

but we just talked, then dressed with the others  
 hiding behind towels, dabbing Blue Waltz toilet water  
 behind our ears (that's how our mothers taught us)  
 we covered our wet pony tails in identical white scarves  
 applied more Flame-Glo pale pink lipstick  
 over the darkening reddish-blue it had become  
 saved our bus fare so we could walk to Woolworth  
 and cram ourselves into the hollow box and pose  
 for the photo flash, pucker, stick out our tongues  
 slide on the tiny plastic seat, fall upon each other  
 giddy, crazy, laughing, crying, almost peeing our pants

well, more than almost, but that was many lives ago  
 many girlhoods ago, today we dribble with each cough  
 or sneeze or unexpected spurt of laughter  
 husbands dead, children gone, hardly any of us left  
 we find each other, try to resume where we left off

it seems we have learned much too competently  
 much to acutely, how to live alone, how to measure  
 how to avoid other people's hells, save a buck, do without  
 the kind of friends you just goof around with, can't  
 remember the last time we caught an old Esther Williams  
 movie on television; the vanilla scent of cheap toilet water  
 in heart shaped bottles; the way our dreams swam in sync

oh, we try, but to the whiff of chlorine that comes like  
 the phantom aroma of snuffed candles one can sense emitting  
 from a cassette tape of monks chanting just finished and turned  
 off

finally one of us becomes sensible about underwater somersaults  
 and how they come up from under to go over, and over  
 until they are definitely over, one of us honors the pragmatic  
 and politely, firmly, asks about grandchildren.

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*generally with contempt or pity on either side." Samuel Johnson ~§~*

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## *Generations*

*brenda wise byrd*

I glanced into the mirror  
And saw my daddy's face.  
I looked again, but he was gone,  
And I stood in his place.

The gleam that twinkled in his eye,  
Now sparkles from my own.  
I don't know how it got there,  
For I'm standing here alone.

His salt and pepper wavy hair  
Now sits upon my head.  
It's curled and rumped everywhere,  
Like he just got out of bed.

His laughter bubbles in my throat,  
And gurgles from my mouth.  
My accent when I speak, like his,  
Is clearly from the South.

He's dead now, but he isn't gone.  
I sense him everywhere.  
The things he taught still guide my life.  
I am his grateful heir.

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*"How can I die? I'm booked." George Burns ~§~ "Freckles can be*

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## *My Apologies, Sisters*

*Frances Hern*

My ability to fix things extends as far as strips of duct tape or a squirt of WD-40. This is why the sentence, “The front door knob feels loose,” recently uttered by my daughter, was enough to spoil my breakfast. I quickly confirmed that the knob was no longer attached to the springy-turny thing and mentally slotted into my day a visit to our local hardware store.

There, I found a handleset on display that was similar to our broken one, but this model was mounted on a left-hinged door. I tried to visualize whether the catch mechanism might be turned around to fit a right-hinged door and, at risk of appearing stereotypically dumb, went in search of a salesman. After a lengthy discussion with a second salesman, the first one told me that it probably could and, if not, I could return the item.

Returns have to be in the original packaging and it took me ten minutes to coax the box open without destroying it. Cheered by this small achievement and the unexpected appearance of my husband, I convinced him that dinner would be half an hour earlier if he took over. I had barely put the saucepans on the stove before he called that the screw hole in the handle was in the wrong place and wanted to know why I had bought an entire new handleset when all we needed was one knob.

“Because you can’t buy a knob with a handle,” I said. “You have to buy either two knobs or a set like this with knob, handle and a lock too.”

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*explained away by medicine, but I prefer the explanation that they are*

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“Then buy two knobs and you’ll have a spare,” he said, in a tone that implied obvious logic.

“But the knobs might not fit onto our handle.

“Well this one looks as though it will.”

The next morning I returned the handleset and bought a set of knobs of the same make. I attached one knob to the old handle and tentatively turned it. The door opened. I turned the knob again at regular speed but as I pulled to open the door the catch slipped back into the jamb. I had to leave for an appointment so warned my son that he would have to open the door slowly and it might take him several attempts, knowing he would need ten seconds, instead of the usual five, to run to his bus stop, several slices of toast in hand. I didn’t leave my husband a note. I thought that the slipping catch would be more eloquent.

To my great disappointment, his meeting went on much longer than expected and I tried to install the new catch in a hole that was half an inch too far from the edge of the door. I was repackaging the new knobs and asking anyone who might be listening why such items couldn’t be made in one universal size, when he returned.

“But why didn’t you buy the same make as our old one?” he asked.

I bit back a retort that this was the make he said would fit, and that this handle screwed on the inside of the door which seemed more burglar proof than our old one with the screw on the outside. Instead I went with the argument that would most appeal to him.

“The old one was the most expensive brand,” I said. “If the new one is only going to last three years anyway then I might as well buy the cheaper house brand.”

He looked at me as though I had spoken a foreign language. I chose my next words carefully.

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*kisses from the angels.” K. Greene ~§~ “Youth doesn’t reason, it acts.”*

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“If you came to the store with me you could help me make a more suitable choice.”

While I queued to return the knobs, he immediately found a salesman who helped him find an exact replacement of our old handleset, pointed out that it had a lifetime warranty and gave him the phone number so we could claim our refund.

“If you don’t know,” said my husband on our quiet drive home, “why don’t you ask for help?”

He installed the new knob and gave me the job of obtaining a refund.

“Our policy is repair and replacement,” the lady said when I phoned the next day.

“But we’ve already bought a replacement.”

I explained that without it we would either be living with a round hole in our front door large enough for someone to insert a bent coat hanger and unlock it, not to mention the brisk flow of frosty October air whistling through our open-plan house, or living with a front door we couldn’t open from the inside.

She sighed her disbelief that we couldn’t manage such petty problems and told me to mail the receipt and the entire old set to their office. This meant that I would have to have the new lock re-keyed to match our house keys and then install it, or install it as it was and have several new keys cut and distributed before I could package up the heavy hardware and pay the postage to British Columbia. Accurately gauging my frustration level, my husband decided that he would phone the refund department. It was a new day for the warranty representative, or perhaps it was a new representative. When my husband told her that all he really needed was a new knob, a fact I had mentioned when I phoned, she said, “No problem, I’ll have one in the mail for you today.”

I’ve thought about why my husband always finds knowledgeable salespeople. I’ve studied what he says to elicit

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*Francis Picabia ~S~ “A man’s as old as he’s feeling. A woman as old*

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a response of “yes sir, no problem sir.” Even so, my positive response rate is only a quarter of his, though we live in these days of supposed equality. Perhaps I’m conditioned to expect problems and somehow signal to others that refusing to do what I request would be more fun. To counteract this I shall think positively about the outcome of this repair job. Our replacement knob will arrive in time for me to return the purchased set to the store and the staff will have forgotten I have already returned two sets of hardware and will not suspect me of fraudulent behaviour and give me the third degree.

## *Bridging a Woman’s Life*

*SuzAnne C. Cole*

To her husband at first her body is a  
 bridge of gold drawn up against the hordes.  
 For her children later, a bridge to the world,  
 their guide from familiar to foreign,  
 her strength a footbridge across chaos.

Later, her body-bridge stretched thin  
 sags as grown children march on. On the other  
 side the youngest waves, kneels, flares a match.  
 Weary cross-beams, trusses blaze.

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*as she looks.” Mortimer Collins ~§~ On Watermelons: “Their cleansing*

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## *Connie Sue's Concerns*

*R. Scott Comegys*

Connie Sue gets upset if she does not have Chapstick readily available, but crossword puzzles have a calming effect on her. She always keeps a stack of puzzle books in her nightstand, along with a drawer full of brand-name lip balm.

That's because she has numerous stressors, her husband being paramount among them. He says cooking is risky behavior, so he forbids her to do it. He worries she may have a seizure and fall onto the stove. He fears that fire will start in the cat litter box. He is angry about Red Goose shoes. ("They are not half the fun of having feet," he cries.)

"Quit obsessing," Connie Sue has told him, over and over. But he won't seek counseling, and she has grown tired of cold food. She told her new therapist she felt wrung out.

The therapist looked at Connie Sue intently. "What would relax you now?" she asked.

"A new crossword puzzle. Or some doughnuts."

"But the doughnuts would hype you up, wouldn't they? All that sugar?"

"No, sugar calms me down," Connie Sue said. "There's nothing like doughnuts at bedtime. Just boom, puts out my lights."

The therapist frowned and scribbled some notes on a yellow legal pad. "Sounds like you may be hyperactive then. That's

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*action you can discover for yourself; just rub them on dirty skin.*

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why we give Ritalin to kids; it's a stimulant, but it slows them down because of their biochemistry."

"I don't believe in that hyperactivity stuff." Connie Sue folded her arms and rested them on her protuberant abdomen. "My first grade teacher always said I was just 'busy,' and she was right. She made me run around the flag pole every morning with a boy named Billy Fowler. We only had 48 states then. I remember because we would stop and help a Cub Scout put up the flag."

"You may well have been living undiagnosed for years," the therapist said. "Adult hyperactivity, it's a cutting-edge diagnosis. Maybe we should medicate you."

Connie Sue shrugged and began to hum "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Suddenly she sat erect on the sofa and dropped her arms to her sides, the palms of her hands meeting red leatherette. "Judy Garland had problems, and pills just made them worse."

The therapist nodded. "What do you know about her?"

"A lot. *Bonanza* beat her show in the ratings, so she got cancelled."

"Networks were different then."

"And I know about Hayley Mills. I used to collect her pictures."

"Did you see *Pollyanna*?"

"I did. Read the book, too."

"Did you learn anything from it?"

"No. I bet she never walked again."

"She did in the book."

"I know, but get real. She was paralyzed from the waist down, and it was like 1910 or something. Aunt Polly probably just packed her off to Hot Springs every summer for 'the treatment' with the TB people and the polio victims. Can you imagine all of that clanking and crap? And nobody ever got

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*Watermelons will remove the following: freckles, facial moles, or*

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well. Doctors just made up stuff and pretended they were doing something. They still do. You see doctors on billboards now – it’s just a big profit scam.”

The therapist shifted uncomfortably and glanced at her framed diplomas. “Do you believe that is the general intent of medical practice?” she asked.

“Well, sure. And now that we’re on the subject, you remember in the movie, Agnes Moorehead played cranky old Mrs. Snow. She was supposed to be an invalid. The Ladies’ Aiders sent Pollyanna over with some calf’s-foot jelly, and Mrs. Snow fussed about the doctor.”

Connie Sue recalled Mrs. Snow’s lines: “All he gives you is pills – just pills and bills, that’s all.”

“That’s a good imitation.”

“Yeah, thanks. I’m like an African Grey parrot. I’m a mimic.”

“Some might call you a pessimist.”

“I wish they’d call me a fatality.” Connie Sue reached for her Chapstick. She smeared her lips like Minnie Mouse applying lipstick in a cartoon, with big swipes all over her mouth. “And you know what else? I look younger than I am.”

The therapist checked her notes. “Yes, you do look younger than your stated age.”

“That’s because time is going backwards for me. It’s cosmic punishment. I have to live longer than everybody else.”

With a glance at her watch, the therapist closed her legal pad in a file folder and clipped her ball point pen to the edge. She smiled. “I believe our time is up.”

“No, it isn’t.” Connie Sue squinted and smacked her lips. “We’ve only just begun.”

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*epidemic leprosy, if anyone should have these conditions.” Galen 129-*

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## *Considering Nanny's Cookie Jar* *Becky Haigler*

It is  
a funny little jug:  
a squatty globe whose only ornamentation is  
high-placed curlicue handles and a similar twist of clay  
on the lid. The simplicity of form and the age  
apparent from the crazed lines of its odd green glaze  
are reminiscent of an artifact recovered from the ruins of  
some ancient city. And in fact, this jar once cached strange  
old treasures. Nanny's cookies were large, soft, formless, and  
never-the-same-twice. She didn't put much stock in recipes.  
If the cookie jar were found empty by a grandchild's groping  
hand, Nanny might be inspired to bake. An invitation to pull  
a chair to the kitchen counter and help was even better than  
the finished product, and often what I really sought. I don't  
keep cookies in the jar now (they're fresher in an airtight  
tin) but I love its serene presence in my kitchen.  
Smooth and simple, the stolid lines are  
timeless as a grandmother's love.

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*216 AD ~§~ "I'm aiming by the time I'm fifty to stop being an*

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## *The Red Tide*

*Anthony J. Mohr*

On a warm July day in 1964, Big Louie yelled as he pointed out to sea. “Outside! My God, outside! It’s so big. Look at that thing form.” Big Louie’s eyes had never been so open. The wave built silently and then piped, emitting a throaty rumble lasting almost fifteen seconds before expiring in foam on the beach. “Outside!” referred to waves we could bodysurf. You paced the cresting water, then held yourself rigid, arms straight ahead or at your side. A breathless ride became your reward, uniting you with the inbound tide.

Soupy Sales called us teeners. We were the products of a golden time, the Southern California of 1964. That summer, Gary, Brian, Joe, Eric, Big Louie, Rich and I gave ourselves up to the water. Six weeks from the start of our senior year, we seven were poised to run our high school and finally have some dates before heading east to college. We deserved these dreamy days on the sand. Lying on our blankets, talking about student government and the Johnson-Goldwater match-up as if they were equally important (which they were), we were stoked on teenage success and knew the future lay open, boundless and bright.

A wave was about to break. Joe caught it. I missed and dove under it. When I surfaced and looked back, Joe was rollicking through the foam to the shoreline. In control to the end, he let

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*adolescent.” Wendy Cope ~§~ “He is so old that his blood type was*

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out a victory yell – “Team!” is what he hollered – as he flailed his arms and raced to our beach blankets.

We’d fall asleep until the late afternoon marine layer turned the air moist. Then we scrunched through the sand to our car. The radio blasted all the way to our houses, where we ran upstairs to shower before dinner.

The nights were like velvet. Our bodies became little ovens, giving off the heat we absorbed without sunscreen. We saw *Viva Las Vegas* at a drive-in. The Beatles made us smile and groove. “A Hard Day’s Night” reached Number One on the KFVB Fabulous Forty Survey. Their first movie by the same name was due out on August 11. We worried about nothing. Our grades were high. The Democrats were the party of peace and paychecks. Our swimming pools were heated so we could play in them until bedtime.

The red tide arrived in August. Most likely it was an algae bloom, probably nontoxic because none of us got sick. The diatoms made the water glow whenever something – like a swimmer or a wave – stirred them. And since breaking waves stirred them plenty, the surf line became a band of light.

Surfing that band of light sounded like a grand adventure, and on the night of August 4, we decided to try. Everyone gathered at my house. We had just finished piling blankets and snacks in the car when my parents said the President was about to give a speech. At 8:36 Pacific Daylight Time, Lyndon Johnson’s face appeared on the television.

He opened with the phrase, “As President and Commander-in-Chief...” The group stiffened. Most of us took civics in summer school. We knew that when the President used those words, military action was coming.

Johnson continued: “[R]enewed hostile actions against United States ships on the high seas in the Gulf of Tonkin have

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*discontinued.” Bill Dana ~§~ “A man loves the meat in his youth*

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today required me to order the military forces of the United States to take action in reply.”

“It’s about time,” someone muttered, I think my dad.

“That reply is being given as I speak to you tonight. Air action is now in execution against gunboats and certain supporting facilities in North Vietnam which have been used in these hostile operations.”

We were bombing North Vietnam. Everyone in my den supported this long overdue move. So did LBJ’s opponent. Looking straight into the TV camera, the President informed us, “I was able to reach Senator Goldwater and I am glad to say that he has expressed his support of the statement that I am making to you tonight.”

Certain moments rate as a steeple in your life, the apex of a season. Tuesday night, August 4, 1964, presented such a moment. We whooped through the twenty-minute drive from my house to the Pacific Ocean. The DJ on KRLA said it best: *finally we’re showing those Communists what for*. He sounded as ebullient as we felt, racing west toward the red tide. Even better, President Johnson promised that he would get Congress “to pass a resolution making it clear that our Government is united in its determination to take all necessary measures in support of freedom and in defense of peace in Southeast Asia.”

Brian was the first to frolic among the phosphorus diatoms. Gary joined him and they swam toward an oncoming shadow, the top of which was a ribbon of lit algae. Before diving under the wave, I saw Brian’s head sticking out of the vertical water, his mouth an oval, eyes glaring ahead. For an instant a corona surrounded Brian; then the wave crashed. Brian scored a perfect ride to the beach. So did Gary. Emerging from the glowing froth with his arms in the air and head thrown back, Gary reached for the most awesome syllables at his command to communicate his ecstasy: “Hey, Bamboola!”

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*that he cannot endure in his age.” William Shakespeare ~§~ “Middle*

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Eric voiced an idea for Student Council as we drove home at midnight. Gary invited us to a swimming party on Saturday. And I decided to ask out Margie. Braving the red tide gave me the courage to do it. The fall dance was set for September 26. If I called her tomorrow, Margie would have enough notice. It was going to be a sensational senior year.

## *Legacy*

*Becky Haigler*

“Becky is a mule’s name!” my grandmother said.  
 She died when I was three.  
 My “memories” are only photographs.  
 But I remember what people said about her:  
 “A saint!”  
 We have her quilting and embroidery  
 and her name. But I didn’t really know  
 Mary Elizabeth, my grandmother.  
     Mary Ruthe, my mother.  
     Mary Rebecca, me.  
     Mary Rachel, my daughter.  
     Mary Elizabeth, my granddaughter.  
 There is a strong stubborn streak here.  
 Are you sure mules don’t reproduce?

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*age is youth without levity, and age without decay.” Daniel Defoe ~§~*

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## *The Pump Room*

*Heather Haldeman*

“I wonder if the Pump Room’s still there?” was the first thing my 79-year-old mother asked. Mom and I were flying to Chicago for a weekend, where we planned to meet my daughter, Hilary, on her college break.

“It was the first fancy bar and restaurant I’d ever been to,” she said, reminiscing. “The very first. The night was magic.”

“How old were you?” I asked, assuming that she was probably in her twenties.

I should have known better than to assume anything with Mom. “Thirteen,” she replied.

Up until my stepfather’s death a year and a half ago, my mother traveled extensively. Since then, she hadn’t gone anywhere, and the trip to Chicago was a big deal for her. She was so excited, she even renewed her passport. “Mom, Chicago’s in the United States. Not to worry.”

“But, my husbands always did everything,” she replied, referring to her three spouses. “I’m just making sure that I have what I need to get there.”

We arrived with plans to visit The Art Institute, take a city tour in a trolley car and see Chicago’s magnificent architecture on a river cruise. But, all of this paled in comparison when Mom found that the Pump Room still existed in the Ambassador East Hotel. On top of that, Chicago still allowed smoking in bars.

“Hot damn!” she exclaimed, being a true lover of nightlife.

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*“Keep on raging - to stop the aging.” The Delltones ~§~ “It is not*

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“My god, there it is,” my mother shrieked as soon as the cab turned onto North State Parkway. She acted as if this were her greatest thrill ever.

As our cab pulled up, the doorman leapt to attention and greeted us with a cheery smile. He welcomed us and extended a gloved hand to help Mom out of the cab.

My mother, the consummate flirt, peered up at his nametag as soon as she got out. “Don,” she said, “I’m Marilyn.” Then motioning to my daughter and me, she continued, “This is my kid and her daughter. They’re taking me here for dinner. I’m from California. You know, the land of fruits and nuts.”

Bubbling from all the excitement, Mom was in rare form. Hilary and I exchanged glances, and Don was fascinated.

“Can you believe that I haven’t been back here in 61 years!” she said to Don, who was obviously impressed.

Digging into my evening bag, I pulled out my camera and asked Don to take a group shot of the three of us with the hotel name prominently featured in the background. “Well, Marilyn, it took you long enough to get back here,” he joked, handing back the camera. “We’ve been waiting.”

Don ushered us through the door into the stately old-world elegance of the Ambassador East lobby with its thick marble floors, brilliant chandeliers and ornate high ceiling. Wide-eyed, Mom said dreamily, “Just like I remembered it.”

“The Pump Room’s to your left,” Don said, taking Mom’s arm like a pro. “But, I’m going to escort THIS piece of history with me.” Her blue eyes sparkled and her false eyelashes fluttered.

“Did you know that Chicago’s the city of Big Shoulders?” Mom asked, as soon as we were seated at a small table in the bar area. “It’s true.” She plopped her gold lamé handbag on the tiny table lit by a votive candle. “Carl Sandburg called it that in one of his poems.”

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*how old you are, but how you are old.” Marie Dressler ~§~ “Old*

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Impressed that my mother had read any poetry given the stack of hand-me-down tabloids she passed on to me each week, I nodded. “Really? Gosh, Mom, how’d you remember that?”

“Oh, all the movie stars back in the ’50s loved Carl Sandburg.”

“Angel,” the bartender, quickly appeared and took our drink order. Before my mother could strike the match, he whipped out a lighter and gallantly lit the end of her slim cigarette. Mom was in heaven.

Hilary asked if the bar area looked the same. “Did all these photographs of famous people line the walls back then?”

“I don’t remember that,” Mom tasted the wine. “Ahhh, the first sip. Always the best. Sorry, excuzzy.” She loved using her bastardized Italian.

“The restaurant part of the Pump Room seems smaller,” she said, surveying the area adjacent to the bar. “Like when you go back to your grammar school and the desks look all tiny. But, you remembered them looking big.”

After Mom finished her cigarette, we stepped down into the restaurant and snapped a few photos of her in Booth One, where many of the restaurant’s famous took up residence. Then, we were seated at a larger table which was more accommodating for the three of us.

“So, Nana,” Hilary said, opening her menu. “You were only thirteen? Why were you here?”

“It was the Republican Convention,” she mused. “Papa was a delegate and he took me along with him. He was really excited about Wendell Wilke running for President.”

A bus boy appeared with water and a basket of bread. Mom strained her eyes to read his nametag in the darkened room. “Ahdbjul?” she asked. Now it was her broken Spanish. “Is that the way you pronounce your name?”

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*hippies don't die, they just lie low until the laughter stops and their*

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Abdul obliged, saying his name. “Hmmm. Don’t recognize that language.” Mom shook her head, her frosted bob never moving an inch. “Where’re you from?”

“Af-han-ni-stan,” he replied, using his native tongue.

Oh dear, I thought, here we go again. Mom is always trying to make a connection wherever she goes.

“Wild,” Mom exclaimed. “I’ve never met anyone from Afghanistan .”

Abdul was taken in. “Would you like two pieces of the bread?” he asked her, smiling wide.

Our waiter stood at attention. His nametag read “Joe.” Thank goodness. There’d be no new accent from Mom, but she did find out that he was a native Chicagoan.

After ordering, Mom continued her story. “Papa and I sat over there in one of those tables where you sit side-by-side.” She gestured to the tables along the wall. “I was wearing a lavender dress with this big purple sash at the waist. It had a puffy slip and I felt beautiful.”

Dropping ice cubes into her wine, she continued. “Over there,” she pointed to the steps leading back up to the bar, “I’ll never forget, two waiters came down carrying flaming skewers of shish kabob. In those days, flaming food was a big deal – cherries jubilee, baked Alaska, that sort of thing. I was hooked. What could be better than this!”

Although there were no flaming dishes on this visit, we all enjoyed our dinners. On the way out, Mom took in the celebrity photos, stretching out the evening as long as she could.

Don waved a cab as soon as he saw us coming. “Marilyn,” he called over to Mom, “how was the Pump Room?”

“Marvelous!” Her blue eyes sparkled. Her false eyelashes fluttered.

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*time comes round again.” Joseph Gallivan ~S~ “I’m saving that rocker*

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Helping her into the cab, Don leaned down so that she could hear him. "Now, just make sure that you don't wait another 61 years to come back."

"Not to worry!" she said, as our cab sped away.

## *Father Lied*

*Michael Neal Morris*

My father lied.  
He didn't mean to, I suppose,  
but now that he's dead  
I have to live with it.

He said, "When you are an adult  
living in your own place  
with your own children  
then you will be the boss."

He said it as if it meant  
I'd be in charge, have my way,  
run my course  
or at least have control of the TV

But when I see his eyes  
in my memory they reveal  
a pillar of firm despair  
going before the ark of hope.

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*for the day when I feel as old as I really am." Dwight D. Eisenhower*

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*Thinking About Red**Janet McCann*

The girl's coat in *Schindler's List*  
 is the first red I remember, and of course  
 it isn't red, it is just the faintest  
 suggestion of red, as she is being led  
 off to be killed, in her absolute innocence,  
 in her red coat, and why is that  
 the first red to come to mind, brighter in fact  
 than all the rest? And then there was  
 a red dress I had not the nerve to buy  
 in young womanhood, not wanting  
 the "wrong kind" of attention, but it was lovely,  
 the shimmery red fabric under my fingers.  
 Red blood drops of geranium petals  
 fell on my front stoop, a middle-class plant  
 but you saw it; there was a bright red car we hit  
 because it was hidden in bushes, and you couldn't see it,  
 it looked like flowers. There was so much blood  
 when I found a razor blade at three years old  
 and sliced my fingertip – I shook it,  
 it rained red over the wallpaper of horses  
 and carriages – not till then did I scream.  
 When they said, what is black-and-white  
 and red all over, I didn't get it;  
 I thought newspapers had to have red print

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~\$~ *"If youth knew; if age could."* Henri Estienne ~\$~ *"We do not*

---

hidden away in the middle. There was red  
calligraphy on my ankle when I tried  
to save the feral cats; I tried to read it.  
It healed into a mark my Chinese colleague  
said looked something like the word for friend.  
Last may be the red of my prom roses.  
I had a wrist bouquet. My escort died  
years ago, of alcohol and life,  
but here's the bouquet, shriveled, in a box  
with yearbooks, high school photographs – still red.

## *Grandma Sult*

*Michael Lee Johnson*

I remember Grandma Salt, or was it Sult,  
for her golden silver hair, long  
and strung out like a mop.  
On mild days tidy and tossed back in a bundle  
like twined rope.  
If it was Salt it was her hair; if it was Sult  
it was German and I know now  
where my temper came from.  
Standing erect, for her age, 95,  
structured posture upright  
with a broad smile half the width  
of the mouth of the St. Joe River.  
She wrote her own history with 11 children.

---

*count a man's years until he has nothing else to count." Ralph Waldo*

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Little did she know 8 of them would  
outlive her. 1 touched the century  
mark with a golden pen and added 1 year.  
Numbers are important in family histories.  
Good genes, then genealogy, grew in fertile ground.  
No one knew, hand on the Bible I swear,  
where the planting of the seeds originally sprouted.  
There was a sense of sternness, and a masculinity  
hard to decipher with long dresses on.  
They plowed the fields, spanked the butts  
of dirty street children; they worked hard  
4 the corn they grew and found in their  
children's cereal bowl meals.  
It is hard to discern all the features  
in 1 black and white photograph;  
hard to tell what is real and what is  
coal smoke tossed, gray from the ears,  
to furnaces in the air.  
How do you end a poem like this 1?  
I guess I found the answer when my  
mother passed away at 98½, a fraction.  
#'s are important in genealogies these days.

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*Emerson ~S~ "At twenty years of age the will reigns; at thirty, the wit;*

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## *Just Push Play*

*Ginger B. Collins*

Sylvie wasn't on the porch. It was Helen's first clue that something was wrong. Her sister usually paced on the porch or stood in the driveway poised like a sprinter waiting for the starting gun.

Helen rolled to the curb and honked. No response. "Probably dropped dead from a heart attack," she mumbled.

She swung the Buick into the driveway, rocking to a halt just short of Sylvie's garage. She threw the strap of the oxygen tank over her shoulder and using the fender for support, teetered around the car and up the sidewalk.

A blend of Aqua Net and Shalimar sifted through the screen door. Sylvie stood inside, her Clairol blonde in a crisp updo and her lime-green polyester pants suit barely camouflaging her pear shape. She was preaching to the TV, wagging her finger for emphasis. The shiny red of a fresh manicure added fire to her brimstone.

"They'll put you in the home for yapping to the TV like that."

Sylvie waved her sister inside with the other manicured hand, never taking her eyes from the screen. "Look who's talking. You hardly get around on those gimpy legs. If anyone's bound for the home, it's you."

"I'd rather be crippled than crazy."

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*and at forty, the judgment." Benjamin Franklin ~S~ "Those who love*

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Helen laughed at her own joke, bringing on the deep, raspy cough of a cat with a hairball. Sylvie stepped forward, but Helen's hand went up like a stop sign. After a few steady draws of oxygen, the cough subsided.

"Don't say a word," Helen said, dropping her hand. "I loved every one of those cigarettes."

She walked to Sylvie's side. "What in the hell are you doing?"

Sylvie turned back to the television, hitting buttons on the remote in a random sequence that brought gray fuzz, charts with arrows, and finally a black screen. "Rita bought me a VCR." Each frustrated word was followed by a stab at the buttons with her red fingernail. "And I want to tape my soaps before we leave for bingo."

Helen rolled her eyes. "Are you still watching that trash? Forget it and let's get out of here. We won't get a good seat if we don't leave now." She grabbed at the remote. "You know it's hard to hear the numbers if we don't sit up front."

Sylvie gave a quick tug. "I've watched *Guiding Light* for over thirty years. I don't want to miss it. That's why Rita bought me this thing. 'So you can get out more, and not miss your programs,' she told me. She promised to get me started. But what happened? She plugged in a few wires, said it was ready, and didn't stay to show me what to do next. Now all I'm left with is a stupid contraption that doesn't work, the rings from her coffee mug on my tabletop, and cookie crumbs on the carpet."

Sylvie went back to pushing buttons. "Don't you have one of these VCR's?"

"I have one but the kids put it together. I just put in tapes and press PLAY."

The words hung in the air. Ernie would have put that VCR together in seconds. But the love of Sylvie's life had been dead

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*deeply never grow old; they may die of old age, but they die young.*" Sir

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for ten years. Rita, their only daughter, rarely called or visited. Other than Helen and their youngest sister, Vernie, Sylvie was alone.

Helen fiddled with her oxygen hose. “Oh, damn the front row.” She unstrapped the portable tank and peeled off her coat. “If my big sister wants those stupid soap operas, we’ll put a VCR together.”

“Really?”

“Abslutootly! Get the instruction book. I’ll call Vernie. She’ll hold our places. We’ll figure this out in no time.”

Sylvie was halfway down the hall before Helen finished the sentence. Helen looked at the black plastic hodgepodge of buttons and arrows. It still held the oily warmth of Sylvie’s hand. “It’s just you and me kid.” Helen reached up under the cuff of her blouse for a hanky to wipe Sylvie’s hand cream from the crevices. “Make this easy, okay?”

Sylvie returned before Helen got the hanky tucked back up her sleeve. Her face had turned to sunshine and she waved the instruction book like unearthed treasure when she handed it to Helen. “You get started. I’ll make coffee.”

Helen sat, remote in one hand, instruction book in the other. “Pushy broad.” She took a couple of deep drags of oxygen and started reading. From the kitchen she caught the first whiff of fresh coffee. Sylvie was humming “Tennessee Waltz.”

In a few minutes Sylvie returned with coffee. It was perfect – that caramel color you get with just a touch of cream. The saucer held two freshly-baked sugar cookies on a folded linen napkin. Helen smiled at the irony. Coffee at her house was “serve yourself” from an old Mr. Coffee – fresh in the morning and bitter by afternoon. And baking? Once Entenmanns’s perfected their chocolate chip, Helen stashed away her cookie sheets.

“Any progress?”

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*Arthur Wing Pinero ~§~ “I guess I don’t so much mind being old, as*

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“Who writes these books?” Helen asked. “No one our age, that’s for damn sure. I look at the diagrams ’cause the words make no sense.” She took a bite of cookie and flipped the page. “There’s one thing I learned at Theo’s hardware store. If you fit the male end of one into the female end of the other, something always happens.”

She congratulated herself on the pun, then refocused and rotated the book ninety degrees. “Okay, here we go.”

“You’ve figured it out?”

Helen took a few more deep hits of oxygen and slid off of the chair. She got on all fours and crawled across to the set. She motioned to Sylvie. “Push the thing away from the wall so I can get back there and undo what’s been done. We’ll start from scratch.”

Sylvie scrambled to the television and put her weight behind the corner. After a few strained heave-ho’s, the casters of the metal TV stand rolled across the carpet, exposing a web of black wires that connected the VCR into the back side of the television.

“Where’s that fancy magnifying glass of yours? I need to see close up.”

Sylvie pulled the pearl handled magnifying glass off the table beside her chair. “Another helping hand from Rita,” she announced, handing it to Helen.

“She means well, Sis.” Helen inspected the silver carving on the band. “Nice. Looks antique.”

Sylvie puckered her mouth and turned to walk away.

“Where do you think you’re going? Get your butt down here.”

Sylvie fussed over the potential for wrinkles in her pantsuit as she got to her knees and landed with a thud. There was a symbolic rolling up of sleeves, and work began. They looked at the set and studied the diagram. No kibitzing, no wisecracks,

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*I mind being fat and old.” Peter Gabriel ~§~ “Age does not make us*

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just thirty minutes of concentration as they battled the wires to match up the ins and outs on the two pieces of equipment.

“I think this might be it.” Helen’s voice had cautious enthusiasm. “Go around front and turn her on.”

Sylvie scooped up lint and cookie crumbs from the carpet as she crawled around front. She eased her finger down on the remote’s power button as if the level of pressure made a difference between success and failure. The television came alive.

“Okay,” Helen called. “Push MENU.”

Sylvie gave a gentle push to the button marked MENU and was rewarded with a color grid for “clock set” and “timer set.”

Helen peeked around the corner of the set. “What do you see?”

“I think you did it. Come look.” Sylvie started to giggle like a kid at Christmas.

Helen huffed and puffed to the front. “Grab my tank, would you, Sis.” Her volume was down to a shallow whisper. “I need air.”

Sylvie snapped to attention and helped Helen adjust the tank’s transparent tubes into her nostrils. The static of the television buzzed as Helen pulled in cool, fresh air. They sat with their backs against the sofa and legs stretched out in front like two teenagers waiting to see Elvis on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. When Sylvie completed the final ENTER, they squealed – then laughed – then cried.

“You did it.” She gave Helen a hug. “Thanks, sis.”

“Thanks, schmanks. Don’t get any bright ideas. I’m not going into TV repair as a sideline.” Helen reached for a piece of furniture, starting the long haul to an upright position. “It would cut into Bingo time. Speaking of...let’s get going. If Vernie sees a couple of eligible widowers she’ll give them our seats and toss us to the back of the room.”

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*childish, as some say; it finds us true children.” Johann Wolfgang Von*

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Helen grunted and Sylvie groaned as they struggled to standing. After a quick scan of hair and lipstick, they were off. As Sylvie locked the door, Helen saw her sneak one last look at the VCR remote on the coffee table.

Sylvie got settled as Helen cranked up the Buick. "Let's go for the jackpot today," she said, reaching over to pat Helen on the arm. "I'm feeling lucky."

## *Free Flow*

*Larry Lefkowitz*

When lads, in summer, we swam in the Delaware river  
 The last generation before the advent of the swimming pool  
 Delighting in the river's flow  
 And moving upstream from King's Rock to Queen's Rock  
 The water swirling about our waists as we bucked the current  
 Before the measured pool came to hold sway  
 With tiled bottom in place of time-smoothed rocks.

Are we different because of it  
 From the youthful generation that followed?

I leave it to the sociologists or anthropologists  
 Searching its banks for evidence of the Indians Delaware  
 Who also tested the the river's flow before the Europeans  
     came  
 Bringing currents of change and rocks no longer named  
 For the sun and the moon.

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*Goethe ~\$~ Greeks called freckles ephelides. Middle English observers*

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## *The Last Thing I Do*

*Mary Deal*

Passing of the clouds is barely perceptible, unless the boat rocks and disturbs their reflection before the water returns to glass. The landscape is completely calm, not a tree branch bending. Sunlight beats down, felt, and seems the only thing moving.

I sit endlessly, caught up in the serenity of the lake. I think long about the last thing that I must do, but haven't been out on the water since you left. Left, but not quite gone. And this is not the place. I will know when I find the spot, where you and I used to sit and pass the hours as precious time together waned.

I row. We used to take turns rowing. Our favorite game was to try to find the exact mid-point between opposite shores. I never knew where that was but I remember your words: "...just about where the church steeple on the hill comes into view."

Your presence as always, goes with me, even after there is no bringing you back. You can no longer speak to me, but our playful bantering haunts my memories, as does our laughter.

I wait till the water has smoothed again. Then, slowly, I open the urn and set you free from a mind that held you captive and kept us apart yet together for years; set you free to be the liberated soul that you are.

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*thought freckles looked like lentils; anything freckled or speckled was*

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## *Druid Hill Drive*

*Terrí Kirby Erickson*

On Druid Hill Drive,  
we were laughing, wiggling  
flashes  
of mismatched clothes  
and spindly limbs,  
who spun our parents  
in circles as we dashed  
in and out of assorted kitchens,  
the sound of banging  
screen doors loud  
as cannon fire, family dogs  
barking like mad  
from the porch. With bikes  
to ride and trees  
to climb, forts to build  
and bugs  
to catch, there were  
barely enough hours  
in the day for all the things  
we wanted to do before  
bedtime, when sleep

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*lentiginous. ~\$~ "Freckles stink (owners think)." Ginny Greene ~\$~*

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