

me who I have been. A dozen silver- and gold-framed pictures of children sit on my small roll-top secretary. It is as if Carlton, my nieces and nephew, special children from school or church, and the child of a dear young teacher-friend are poised nearby to “watch” as I write.

Two bookcases are crammed with a diverse mix of books on the subjects of education, women’s issues, politics, nature, and spirituality. Some were signed by the authors when I, eager to be in the company of writers, attended their lecture or workshop. There are also some favorite children’s books, both from my childhood and classroom.

My maternal grandmother’s anniversary clock sits to the right of the sofa on a side table that was also hers. My grandparents bought it in the ‘30s. It isn’t presently working. Perhaps our connection does not run on Earth time. Her corner hutch near the skylight displays crystal goblets ringed with silver, presents from my 1974 wedding. On one shelf are pictures of my grandmother and Carlton, each as young children, along with two angel figurines. They shared the birth date of November 28.

Carlton’s Raggedy Andy doll sits in a small wooden student-chair just under the side table. Another “child” watching me. A dining table and chairs bought from a friend for a bargain price fill the dining area of the room. Two of the nicer pieces in here, an oversized dark blue upholstered chair and stained-glass buffet,

were obtained at another friend's garage sale. In one corner, a threadbare rocking chair with a pinned-on lace doily covering one of the more obvious worn spots accumulates stacks of books and papers. This rocker is identical to the one in which my dad spent much time in the den of our family home.

On top of the larger bookcase a light blue ceramic parakeet, three painted wooden birds, a tiny brass owl, and a pair of brown clay doves perch among an assortment of birdhouses. My maternal grandfather's field glasses anchor one corner. Perhaps, because I often say God speaks to me through birds, it seemed logical to have them above my writing space ready to impart their special messages.

But there's something else in this room that may go unseen to the casual observer. Conversations of family and friends continue to vibrate in the air. And there are faint images from this setting's past. I can see Carlton on the edge of the rocking chair playing Nintendo for hours - his beginning fascination with computers. Did I notice then how intensely he worked at manipulating the data on a baseball game, allowing him to design his perfect team? My dad, in his own rocking chair, would watch baseball games on television with the same intensity. He was part of a partnership obtaining the first television station license for Shreveport in 1953.

Many evenings this dining table waited, spread for the family meal. But anger and sadness from comments

or facial expressions challenged any illusion I might have had of a Norman Rockwell setting. I wanted to recreate the stimulating dinner conversations I remembered as a child. Perhaps I did. The table now holds a clutter of papers and books.

The memorial service with Carlton's family plays through the air, reminding me of our coming together. I can see where everyone sat and hear what we said, each trying in our own way to connect. Here on the sofa Avery and I studied history as we learned of each other. I was discovering common ground and becoming less attached to my idea of how things should be. And this is where I continue to talk intimately to my notebook, gaining confidence to be a participant beyond these walls again.

There are so many kind words, angry words, sad words, and unspoken words swirling around in here. Sorting through all this noise can easily overwhelm and agitate me, when I try to grab hold of it. But warm sunbeams shine through the windows in my ceiling, cutting into the chaotic sound waves, brightening the room, and beckoning me to let go and look up. I watch the drifting cloud wisps and soaring birds, and my rapid, shallow breathing and racing, jumbled thoughts slow down. A sense of calm works its way through my anxiety. I pick up my pen and notebook, ready again to see the words from within.

Walks in the Park

Princess jumped up and down the sofa and whined while I wrote in my notebook.

"Do you want a walk or something?" I asked impatiently, and she headed for the kitchen door.

Now I had no choice; I made the mistake of asking. To ignore her would bring more whining, and I wasn't sure how much more I could tolerate. The weather had been cool and damp for several weeks as winter in Shreveport wound down, so I had postponed our daily walks. But the day was brisk and we were between showers when I drove to a nearby city park to walk the all-weather path around tall trees and an algaeed creek. I pulled into the parking lot and opened the car door. The fresh pine smell took me back to the Girl Scout camp I loved as a child. Maybe the frisky dog's idea for a walk was a good one.

My writing life craves daily walks. The sedentary schedule of sitting on a sofa all day was quite a change from keeping up with twenty-five active children in a classroom. My body wanted more stimulation.

Most mornings I begin with a solitary hike in the park near the Red River, circling through grassy wetlands on the concrete road, when it is not underwater after a particularly rainy season. Water

birds get their breakfast of crawfish, bugs, and small fish before they start their day, and the sights and sounds of a morning routine inspire me. There have been some regular walkers here - a friendly woman and her big black lab, Lucy; a timid man with earphones and a hurried gait; and several runners. We acknowledge each other with our standard ritual of a smile or small talk as we pass.

Another trail, through more manicured gardens behind an art gallery, is good for hikes later in the day with a small, scruffy dog, except during the height of azalea and dogwood season. Then, every bride and Easter-dressed child stand posed beside the brightly colored spring flowers. My friendly Princess is all too eager to take her place in their picture.

Sometimes my morning walks take me to the track at the elementary school I attended as a child, while students arrive on campus. Or, later in the morning, to the park down the street from the first little house Carlton and I called our own.

Each location fills a different need. Sometimes I walk to be on a schedule, for my former-teacher self. Sometimes a walk offers material to test my observation skills, or helps me break from a cycle of anxious, spinning thoughts. But often it is just a calming assurance that there's a grander plan than any I could imagine between the walls of my living room. Something deeper, something I couldn't quite identify, but something that might become clearer in time.

I watch one season transform into another and listen for rebirth within myself. Staying present during this daily journey moves me through past fears and away from future concerns. And the day a flock of tiny bluebirds flew out of a tree I passed, I remembered this is the magical walk called life.

Carlton's Stuff

Michael, Carlton's friend in California, called to offer help, sparing us the overwhelming task of vacating his apartment. I was grateful. I did not want to go to California at that time. Michael notified friends and business associates of Carlton's death, distributed clothing and furniture to local charities, then packed up his books, tapes, and movies to ship to me. He was also sending Carlton's powerful computer.

Within days of our phone conversation, eight big boxes arrived. The young UPS guy was eager to chat with me about receiving such a mother lode until I told him they were from my son, who had died. He quickly departed. The boxes sat stacked in the middle of my narrow kitchen, which was as far into the house as the delivery man had permission to set them. Over the next few days I moved them one by one to Carlton's old bedroom.

One box was much lighter than the others. I opened this one first, thinking there might be something inside I should take care of. It contained correspondence,

bills, and tax records, and it was overwhelming. I had no idea where to begin and hurried out of the room just to catch my breath. The next day my brother's lawyer friend told me not to worry about sorting through it; just wait a while. So I practiced waiting, turning to my notebook when I couldn't do it by myself. A couple months later when a creditor called asking for Carlton, I told him he had died. The creditor put me on hold to listen to the Carpenters sing "Close to You" while he checked the computerized public records. Returning several minutes later he notified me that "Carlton" was now released from any outstanding debt. I felt my own release. That was all the permission I needed to bag up the shoeboxes of papers and envelopes and carry them to the curb on trash day. That part was over.

Another box was packed with audiovisual materials. Avery eagerly claimed the DVDs one night during tutoring since I didn't have a DVD player. *The Lion in Winter* and *Pretty Woman* are movies the cousins now share. I picked through his assortment of videos, audiotapes, and CDs, recognizing some as part of the collection I had heard drifting from his bedroom at night before he left Shreveport. There was a diverse mix of movies and music, and I smiled when I found some that I also own. Digging through the titles I imagined what was going on inside him when he had watched and listened to this assortment. I held on to the ones that interested me and took the others in a big box to Mother's house for the rest of the family to

go through. As far as I know, they are still over there in the box, untouched.

The other boxes were heavy with the weight and smell of books. Carlton, like me, was an avid reader. Included were science fiction, Kurt Vonnegut, and John Irving. I recognized some from discussions we had during phone conversations. Some might have been assigned reading from past college classes. Others didn't seem to make much sense. Maybe they were book club selections, sent automatically when the monthly order form wasn't returned on time. At least that's how I accumulated some of my own collection. I was trying so hard to figure his life out. What did these books tell him? How did he connect?

I repacked several boxes for a local book bazaar, took a Bible and book of poetry to Mother, and kept a box for myself. In time, Uncle Buddy got the baseball books.

Movies, music, books - these were interests my family shared and expressions I could relate to.

Then, a few weeks later, the computer arrived. It was packed in three big boxes, left just inside my living room near the front door by a different UPS guy, again for me to carry box by box back to his bedroom. I couldn't open it. According to Michael, it was an impressive state-of-the-art computer, and my own little laptop was rather limited. But it was too much a part of the Carlton I didn't know. It was his passion and obsession, and it scared me. It was something I

couldn't connect with, so it loomed still securely packaged in the middle of his old bedroom.

One evening when my friend Linda and I went out for supper, she mentioned her computer had crashed. She was teaching education courses at a local college, and a working computer was essential. I immediately thought of the unopened boxes and offered her Carlton's computer. At first she took it as a loan, in case I might want it back someday, but after a month when I still had no interest in it, I knew it was for Linda, whom I claim as my "big sister," and I let her buy it from me. She knew Carlton as a baby. We met at a church singles program after I moved back to Shreveport in 1976. Her two daughters, collectively called "GinaCindy" by Carlton, sat with him in church while Linda and I sang in the choir together. This part of Carlton will be safe with Aunt Linda.

Bit by bit I dispensed of my son's belongings, hoping to know him better as I handled his possessions. He offered such a diverse set of clues. But I knew I was not really learning about Carlton. He was not a collection of things. I have been learning about myself in his life. One box at a time.

Caged Birds

A female albino ring-necked dove perches in a cage on my sunroom's tiled floor. The bird is the last remaining animal from the science class I taught at Stoner Hill Elementary School. She was the mother of six babies who hatched, were fed, and learned to fly in the presence of many junior naturalists. The father bird died, after conscientiously doing his duty, sitting on eggs, feeding babies, and giving flying lessons. It was an equal partnership. The babies have since been given away, have flown away, or have died, so now the caged mother is left alone in my sunroom to sing her mourning song and occasionally break into a sound resembling laughter. I understood her sad tune, but what triggered that joyful sound? Did she remember the thrill of seeing her children learn to fly? Was she recalling a funny story from our class?

Several years ago there was a rather noisy, messy pair of light-blue parakeets sharing this sunroom with her. They were also in my classroom for a while, until I realized we didn't need any more noise or mess. They left school earlier than the rest of us.

In June 2001, less than a month after my retirement, the Flett family reunion gathered in my backyard for a crawfish boil. It was the last time

Carlton was in Shreveport and the first time he met most of my dad's side of the family.

My niece, Laura Beth, left the parakeets' cage door open after trying to pet them. The in-and-out traffic through the sunroom door was too much temptation for the adventurous girl bird. Out she flew, leaving her mate behind.

On the last day of the reunion, after taking Carlton to the airport, two cousins and I were sitting in the quiet of my house when we noticed how lonely the little boy bird seemed. He was used to following the antics of his more active partner. We decided he too should be set free, if that's what he wanted, so I unhinged the cage, opened the sunroom door, and out he flew. Within minutes of his escape, we heard what had to be two parakeets answering each other somewhere high in the neighbors' trees. Was this the joy of flying free?

Eighteen months later, after Carlton died, I received many cards from his friends and business acquaintances in California because his friend Michael had given them my address. One was from a woman telling of her friendship with Carlton over the Internet, sharing their depressive tendencies and how they worked around them. I was relieved to know he had someone to talk to.

She said she and Carlton shared a favorite movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*, and quoted from the movie about how some birds are not to be caged and

when they are released there is a rejoicing, even as we miss them.

Carlton must have known the loneliness of being a caged bird wanting release. I see the lonely boy parakeet on the day I took him to the airport. The last time I saw him. I can't catch my breath. Maybe he was feeling like a caged bird. I'll keep scribbling.

Ah, but his scattered ashes lie on the path of songbirds. Perhaps he's truly flying free.

I listened to the song of my dove in the next room, as I sat on the sofa scribbling to connect these thoughts. I was the caged mother bird mourning her child, laughing occasionally at memories, and writing for my own release.

Reaching Out

Reentry

Often I had overwhelming fears I would never return to a normal life. Before Carlton died, I'm not sure how "normal" I was, sitting on a sofa all day writing about teaching experiences. Afterward I wondered what normal was supposed to be for me. Maybe being aware of my life, learning from the past, watching the present and visualizing a future was the best I could hope for. I didn't really want to be as removed from the world as I had been, but I wondered if I would ever feel safe enough to reenter the fray. Could I let go of these paralyzing fears long enough to participate in a more active life again?

One morning I sat and wrote until I got antsy, then took a brisk walk in the neighborhood park with Princess. When I came home to try writing again that restless feeling returned. I wanted to be "doing" something else, so I consulted my rather short list of safe things to do.

Surely there is something I need at the grocery store. A trip through cereal aisles and frozen-food displays doesn't seem very exciting. Maybe I could sit in the sunroom and type my stories into the computer.

I got off the sofa and turned on my computer to begin tapping in new work. But the pokey computer was too slow to react, making me impatient. I knew I didn't want any more anxiety.

It's nearly noon. Too early to take a nap. What else can I try? I could get some lunch out, then go to the library to write.

I liked that idea, so I picked up my woven bag full of pens and notebooks and drove to the nearby barbeque restaurant. However, when I pulled in, I felt uneasy. The parking lot was nearly full. Breathe, I told myself, and pushed past the uneasiness so I would not automatically return home. I parked the car and went in. There was a long, loud line extending to the door. The crowd inside matched the abundance of cars outside. "Breathe, Laura," I repeated, inhaling the sweet, smoky air, and willing myself to stay. I could at least get a sandwich to go.

By concentrating on my breath while waiting in line, I found I was ready to stay and eat. I took my chopped beef sandwich and side order of cole slaw to a booth by the window and set my black and white notebook beside my plate in silent support. I watched the noisy crowd of people eating their lunches. They were making small talk with each other, while their eyes darted

around the room. That was interesting. They didn't appear any more confident than I felt.

I finished my lunch with renewed energy and decided to drive to the nearby library branch. Pulling into its nearly-full parking lot without a second thought, I turned off the engine, pulled up the emergency brake between the front seats, and got my bag. Next I climbed out of the car, closed and locked the door, put my keys in my pocket, and took several steps toward the library. But I stopped, turned around, and walked back to the car to peek through the window and double-check the position of the brake. Then, satisfied by this compulsive little ritual, I headed toward the building with confidence, passed through the sliding doors and down the center of the busy, modern media room to the floor-to-ceiling windows in the periodicals section. I dropped into a comfortable chair with a view of the duck pond, letting my bag fall to the floor. As I bent over to dig out a pen and notebook, the sunlight through the glass warmed my back. I was ready to write again, eager to "see" what I had been "doing."

Here I am. One foot, or maybe one word, in front of the other.

You're doing great.

Why do I get so scared? Was Carlton's fear of people my fear of people?

I don't know. What do you think?

Are there people in here worrying about the same thing? How do we get over it?

I can't speak for them. What about you?

Well today I ate in public, and went to the library. And lately I've been out more with friends. In the morning I'm not real sure what to do unless I have a specific appointment. I still have no "normal" schedule. But talking to you helps.

I'm glad.

No really, you help me sort out my thoughts and listen to how I feel. I'm not as apprehensive as I was. I think I'm getting braver.

Stacks

There was a stack of papers taking up space on my kitchen counter. Assorted stuff that piled up since the last time I cleaned off the limited work area a few months ago. There are stacks like this all over my house and they could easily overwhelm me, if I let them.

So while waiting on the microwave to heat a cup of coffee, my mind swirling around unclear thoughts, I tried tackling the nearby stack.

I couldn't find a new place for everything in that counter stack. I threw some things away, moved others to another stack, and put one on the refrigerator (which is just another form of stack). When I was finished there was still a stack on the kitchen counter, but it was smaller.

Feeling somewhat accomplished after sorting through the disorganized pile, I walked into one of the spare bedrooms. It has no bed or any clear purpose, except to hold stacks. It also contained the boxes of Carlton's things, as it used to be his bedroom. My eyes scanned the room and rested on a table full of stacks. On top was the envelope I received from California nearly four months after Kelly's phone call. It contained official copies of the death certificate and the coroner's report, stating "multi-drug intoxication" as the cause of death. A wave of nausea rose in my stomach and I slowly backed out of the room. This was not a project for that day.

I tried the next bedroom, which actually has a bed, but would be of little use to a guest because it is also covered in stacks. There were books, watercolors, sketch pads, and journals - products from my creative endeavors. I understood the purpose of this room better, so I lingered long enough to begin clearing the bed for potential company by skimming papers and remembering when I wrote them or why. I took several of them into the sunroom to set next to the computer.

I was not exactly sure what my plan was for these writings; they just needed to be near the computer.

In the sunroom I became sidetracked leafing through another stack on top of the half-empty file cabinet, until the dryer buzzed from the laundry closet. I set the papers down and walked toward the sound. I pulled out warm towels and folded them, then took them to the linen closet in the front bathroom near the guestroom. The bed in that room was still not completely clear, and there was a new stack by the computer in the sunroom, but my towels were clean and put away.

This mess didn't happen overnight. To think I could dig through it in one determined effort was to invite frustration. Little by little I have excavated the stacks, letting them take me where I needed to go.

It's a metaphor for my life now, chipping away at old memories, accumulated in no discernible order. I am constantly choosing what to let go of, what to find a new place for, and what to leave for another day.

On my computer there is a program called defragmenting. I turn on the "details" while it scans one line at a time, cleaning up pieces of scattered information. Sometimes it seems to hit a snag and send the search all the way back to the beginning. This is similar to my grief journey. I would make it through a couple of "good" hours or days, sorting through my life, increasing my pace, thinking I was back on solid ground.

Then wham! a sad memory or a wave of anxiety would knock me back to what felt like the beginning.

This book evolved the same way. I would work on one little story, only to be reminded of two others. Sorting through the accumulation of memories seemed to have no order. Often I have felt I was running in circles, but I wasn't yet ready to give up. I visualized a spiral, spinning outward in an ever-widening arc to replace this mindless, tail-chasing image.

Life hasn't been a simple walk down a clear, straight path. When I let go of that idea, the journey becomes more of an adventure and the scenery more enjoyable. These triggered recollections of 55 years are showing me all the whimsical diversions and rich layers of the experience known as Laura Flett.

Cleaning House

My house is comfortable, but it's a mess. In addition to the books and papers resting on every available horizontal plane, clothes drape over chairs and a light dust covers every surface.

When Carlton was young, Saturday mornings were designated for cleaning the house. I became Dragon Lady, lighting fires under husband and son, expecting everyone else's schedule to fall in line with mine. No one was happy. The house might get straightened, but we were all a mess.

Now I live alone, except for the shedding Princess. I no longer have the rigid schedule telling me Saturday morning is the only time this house can be cleaned. There is no one to blame for the clutter but myself. Well, I have pointed out that the dog's toys are scattered throughout the house, but no more than any of my things.

Somehow I've moved past the mindset that my house needs to look a certain way, no longer caring as much about how presentable it is. I guess that happened soon after I realized it was now all my responsibility.

On an afternoon when a friend was to stop by, I ran the vacuum cleaner in the living room, took the kitchen garbage outside to the compost bin, dusted with a lemon scented spray and loaded the dishwasher with the last 24 hours of dirty dishes. It only took about twenty minutes, and the front rooms really did look and smell better.

When the cable man came to fix my Internet connection, the sunroom, where my computer resides, got its own twenty-minute cleaning. I ran a dustmop over the tile floor littered with bird seed and feathers from the dove's cage, emptied an overflowing trash can of paper, and closed the louvered doors to the laundry closet full of detergent bottles, empty hangers, and dirty clothes. It didn't take much, but it was a noticeable improvement.

Sometimes I do hit a limit on how much mess I can live with. This usually happens when I can't find last month's electric bill, or I've tripped over scattered books and toys one too many times. So I whip into a cleaning frenzy for an hour or two, until I feel more organized, or have at least found the nearly-overdue bill.

A bright yellow sign was hung on my kitchen doorknob advertising window washing and gutter cleaning. Yeah, that was a pleasant image. I've had my windows professionally washed before and the whole house sparkled. But I never called them, even though their sign hung on the door for a month.

In a television interview J. K. Rowling admitted to living in absolute squalor for five years while she wrote her first Harry Potter novel. I can picture a rather creative mess piling up around her as she spun her magical story. I liked that scene and have often borrowed the quote to explain myself.

If the mess wasn't making me anxious, then it must be at an acceptable level for me, and balance is what I am looking for. I'm learning how to identify what I can live with, rather than just reacting to an outside standard that sets off inside fireworks.

An interesting thing happened the day an out-of-town friend dropped by unexpectedly. I hadn't seen her in a while and I immediately launched into my knee-jerk apology for the mess, closing a bedroom door and sliding a stack of books to the floor so she had a place

to sit down. But my friend countered with a lengthy description of her own messy house, as if we were finalists for the coveted Slob of the Year title. Cute, I later thought, replaying the competitive conversation in my head. Maybe we could start a new trend.

All the wasted energy on those Saturday mornings long ago, when no one really wanted to be cleaning, can't be called back. I was trying to please some perceived outside authority. For now I can just be careful not to waste any more time worrying about it. I want this house to feel safe as I'm busy cleaning up my inner mess. The outer mess will get the attention it needs, as it needs it.

Two-Part Harmony

Carolyn, a childhood friend, called to offer a trip away from the safety of my home. She wanted me to go with her to the Maine coast for a week in October 2003, to see the fall foliage. I had never done this, and she had made the trip several times. She would find a house to rent and her daughter, who worked for Delta, could get plane tickets for next to nothing. I knew Carolyn liked this kind of detail decision-making more than I, but I soon discovered that even deciding whether or not to go was too hard for me. I took my uncertainty to the notebook.

*Carolyn used to be very outgoing.
She might overwhelm me.*

That was years ago. How is she now?

Well, she's been living alone for a while. And she knows my introverted side. We had a good time in that mountain cabin in North Carolina a few years ago.

Then this could be fun too. Talk to her about it.

So I did. We talked about what we might do up there for a week. I wanted to be assured that the adventure wouldn't be too structured, and I found we both just needed a healthy dose of Mother Nature and a break from our own responsibilities. I decided this could work.

It was an invigorating experience, staying for a week in a quaint cottage by the Atlantic Ocean in the tiny town of Friendship, Maine. I chose an upstairs bedroom, a loft with a slanting ceiling and a view of the water, furnished with stenciled furniture and a quilt-topped bed. I took Madeline L'Engle's *Two Part Invention* up there to read. I tested my old scouting skills at the fireplace downstairs in the living room, gathering tinder and kindling from the nearby woods.

We drove to neighboring towns, pulling off the road to take pictures of the colorful scenery and wandering in and out of bookstores and craft shops in little villages along the way. We spent a brisk afternoon at the lighthouse, Carolyn's favorite spot, watching the ocean crash into the rocks. On another afternoon we ate fresh clam chowder at a local café. Carolyn and I cooked and shared most evening meals, refrigerating

leftover chicken stew and salads for individual grazing later. We spent hours quietly sitting in the same room with our books and journals. Or we ventured out alone for solitary walks through the neighborhood of multi-colored trees, collecting leaves to preserve as memories.

It was perfect. I couldn't have guessed Carolyn would offer me my first extended opportunity to tiptoe back into the world. Life keeps putting people on my journey I am willing to trust, with lessons I am ready to learn. Carolyn, once choir director at our church, sang the soprano of our duet while I, the alto, practiced finding sustained harmony in the presence of another.

But even though we had a shared history and were successfully spending time together, we talked around the death of Carlton, using "God words" for generalities, and avoiding the specifics of our personal pain. Was this also part of our history, the feelings we were told as children not to share? I was saving most of my emotional ramblings for the safety of my notebook, still unsure how to connect with another person. It wasn't until the second-to-last day in Maine that I felt comfortable enough to venture deeper into the conversation. I was grateful she hadn't pushed. She has two children about Carlton's age, who were his friends, and she had a big brother Tommy who died of cancer in his early thirties. I asked her when Tommy had died.

January 11. The same day Carlton died. She probably knew that all along and was just waiting for me to ask.

Birthday on the Beach

In the middle of November 2003, my family was closing in on me. Dad was put in the hospital because his heartbeat was irregular and the doctor wanted to explore the possibility of a pacemaker. I agreed to meet my brother Bruce at the registration desk to help check Dad in then ended up spending the night in his hospital room to prevent him from trying to leave, like he had done on a previous occasion. I did this for the family, the responsibility I still felt as the "big sister." However, in the morning I was tired and grumpy from sleeping on a plastic loveseat, listening for sounds of escape. All I wanted to do was go home, take a bath, and crawl into my own bed. Unfortunately the doctor made his morning rounds before I could leave and very emphatically told me that someone needed to stay with Dad. After the doctor left the room, I waited about ten minutes, went home, and called Bruce. I repeated the doctor's instructions and confessed I couldn't stay another night. Later that afternoon when I delivered clean clothes to the nurses' station they told me Dad was doing fine, so I slipped away.

November 28, 2003, would have been Carlton's twenty-eighth birthday. I wanted some time to myself,
