

Black River

Charles P. Ries

As I entered the third of a four-hour meditation, my legs began to cramp and my back ached. My mind continued to run in circles, but slowly it came to a standstill when for a long, calm, clear moment I saw him. I saw my father sitting next to me. He wasn't the father I'd known, but a Hindu monk. He was young, with a shaved head, but I distinctly knew it was my father and it dawned on me that prayer and service had not been enough to keep him in heaven. God had played a cruel trick on him when He made him return as a parent. What the monastery couldn't do we, his seven children, would. We'd grind his ego, temper, and impatience to powder and send him back to God without a blemish. In a flash the vision was gone. I'd seen him. I'd known my father before, as a monk. And when I found him again in this life, he was still a monk. Perhaps parenting – not the priesthood – is the path to God, I thought.

So many stories. So many memories.

During the vigil prior to my father's burial, I walked up to his open coffin and slipped in an envelope filled with rose petals I'd been given years earlier after completing an advanced yoga training. I had left Catholicism long ago (if anyone ever truly leaves Catholicism) and was determined, through therapy and spirituality, to heal myself. I worked with a Jungian therapist to understand the meaning of my dreams. I studied Buddhism and Hinduism. I even traveled to North Africa to learn the mystical

teachings of Islam. I left no rock unturned in my search for happiness. I discovered that when I calmed my mind, my thoughts became less self-critical. It wasn't perfect, but it was better.

That evening I drove out to where the mink farm had been. The sheds were gone and the massive yard that housed our ten thousand animals had been replaced with a Super Kmart and a Piggly Wiggly. But the house my father and his brothers built sixty years before was still standing. After a difficult divorce and needing a place to stay at a good price, my cousin was renting it. My parents did what they'd always done and practically gave it to her. She was, after all, family.

I glided to a stop on the gravel drive leading to my parents' home and climbed out of my car. My cousin Joan was already waiting for me on the back porch. "Hey, Cousin, mind if I sit back here for awhile and think? I could always see further when I sat back here," I said as she reached out to give me a knowing embrace.

"Sure thing. You want a beer to keep you company?" she asked. "Hey, your dad was a good man. He just didn't have much to say. He came from a generation of silent men. Men who didn't burden others with their feelings. He showed his heart in other ways."

"Right. I know that."

Joan looked at me for a moment longer and then turned to go inside. When she returned she handed me a bottle of Kingsbury and gave me another long hug as I struggled to fight back a rising wedge of emotion.

My father was a hard guy to figure and, although I'd worked hard to forget him, he remained a primary suspect in the emotional arch of my life. I'd become a sweet, silent middle-aged man – successful, spiritual and divorced twice with two teenage daughters. I'd worked hard to know about life, to

understand how it worked and yet I was still subject to sweeping self-doubt and sadness.

As I sat looking east from the back porch, I again tried to remember my life. I heard nothing but the crickets and the occasional car passing by. I thought about my father who'd be buried the next day and I longed for the kind of sustained joy that I'd read about in Buddhism or the here-today zest that I saw in my Uncle Pete and his children. But I realized I was not one who could sustain long joyous flights. I was a careful, thoughtful plodder, just like my old man. I was a Ries.

And a final memory came to me.

It was the dead of winter. The temperatures were far below zero and a deep blanket of snow covered the ground. I had come home from college to help with pelting. My dad and I continued to bump heads and argued from time to time. But generally we maintained our truce. I was surprised when he invited me to go on a walk with him. It was the height of pelting season, and he wanted to go for a walk – with me – go figure. Maybe the old man's going to give me some sage advice. Finally the pearls of wisdom he's been storing up will be shared with me, I thought.

It was just before dusk as we drove the pick-up a few miles south of Sheboygan and parked it alongside a county trunk road that crossed over the Black River. Wearing thick winter gloves, boots, jackets, and wool hats we got out and jumped down a slight embankment that led to the snow-covered surface of the river and began to walk side by side. First one hour going up the river and then an hour going down the river. The trees groaned as the wind gently moved them and our boots crunched the fresh dry snow. We walked through rolling hills, silent tree groves, and open fields. Beneath a slate gray sky, we saw no one, not a bird or an animal. We just walked, keeping our thoughts locked inside. When we arrived back at the truck we lifted our silence

up into the cab and drove home. There would be no pearls of wisdom today.

“How was your walk?” My mother asked us we entered the back hall, stomping the snow off our boots and removing our coats.

“Well, it was fine,” my father replied. “We had a good walk and nice talk, didn’t we, Chuck?”

“Everything’s cool, Mom. Dad and I did some big-time male bonding,” I told her. She smiled with relief. She was pleased to know her husband had taken time to be with her son.

Our walk was one of his gifts to me. He’d reached deep within himself and told me he loved me. It was a grand gesture from a silent man, and it was good enough. There are the parents we are given, and the parents we find. We are shaped by all of them. After years of prayer, God had given me my miracle. A parade of angels disguised in baseball caps, floral skirts, and bib overalls had conspired to convince me that I was enough.

There are days I wish I could leave the small boy within me behind. To finally stop feeling the yearning and disquiet he felt. But none of us ever truly outgrow our childhood. We have the option to understand it and embrace it. We can learn to view this life as half-full and say, “God only gives us what we need, so bless what we’ve been given.” But even with years of therapy, hours of meditation and the love of friends, each of us is, in the end, a bit of that child who believed in angels, saw ghosts in the shadows, and worked just as hard as he could to find love.

Requiem for a Sailor

David Davis

I never lived
for my father.
He died
before I made ten.
I do remember
the vodka bottle
he pulled on
to still the nightmares
of war in the Pacific.
I do recall
his trembling hand
as he lit
another Camel
while sitting
on the side of the bed.
The frogs and crickets
outside
chanted a midnight requiem
for his coming death.

To Old Moon

Rebecca Hatcher Travis

looking tired
in her less than perfect shape
edging tattered
a few days past full
moon now shares the sky with sun
still up there
in the piercing light of day

I understand her reluctance to set
for on the other side of the zenith
days are less rushed, more precious
I want to savor them beyond this moment
make them last a little longer
prolong their sweet flavors
in the golden afterglow

Raspberries and Tea

Brianna Cedes

At the counter of the high-end deli, we bought food for our first afternoon together. Henry appeared to be totally at ease. I was excited and nervous. We chose cheese, a baguette that we would later tear apart, chocolates, red wine, and raspberries in a honey syrup. Looking at the raspberries, their dark red flesh curled into tiny succulent cups, I asked, “Do you like to put your tongue into the little hole?” Up shot his bushy eyebrows! “Of course!” He grinned and his light blue eyes gleamed wickedly at me.

So many of my memories of him involve food! He had no interest in health foods, nutritional content, or calories. Food was to be enjoyed, savored, relished and shared. His approach to food was about sensuality and connection.

Henry filled my largest soup pot with piles of washed spinach leaves, and handfuls of raisins and pine nuts. After the spinach steamed down to soft, dark green leaves, he tossed in olive oil and sharp pepper. We ate it with grated cheese on slippery pasta.

We ate lobster together, and mussels, licking the winey, garlicky broth from our fingers.

He grilled huge, juicy hamburgers for my children and me, and served them on toasted English muffins, with ketchup, mayo and “little pickle circles.” In the summer we sometimes ate outside, at his uncle’s home, in a beautiful garden of

vegetables and wildflowers. Beyond the garden were grasses and scrubby trees; past the fence the land sloped down toward the bay. Rabbits visited the garden, and Henry gave my children saltshakers and instructions to wait quietly for the bunnies. “If you can sprinkle some salt on the bunny’s tail, then you can catch it,” he solemnly told them.

He made sun tea, setting out water and bags of tea in big cylindrical glass jars stoppered with thick, wide corks. One summer afternoon, he photographed my little dark-haired daughter smiling beside a jar of amber-colored tea.

Henry baked chocolate cake and created ice cream concoctions for birthdays. In warm weather, he made thick chocolate malts; in the winter, pots of hot chocolate with marshmallows and cinnamon, his glasses fogging from the steam.

During the day as we worked together, we drank endless cups of Earl Gray tea, the strong flavor softened with sugar and milk. When I smell the bergamot-aroma of that tea, I always think of him near the stove, carefully brewing the tea. The dark brown-red berries on the wallpaper that covered the walls and the ceiling in the kitchen were the exact color of the tea.

Our business went belly up. What followed was a year of fears that neither of us dared to share, misunderstandings and too many conflicting demands. I found a job in another city, and the children and I moved away. After some years, when our anger and disappointment had cooled, we cautiously began writing. Every Monday morning, I would find an email message from him, often with a recipe or a description of a meal. He married. For awhile, he and his wife Marta lived on a houseboat, and he wrote about making sun tea and grilling fish on the deck of the boat. He sent chocolates to my children, and sent me kitchen gifts – aged balsamic vinegar, fragrant olive oil, a baker’s knife. I sent him music and T-shirts with opera logos. In

his last message, Henry wrote that a growth had been found in his intestines, and asked me not to try to contact him.

About a year after Henry's death, I visited his daughter Beth and her family. The baby, eleven months old, had Henry's blue eyes and soft blonde hair. Seven-year-old Janey sat on my lap and read me a storybook. She showed me the necklace that she had made herself and worn to her grandfather's funeral. It was cold, and in the late afternoon Beth brewed Earl Grey tea. She served it properly, from a pretty china teapot, with milk and sugar. The chatter and laughter of the four children pulled me back into the present, away from my memories. Then Beth softly asked her daughters, "Do you remember? Grandpa always loved to drink this tea."

Rootin' - Tootin'

Carole Creekmore

When I grow up,
I want to be Annie Oakley —
So when I'm shot at,
I never get hit.
 You missed!

Then I want to be
There-She-Is-Miss-A-mer-i-ca,
With long, blond hair,
Strapless gown, roses, a crown.
 Oh my!

When I'm tired of that,
I'll be a bride,
With white lace, veil, luggage,
And, oh yeah, a husband.
 Maybe Ken.

Then I can be Mrs. Wife,
Homemaker and Mother —
 — All at once —
Polish floors in high-heeled shoes.
How bright!

So many wonderful choices,
For little girls my age.
When I try some on for size,
Annie Oakley wins every time.

 Bang! You missed again.

Welcome Wagon

Carlos Colon

Have you ever sold your house
And left your neighbors gladly,
Then moved next door to Norman Bates
And two down from Boo Radley?

I Shall Not Wear Purple

Betty Wilson Beamguard

I shall not wear purple, at least not with a red hat, froufrou, bling, and a feather boa. Not that I mind other women doing so. Hey, it breaks the monotony. But as I understand the poem on which the Red Hat Society is based, it's all about daring to be different. Yet how different can a member be when each is required to dress in purple and wear a red hat?

Goodness knows, the Red Hatters make every effort to create variety and express individuality within those limitations. Members can choose skirts of any length, long or short sleeves, buttoned or zippered closures, pearls or sequins, suits or dresses. The hats can flop with a brim wide enough to shade the wearer's entire body or crown the head Jackie Onassis style. Still, even with those many variations, the outfits are about the same shade of purple and the hats are all red and way overdone. The result – they all look pretty much alike.

As for tea parties, which is what these ladies dress up for, forget it. I'm the picnic-in-the-meadow type, since I didn't grow up in a tea-party environment. My mother didn't have time for parties of any kind. She worked and had probably never even heard of hot tea. Sweet iced tea was the beverage of choice wherever we went – that or lemonade. This was the fifties, before travel and advertising made hot tea popular in the South.

I don't even remember playing tea party as a child, except when my cousin Rosemary visited. Her mother was a war bride

from an upper-class Australian family, so Rosemary loved to play society matron. I usually served the tea and wasn't invited to join the lady for refreshments.

When my best friend Elizabeth Ann and I played, we slouched around our make-believe trailer puffing cigarettes and flipped through the pages of movie magazines as we flashed hot-pink fingernails that were an inch long in our imaginations.

The neighborhood gang usually played family. The kids would throw tantrums and those in the parental role would beat them cross-eyed. We'd never heard the terms dysfunctional family or child abuse. One summer my mother observed our aggressive disciplinary measures and asked why we always played mean mothers. She said, "The neighbors will think that's the way I treat you. Why don't you read to the children and play games with them?"

Now I ask you, what could be more boring? A tea party perhaps. We wanted action and drama.

I've never been much of a hat person either. The only time I wore hats and gloves was on Easter Sunday, and then only at my mother's insistence. The spring I started driving, Mother had to work the Saturday before Easter, so she sent my sister and me to downtown Nashville to choose our own hats. We hit all the main department stores, but I never found one that suited me. I tried – really tried – but my heart wasn't in it.

When my mother discovered I'd come home without a hat, her reaction was about the same as if I'd been caught shoplifting – anger and extreme disappointment. She'd trusted me to buy a hat and I'd let her down.

I've changed a lot since then, but I'm still not the hat-wearing, tea-party type. I dress for comfort in jeans and Reeboks. Therefore, I do not wish to cake on makeup and pile decorations onto my aging form to spend a few hours looking at other made-up wrinkled faces grinning under feathered red hats.

Neither do I wish to join the much looser – in a number of ways – Sweet Potato Queens. For one thing, I don't have the bustline, and I can't picture myself wearing a red wig of Dolly Parton proportions. Besides, the Queens are so wild, we don't even have a chapter in our conservative little town.

But far be it from me to discourage those who are having fun as Queens or Red Hatters. It's wonderful they can get together and play dress-up. I say, take it and run with it, gals. But please, leave me out.

A Distant Garden

Peter D. Goodwin

As bombs rain down on a distant land —
I remember a garden
lush with large blossoms,
white and pink and beautiful
very popular with the bees —
a growing boy quietly approaches
the beauty and the busyness
and with a baseball bat
whacks the blooms and bees —
our conquering hero.

Silver Strike

June Rose Dowis

Like a striking snake
That first gray hair
Is a mighty blow
No victim spared
Panic, then planning
As you mull your fate
Mortality knocking
Will have to wait
With a flash of steel
and a chop to the head
In a moment's notice
The culprit is dead
Smugness accompanies
Your aggressive stand
Till sunlight connects
With another strand
Hard fact muscles in
Fears can't be hushed
You know there are more
Coiled in the brush

Past Passed

Errid Farland

Chantu Kao wore her hair long, had bangs, favored long Indian print dresses, wore sandals, burned patchouli incense, had beanbag chairs, ate cross-legged at low tables, smoked pot. And she was fifty-nine years old. She'd hung with this gig for forty-five years now, maybe forty-seven. Probably forty-seven, though she wasn't real clear on dates.

One date she was crystal clear on, though, was March 16, her birthday. She'd be sixty years old. She looked in the mirror at the deep lines that came from her skin's alluvial flow – a bunch of gentle arcs under her eyes where her lower lid bulged and folded, under her cheeks where the great flood basin of her smooth cheeks ended in two smile-looking wrinkles above and either side of her lips. And her lips! All those years of puckering around roaches carved deep canyons into her upper lip.

How could she be sixty? How could this have happened? And what had her life been, if not a stop-action of a magic time she wanted to live in forever?

"I don't like patchouli," she told her image in the mirror. "There, I've said it. I don't like it. What will you do about that?"

Her image waited dumbly. It blinked. It lost patience.

"I'm not saying I never liked it. That's not what I'm saying," she said to herself. "I used to like it, until, oh, about ten or twenty years ago."

She waited for her image to extend her the courtesy of a reply, then she frowned at it. “It’s just that, after all those years, it defined me, you know? How could I just stop?”

She gave up on the mirror, started for the bedroom, then stopped and turned back to it. “I know you’re just my image,” she said. “It makes me feel less of a fool to say it to a face, even if it’s my own.”

Still, she couldn’t help being pricked that the mirror didn’t at least try to participate.

“It’s that I’m a fraud. There, I’ve said it. Freaking fondue pots! My daughter and son-in-law sent freaking fondue pots for my gift!”

Finally she walked away, through the bedroom with its ambience of candles placed on trays and bamboo stalks planted in groupings – three for wealth, five for health, or whatever the hell they were for – into the living room. Truth was, she was still poor, scrambling to make ends meet, hoarding her weed so it would last to the next paycheck, and she was going to die. Soon, too. Oh, maybe it’d be another ten years, maybe even twenty, but, hell, that’d be gone in the snap of a finger, the blink of an eye.

She sat on her couch and with her turquoise and silver-covered fingers, picked up the joint from the ashtray, put a lighter to it until it glowed red, and hit on it with a few hard, quick puffs until it yielded a smooth flow of smoke. She looked at the fondue pots on her low table and said, with that held-breath-alien-freak voice, “I’m too freaking old to sit on my ass to eat fondue anymore.”

Then she threw up her hands in exasperation. “But what else can I do? This is all I’ve ever been.”

The phone rang. It was Tom, her ex-husband, who’d been more a friend than a husband. Their marriage lasted twenty-some-odd years, Chantu didn’t know how many, but it had never

been a marriage, per se. They believed in open love and all that bullshit, but found, after the first three years, that open love wasn't conducive to such close quarters. So they separated, but just didn't bother to get divorced for a couple of decades.

"Happy birthday," he said.

"It's tomorrow."

"I know, I'm going to be on a plane. I'm going to Seattle to celebrate for you."

"That's thoughtful of you," she said with a smile. Tom always made her smile.

"Did you hear from Kallie?"

"She sent fondue pots."

"Do you still have that cheese recipe? Remember that kick-ass cheese fondue you used to make?"

"Tom," she said, "did you ever wonder what might have been had I, you know, worn make-up or something?"

"Are you having an old-life crisis?"

"Did you?"

Too long a silence passed before he said, "Naaa. That just wasn't you."

"I think I need to find myself."

Again Tom let too much silence fall into the gap.

"Do you remember my real name? Before I was Chantu?"

"I've been feeling it, too, Cathy," he said. "Like we outsidersed ourselves into a rut."

She smiled again that he'd let Cathy roll off his tongue so easily. "Birmingham," she said. "What would have happened if I'd lost Chantu Kao and become Cathy Birmingham about thirty or forty years ago?"

"Hell if I know," he said.

"I don't like patchouli," she said. "Don't bring me any more patchouli incense."

"It's probably bad for your lungs."

“Probably,” she said, which reminded her of the joint in her hand. She relit it and hit on it and said, “Have fun in Seattle.”

“I will. Happy birthday.”

“Thanks.”

“Hey,” he said, then he paused.

“Yeah?” she prompted.

“I loved you best, even if I couldn’t stand you.”

She smiled again. “I know,” she said.

After she hung up, she crunched the glowing end of the incense stick into the ashtray. She carried it to the trash, and brushed off her hands, as if to offer her final pronouncement on the matter.

“Too little, too late.”

Audio Tour of Edinburgh Castle

Frances Hern

A voice through my earphones
tells of the tiny chapel
perched on castle rock,
built for Margaret, queen then saint,
by her son.

My mother catches my eye,
mouths words,
holds out her audio wand.

“How do you turn the sound up?”

Now Randolph’s men scale precipitous rock
to re-capture the castle

for Robert the Bruce and
mother is shaking my arm.
“My fingernails aren’t long enough.”

The Bruce invades England,
forces Scotland’s independence
“that’s invalid,”
on King Edward already
marching his army north.
“What number is it?”

Mary Queen of Scots births a son
but flees leaving the infant
King James of Scotland behind.
“This isn’t working,” she cries,
as the medieval cannon
booms time’s passage to
the Port of Leith.

Bundled against squalls my mother looks
smaller than she used to.
Her soft hand holds no resilience
as I take her wand.
Eighty-five and she lives alone,
drives to the shops,
leads six-mile hikes for her rambling club,
puts on skits for the old folk.

I gaze over castle walls,
see its history stretching further than I will know,
unlike my mother’s.

Oasis

Lee Ardell

I didn't go back for years
the drive was too long
the roads too rough
the land so empty
but fate or circumstance or luck finally
pushed me to the ranch where I grew up.

I climbed the barbed wire fence
an intruder in my own life
and walked up a dry creek looking for memories.

Bare trees lined the creek banks
dead leaves swirled across the gravel
and every step took me back

until I found a shallow pool of water
surprising in a drought
unexpected, unremembered
and completely beautiful.

I heard a voice calling, reminding me
of walks to the forgotten spring
of laughter, hope, love

and I reached up, a child again, to grasp my father's hand.
