, a little vacation to get away from it all. But later, after they heard her story, not one of them was sure they had given good advice.

Mary Louise was an exercise physiologist for a large medical institution. For one particular fiscal year, the hospital slashed the budget in the Exercise Physiology Department, apparently believing the rehabilitation of chronic diseases was not a priority. Manpower in the unit was severely curtailed. And when two additional physiologists quit, Mary Louise and a small group of her peers were left to pick up the slack.

The poor woman was working fourteen-hour days. She would drag home at night with just enough time to fix herself a cup of soup, watch the evening news, and drop into bed, exhausted. Keeping such a schedule wasn't good for her, and it wasn't good for her clientele. After a few patients complained that she was snappish, Mary Louise

was summoned to her supervisor's office and told to take a few days off. It was a welcome break.

When she was a little girl, Mary Louise had loved camping out. She decided that the forest would be the best place to find a little solace and get her act together. She packed up a cooler with turkey dogs and beans and made her way to a rustic area, several miles outside the city limits.

She tells the story that it was midnight, and the forest was still. It had taken her a while to build the campfire and set up her tent; but there she was, humming along with the radio and cooking her first outdoor meal in years.

Mary Louise wasn't sure what made her put down her turkey dog and wander away from the campsite to the edge of the grove. Perhaps, it was the rustling of the wind, just slightly detectable. Or maybe, it was her natural female curiosity to explore, a trait that had gotten her into trouble more than once when she was a child. Whatever the reason, she found herself lurking around a flat stretch of debris-covered ground, just a few feet from the wooded copse.

Suddenly, a flash of light, bright as a laser and swifter than lightning touched the ground at a vertical angle. And there, in front of her, so her story goes, was a shiny, top-shaped vehicle. It was small, about the size of an automobile, she estimated. It appeared to be a spacecraft.

Mary Louise wanted to run, but her legs failed her. She stood watching, curious, transfixed, while nothing happened for nearly thirty minutes. She held her breath, anticipating translucent

bodies, large heads with tiny limbs and big, black, all-knowing eyes.

But her patience was rewarded when the top of the vehicle swiveled to one side. To her surprise, two of the grandest hard bodies she had ever seen disembarked from the ship. They were a silvery color, shimmering and glistening all over, as if massaged by fine oil.

They were males. That was easy to tell. They had immense shoulders with large, well-developed pecs and abs. Their biceps were a sight to behold; their large, shiny triceps, beyond comparison. They wore skin-tight suits, just slightly more silvery than their bodies. These suits did not hide the fact that certain unmentionable aspects of their anatomy approximated, if not surpassed, that of earthmen. As one of them crawled from the vehicle, Mary Louise was treated to a view of the tightest set of *gluteus maximi* she had ever seen, even throughout her entire practice as a physiologist. The male entity approached her. His face was kind, his manner friendly.

“You smell heavenly.” (Reporting the story later, Mary Louise excused herself for the pun.) Her hard bodies spoke to her in her own language, asking lots of questions. She was having trouble concentrating with those glorious specimens of alienhood, standing right before her eyes.

“We’re on a fact-finding mission,” one of them said, flexing one trapezius and then the other, “to document the nature of the inhabitants of this planet. We want to determine if earthlings have something to offer, or if we have to assist them in

evolving,” the other said, tightening his *quadriceps* until they bulged through his silvery trousers.

At first, Mary Louise was a bit wary, giving out information to beings from another environment, but they reassured her. “We are friendly folk,” one said “You have nothing to fear.” As he spoke, he bent sideways, and Mary Louise was afforded the opportunity to see *deltoids* of unfathomable strength.

“Don’t you want me to take you to my leader, or something?” Mary Louise asked, pulling in her *rectus abdominus* to look more appealing and trying not to look at their rippling *trapezii*.

“It isn’t necessary,” the first one told her. “We’ll draw our own conclusions.”

Later, Mary Louise couldn’t say if it was her lack of willpower or if it was those beautiful, clenched *adductor longus* muscles that rendered her willing to volunteer answers to any questions they asked.

Mary Louise came back to work with a smile on her face five days later, reporting that she couldn’t remember anything more about the encounter. No one believed her, especially since she showed up pregnant not long thereafter. All of her co-workers thought that Mary Louise must have met up with some fast-talking guy in the forest during her vacation. She swore she didn’t.

That would have been the end of the story, except nine months later, when Mary Louise delivered, all the exercise physiologists marveled at the incredibly muscularity of the baby.

No one mentioned that his skin had a slightly silvery tinge.

Ni ne to Fi ve i n the Pen?

The best thing to do in cases like this, is to just get it off my chest. And believe me, I've held onto it for so long, it will be a relief.

It all started in 1980 when a groundbreaking movie, *Nine to Five*, debuted. It was a tongue-in-cheek comedy about women's inequality in the workplace.

Two of us couples, Dan and Barbara, and my husband and I decided to go to an early showing and have a bite later. Imagine our disappointment when the lady in the ticket booth informed us, after an endless wait in line, that the performance was now sold out.

We friends held a quick conference and asked the lady, "Can we buy tickets now for the next show?" We were thinking we'd have dinner first instead of after the movie.

"It's the policy of the theatre not to sell tickets until half an hour before the show," the lady told us.

Another conference and we decided to get burgers and fries across the street from the movie house and buy tickets at the appropriate time.

We traipsed over to the grill and cleaned our plates well before time to buy the tickets. It was a

great opportunity to sit and chat, catching up with each other's lives for a while. Although a little more time passed than we imagined (you know how easy it is to lose track of time with friends), we marched back to the theatre, certain that we were ahead of the game this time and could get our tickets.

To our surprise, many more people came to the later show than the earlier one. And there were two lines this time – one to buy the tickets and another to stand in line for the performance.

We got into the ticket line.

"It's barely moving," Barbara complained. "Meanwhile, the other line is growing longer and longer."

I wondered how many people the theatre could hold. We started counting heads. Still, we thought, we'd probably get a seat.

"Maybe we'll have to sit in one of the front rows," my husband said. "Puke City, as far as I'm concerned."

"Or in the stratosphere," Dan added, "where the air is so thin that I'll have to take my inhaler."

Then, disaster. True to my typical behavior, Mother Nature called. But, Barbara and I saw that as an opportunity. *That was our downfall!* I wish we had remembered that old saw about crime not paying.

We plotted to get into the movie house, by explaining that we simply had to "go." Then, we'd go to the particular theatre where the movie was showing and get four choice seats. My husband and Dan could buy our tickets and join us later when the customers were allowed in.

Wary ushers finally agreed that we had a legitimate crisis and that it would be all right for us to enter. Barbara and I proceeded to the ladies' room. There we waited until a couple other movies were letting out and filling up so as not to be conspicuous, and snuck out to search for the appropriate theatre.

Our theatre was still completely empty. With an extravagance of possible seats, we were like kids in a candy shop. We tried one place, then another, and at last settled on four seats, center section, midway back, on the aisle. Perfect. Barbara and I sat down to wait for our husbands and our tickets.

Time passed. No one came. That is, except for a few ushers cleaning up popcorn boxes and candy wrappers. Barbara and I scrunched down in our seats so as to be less noticeable, but the ushers didn't seem particularly interested if we were there or not. We breathed a sigh of relief when they left. Then the theatre began to fill with people. The two of us "girls" looked and waited. No husbands.

"Maybe, they went to another movie," I worried. "What if we are found here before we can get our tickets?"

Barbara made it worse. "What if we are kicked out? How humiliating would that be!" We sat and wrung our sweaty hands.

You can imagine our relief when our mates finally walked through the entrance, sheepish grins on their faces.

"Oh, thank God," I said. "Now, we are legitimate. Honey, let me have my ticket stub."

“What stub?” he said. “Dan and I decided that since you guys were already in, there was no reason to buy you tickets.”

Barbara and I looked at each other in horror.

“Oh, no,” I said, “This is a very popular show, selling out every time. What if they only sell so many tickets for the performance, and two people can’t be seated because we cheated?”

“They aren’t going to go around the theatre checking stubs,” my husband said.

But, Barbara and I didn’t believe him. We just knew they would, and we would be mortified.

The movie started. It appeared that everyone who wanted a seat got one. But then, why were the ushers going up and down the aisles so often in the dark? Had they remembered us from when they were cleaning up the place? Were they looking for the two little thieves who got in illegally?

The movie proceeded. Barbara and I were kind of nervous, but thinking we were probably safe. When *Nine to Five* was over, Barbara leaned over to me and whispered, “I’ll bet they’ve got the police outside waiting to arrest us.”

I felt another jolt of adrenalin to my system, but now it began to seem funny. Barbara and I *tee-heed* all the way to the exit.

Our laughs turned to panic when we opened the exit door and standing there was a fully-uniformed officer, waiting for the show to let out. He came over, a concerned look on his face.

“Everything okay here?” he asked. “You look a little nervous.”

I gulped as my husband said, “Thanks officer, we’re fine.”

Turns out he was the security guard for the movie, making sure the people going to the parking lot were safe. Thankfully, he didn’t seem to want to read us our Miranda rights.

We left the scene of the crime, our husbands delighted that they didn’t have to shell out the cash for our two tickets, and Barbara and I relieved that we were not going to be jailbirds.

Please don’t ask me what the movie *Nine to Five* was about. And don’t ask me to watch it being rerun on television or on a DVD. I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to know about it. I am never, ever going to try to get inside a theatre before the ticket is in my hand. And if Mother Nature calls while we are waiting, well, I’ll just have to find the nearest tree.

Mr. Tillis' Girls

It was just November. Mr. Tillis sat in his den and stared at the bevy of beautiful young girls and women before him. They were lined up, scantily clad in tights and leotards, each putting forth a pose to flaunt her best features. He looked from one to the next, trying to decide which was the most beautiful, who had caused him the most concern in his pursuits, who had meant the most to him.

Had it been that little one who was first in line, bending one leg up so that the flat of her foot was balanced against her other leg at the knee? She was his first, an achievement that none who followed could match in significance. Or was it the tall girl in the back who was balanced against the bar? What a proud accomplishment she had been. Then, there was that woman over there, bending backwards, her arms over her head, her proud breasts in the air. She was the most difficult of all.

It was hard to decide which he valued the most. Each had been different. Each had been special.

Mr. Tillis touched each of them ever so gently as he approached her. Occasionally, he would

stop and caress one. Then, he smiled wryly and passed her by.

He thought of Allison. He'd been involved with her for as long as he could remember. He couldn't let it go – their relationship. Allison was so beautiful and lithe, and the two of them had so much potential together...if only she were willing to work as a team.

He had been willing; still was. He had always put his heart into it. He spent hours with her, practically taught her everything she knew. He bought her the best of everything, the finest money could buy. Whatever she needed, he was willing to provide. He gave her the most beautiful of ensembles, and the finest of coaches so that she knew what to do and how to do it. Laughingly she had called it “finishing school.” For him, it was not simply savoir-faire, it was the essence of life.

She had been sublime. Her grace and elegance were unsurpassed. Her every move, the envy of others. She earned the respect of any who were fortunate enough to come into contact with her.

How could things have gone so wrong?

Mr. Tillis, standing there amidst his girls, remembered their last conversation. As always, he had made the selection for Allison. It was the best possible amongst the alternatives. She balked. But, he, in his wisdom, insisted.

Ultimately, she acquiesced and followed his lead. That was in September. Last month she called, tearful. This course of action was not right for her. She was miserable. She would need an alternative plan.

“Alright, alright,” he said. “It doesn’t have to be gymnastics. It can be track. I was in track when I went to college. I can help you with that, as well.”

“No, Dad,” she insisted. “I don’t want to major in track either.”

Mr. Tillis was shocked. “Then, what?” he asked. “What other possible path is available?”

“I was kind of thinking about accounting,” Allison said. “I was always good in math. I’d love to do that kind of work.”

He sighed. He was not at all pleased with her aspiration. She was an incredible gymnast. What a shame it was to abandon the talent that he had found and nurtured and molded himself. She was Galatea to his Pygmalion. Eliza to his Professor Henry Higgins. She was his route to glory – the brilliance and *éclat* he failed to attain in his own youth.

But, Mr. Tillis loved his little girl and despite his ambitions for her, he couldn’t bear to see her miserable. Besides, it was only November. It was early, yet. She might change her mind, again.

Mr. Tillis looked at all his girls standing before him in the trophy case. He had hoped there might be twice as many, some day. And speeches. And endorsements. And contracts of all sorts.

Wistfully, he closed the case and mused. If only she had been a boy.

Got Milk?

What is it about animals that makes people think of sex? Maybe, everything makes people think of sex; but animals, in particular, non-human ones, seem to bring the subject up with disquieting frequency.

There are just too many jokes out there about “bestiality” (with apologies to any of my four-legged friends who find the term politically incorrect) to dismiss it as just a casual reference. More often than not, the connection involves an alluring bovine creature and her oft-maligned companion, Farmer Brown.

Taking a short journey on the internet highway only proves my point. I googled “Farmer and Cow.” I found pages of stories that discovered the farmer in compromising circumstances or stated happenings too ridiculous to be made up.

For example, Farmer Brown goes to the barn to milk his cow. The cow kicks over the filled pail with her left leg. Brown takes a length of rope and ties her left leg to the left post of the stall. He fills another pail of milk, and the cow kicks it over with her right leg. The farmer ties her right leg to the right side of the stall. Our frustrated farmer proceeds to once again fill a pail that the cow tips

over with a swish of her tail. Having no additional rope, the farmer takes off the belt to his pants and binds the cow's tail to the rafter. In that moment his pants fall down and his wife walks in.ⁱ

There are many stories about the lonely Farmer whose cow is a better companion than his wife, listening to him and being willing to converse with him about many diverse and intellectual topics.ⁱⁱ I could hardly believe it. My guess is the cow is very limited in what she can discuss – maybe Cow-pernicus, political cow-ruption, and cows-manauts. Maybe music – Moo-nlight Sonata. But enough of this, I don't want to milk the situation here, simply to report it.

And incredibly, there is the absolutely true story of a farmer asking President Vladimir Putin of Russia to allow him to marry his cow since all of the women in his little town are already married or have moved away.ⁱⁱⁱ There was no information as to Putin's response to the request. But, I am quite certain he thought the appeal udderly ridiculous.

Finally, there are no bounds to which a smitten farmer will go to please and satisfy a bovine beauty with incredible animal magnetism. He can order from web sites devoted to satisfying her every desire. Ruminant over these examples:

One site features sports bras for cows, hoof polish with glitter, pagers so your lovely knows when to come in for milking, individual cow radio headsets for discriminating cows who can't decide between country and rock, cow visors to cut down on glare, tail hair crimpers, GPS locators and

directions to greener pastures, udder cream depilatory, and a variety of other gifts.^{iv}

As I see it, it would be much easier to simply buy a pair of earrings for a human being – a woman. But, I guess the grass is always greener...

- i “Cow Jokes” updated on Monday, August 31, 1998. On Plejaderna Ringlink, Author Unknown.
- ii. “The Farmer and the Cow,” by Mark R. Wilkins, Harvey Mudd College, Computer Science Collection, an adaptation, based on the original story.
- iii. “Russian Wants to Marry a Cow” Ananova Ltd., copyright, 2007.
- iv. “Got Milk,” *Cow Boutique*, bissier.tripod.com/cowpage.htm.

About the Author

Madelyn D. Kamen is a free-lance writer who has published short stories, poems, and essays in local and national magazines, newspapers, and online. Prior to establishing a document development company, she was an associate dean and professor at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, and before that, the Assistant to the Director of the City of Houston Department of Public Health.

She graduated from Southern Methodist University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology and from The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, School of Public Health, with a Master of Arts and Doctorate in Public Health.

Madelyn was a graduate of the Leadership Texas Class of 1992 and has been listed in Marquis' "Who's Who in the Southwest" and "Who's Who in America.". She has served on a number of boards for public agencies and private foundations dealing with women's and children's issues.

She is currently working on an historical novel.

Madelyn is married to an aerospace engineer and has two sons.

Maddy, here's where we start marketing the book. Do you want to put the links to Facebook and/or Twitter? On your nascent Twitter account you talk about starting a website. If you're going to, let's get it going now so we can put a link here to your blog so they can read more of your writing and you can continually go back and push the book from there. Besides, 3 lines on a page is ugly.

barb

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