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Nurses, My Family & Elvis

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An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
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2005

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY:

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Abstract

This collection of short stories will focus primarily on nurses from the turn of the last century to the present. Some of the stories are fiction and some are based on experiences of nurses I have known. There two stories unrelated to nursing, one is about how my father helped launch Elvis Presley's career, the other is about my family.

The goal of the collection is to illustrate the different roles and personalities of nurses. The first story, "A Feather in Her Bonnet" is set in the early nineteen-hundreds. A seemingly innocent feathered bonnet on the head of a frumpy baby nurse sends the affluent household into a tizzy.

The second story, "Tea for Two" starts on a French battlefield in World War I and tells the story of the impact one nurse has on an American G.I. and his wife. Some of the stories are fiction and others are based on the lives and experiences of nurses.

There are two pieces in this collection that are not about nurses. One is a short memoir of my family, particularly my grandmother. The other describes the role my father played in discovering and launching the career of Elvis Presley.

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I was born in 1949, another hot, humid summer in Memphis, Tennessee. I made my appearance a couple of weeks late. This isn't important to anyone but my mother. And it was a great inconvenience to her. But she got her revenge. She gave me her maiden name as my first name- Cristal. But the hospital spelled it wrong (Cristle) and I've been saddled with it for 56 years. Dear old Mom.

As with so many things, the beginning foreshadows what follows. For a while, nothing really bad happened, life was always just slightly off kilter. We moved a lot, bouncing back and forth from the West Coast to the South to the South West and back to the Coast.

We lived in Memphis, Tennessee. My father worked for RCA in the record division. We lived in the good part of town in a nice house with a huge yard. I went to an all girls Catholic Academy where the nun's take discipline very seriously. All the stories about rapping students with rulers are quite true. I was under the less-than-tender ministries of the sisters until the second grade when Dad left RCA to help his brother open a chain of discount stores across the country. We were on the move,

criss-crossing the continent about twice a year. We traveled on the legendary Route 66.

I remember driving through dark, eternal nights of emptiness to see one lone house so far out on the prairie I couldn't imagine how they survived. Crossing the desert in the southwest contained an element of real danger. We hung bags of ice on the hood of the car to cool the radiator.

We passed herds of longhorns in Texas and fields of oilrigs in Oklahoma. Travel today seems tame and neutered, like traveling in a sanitized bubble. Route 66 was real and intimate and gritty and grand.

In the 1950's cross-country travel on Route 66 meant there were no big superhighways, chain hotels, fast food joints and the general homogenization of a continent. I feel lucky to have memories of traveling across huge, empty expanses of plains and deserts and mountains. I loved meeting the variety of people we encountered on 66. They were real American icons; Native Americans, cowboys, farmers, truck drivers and diner waitresses. We traveled back and forth so often the waitresses knew us. They always had great names like Verbena, Garnet and Ione. They had big hair, they chewed gum and smoked cigarettes and they treated everyone like family. To this day

I don't trust people who mistreat waitresses. The cooks usually looked like felons out on a day pass; scruffy, tattooed and rough around the edges. They worked their greasy griddles like master chefs. The diners served great food. Even more important were the great characters that came in to eat it.

You could tell where you were by the people in the diners. Overalls and work boots meant we were in Missouri or Arkansas. In Oklahoma and Texas diner patrons wore jeans and cowboy boots. In Arizona and New Mexico hats and colorful shirts were added. Regional differences were much more pronounced and it made traveling much more interesting.

Mornings we were up before dawn so we could get an early start. We would be on the road before sunrise while the desert was still cool. That was real important in the days before air conditioning. The sky was deeply dark and the stars were so bright and so many it looked like they would tumble to earth. About an hour after we hit the road the sun would start to come up. Sunrise turns the desert into magic. Soft shades of blue and rose begin to creep over the horizon. Long clouds stretched lazily across the enormous desert sky. Mountains would slowly appear in the distance.

I have thousands of memories of those trips on 66. Traveling gave me an appreciation of the differences in people, places and cultures.

In spite of all the moving, I will always think of Memphis as home, My mother's family and most of my father's were still there. My mother, brother and I went back every summer to visit. My early childhood memories of Memphis are strong.

The South is fond of its eccentrics and will tolerate behavior that would result in getting institutionalized anyplace else. We had a few such characters on in our neighborhood in a Memphis suburb. Just down the street lived the bird lady. Her house was on a corner. The whole place was overgrown with shrubs, trees and bushes. She kept parakeets, lots and lots of parakeets. The birds were allowed to fly free in her house. She didn't come out of the house very often. To a five-year old, both she and her house seemed enchanted. The flowers exploded on the trees and dripped off the bushes until every inch of the place was covered with a riot of color. Of course, you always heard birds singing. My mother never let me go visit the bird lady. My mother was obsessively clean; in her house, her person, and any other person who crosses her path. She was

not about to allow her daughter to be in a house full of free flying parakeets and guano covered furniture.

The bird lady used to come over to our house every so often with home made pies or cake. My mother would always thank her very graciously. As soon as the front door closed, mom would march to the back door and throw the goodies in the trash, saying, "Heaven only knows what's in there." Even though she tossed out the food, she would never say or do anything to hurt the bird lady's feelings. That would not be ladylike.

At the other end of our street there was a farm with a cantankerous old farmer and his equally cranky old bull. One day the bull got out and all hell broke loose. In less time than it takes to tell, a bizarre assortment of neighbors rallied together to corral the errant bovine. There were old men with rakes and workers from a street crew, a few of the older boys got in on the action, too. No one would have called the police or animal control. We just took care of it ourselves. Live and let live.

Nothing illustrates that attitude better than the way the neighborhood handled Iggy, the weird kid who lived a few doors down the street. Iggy didn't mean any harm and he never hurt anybody, but sure could shake things up. He

would climb up onto rooftops and then jump down on people walking by. He also liked to climb down into the sewer. One day his mom took a ladder and went down after him, he double backed, climbed up the ladder and then took the ladder, leaving his mom stranded in the sewer. Some neighbors came and helped her crawl out. No one called the police or DFS. I'm sure Iggy was in plenty of trouble at home but that was none of our business. I mention Iggy and the Bird Lady because they gave me an appreciation and sympathy for quirky and off-beat characters.

I lived there until I was five when we started our ten-year period of moving on an annual basis. Travel is enriching but moving all the time had some drawbacks. By the time I was in the tenth grade I had been in eleven schools. Changing schools so often has some benefits to counter the drawbacks. When you are always the new kid, you learn to be tolerant, flexible, and resourceful and saying good-bye comes easy. Living in so many different places gave me a wider worldview than my peers. The down side was that you are either ahead or behind in subjects and I missed a lot of the basics. School wasn't important to me it was just part of the blur of life on the road.

But books were a big part of my life. They are portable and you don't need any special equipment or a team to enjoy them. Books were something I could take with me wherever we were going, the perfect companion to my nomadic childhood.

When I was very young I enjoyed the standard childhood authors, Louisa May Alcott, Robert Louis Stevenson and Mark Twain. When I hit my early teens I discovered Steinbeck, Sinclair, Tennessee Williams and Faulkner. I have to confess my favorites were not the serious authors. When I read James Thurber it was like finding a long lost cousin. The characters in his family seemed so much like my own. Then I moved on to the members of the Algonquin Round Table; S.J. Perlman, Robert Benchley, Edna Ferber, George S. Kaufman and especially Dorothy Parker. I was drawn to the acerbic wit and urbane sensibilities that characterized their style. The Round Table saw me through my teens. Then it was time to leave home.

I married as soon as I got out of high school. Paul and I moved to Florida and life was fine. How bad can it be when you're 18 and living within spitting distance of the Florida Keys. When I wasn't at work I spent my time at

the beach or playing softball. There wasn't much time for reading.

A couple of years later we moved back to St. Louis and had a child. His name was David and he was the smartest, sweetest kid that ever lived. When David was two years old, Paul and I got a divorce. We were just too young and immature to handle the responsibilities. I was left with a child and a house, but no car, no job and no child support (Paul just didn't pay it).

In a series of minor miracles, I managed to take care of David, keep the house, get a car and a job. I worked nights so that I could stay home and be with David during day. When he started school, I went back to college while still working nights. It took a long time but eventually I graduated and got a day job. By this time I also had met my future husband and best friend, Jim.

I had drifted into health care because there was a strong job market with good prospects for employment well into the future, I was right about that. For twenty-five years I worked in the health care industry. My first job was as a consultant to the Daughters of Charity marketing their cardiovascular services from prevention through diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation.

In college there wasn't a lot time to read for pleasure anymore. When I did read for fun my tastes had turned to non-fiction writers, such as; Joseph Campbell. As a psychology major, I was drawn to his use of myth to explain psychological and sociological concepts. I also read Alan Watts and Carlos Castenada. Diane Ackerson's writing are non-fiction, but so beautifully written they could be poetry. She has become one of my favorites.

Life was settling down for the first time ever. I had just started work on my graduate degree and my career (in health care) and personal life were full of joy and promise. But when the officer came to the door to tell me David had been killed in a car accident, it all went dark. Years later, it's still dark, just not as completely.

During that very hard time Jim was a rock. We got married and after surgery (another miracle) I was able to get pregnant and eighteen years after having my first baby, I had my second. Holly. I have two only children. She is now 18 years old and completely wonderful. While Holly was growing up, I was working full time and, once again, found little time to read for pleasure. But she is grown now and life has settled down.

I guess I'm skittish about getting too comfortable. Bad things seem to happen when I get comfortable. So I decided to get a second graduate degree. The Master of Fine Arts in Writing appealed to me for two reasons; there is no math involved, and I have never done any creative writing before. As my brain gets older, I think it's important to keep stretching it. Maybe it will stay flexible, like a hamstring. For example, I never enjoyed poetry. It just seemed like a huge waste of time to me. After studying poetry in class, I found out that I like it, especially haiku. I think I like haiku because it demands simplicity and its short. Here are three examples of poetry (one haiku) I have written.

Friend

Spirit

Light and sweet

A summer day smile

Laughter

Bubbly and gay

Dancing over stoney faces

Heart

Open to pain

A doorway to the soul

Friend

A path to

Finding myself

Morning

Quilts

Coffee

And the news of the world

Soft air morning

Bird songs

Bare feet

Grass stained toes

Cloud dance morning

Sweet berries

A glass of juice

Dog rolling in the grass

What else is there?

Spring

Full berry basket
Red juicy sweet strawberries
Spring drips down my chin

So, I learned to enjoy poetry and I hope I've learned to write a little better. I certainly came to appreciate reading non-fiction. The Beat writers have become favorites Immediately after finishing, I switched careers and now I teach part time and I'm the Director of a small arts agency and work as a consultant on various public health projects.

Anyway, that's how I came to write this little essay. After fifty-six years and all the things I've been through I ought to have something profound to say about life. I don't. As Glenda the Good Witch of the North said, "You have to learn it for yourself."

A Feather In Her Bonnet

It was a warm morning in the spring of 1903. She felt her heart racing with anticipation as she briskly marched up the red brick path towards the expansive, white home. With a large, well worn carpet bag in one hand, and a black leather valise with brass catches in the other, she climbed the broad green steps up to the wide front porch. She paused a moment to catch her breath and compose herself before ringing the bell.

She was wearing her traveling suit, a simple, black shirtwaist, long skirt, weatherproof macintosh and serviceable leather shoes. Her dull brown hair was pulled back in an uninspired bun and topped with an equally dull and uninspired brown felt bonnet. She looked down and brushed some dust off her skirt and straightened her shirt. The train had been late and now, she was late. Well, she wouldn't let them think she was at all concerned about that. After all, she was a professional baby nurse and deserved to be treated with more respect than a common servant. She straightened her bonnet and fancied herself quite the crisp and well-dressed professional, inspiring confidence in her charges.

As she stood motionless on the porch, the next door neighbor was struck by how very like a placid brown cow she seemed, wearing her brown coat and standing so still on the green porch. All she needed was a mouthful of cud to complete the illusion. She must be the baby nurse come to care for the Gordon's

new baby, he thought. Still, she seemed a comfortable, utilitarian kind of woman who could be trusted not to become giddy and run off with the chauffer. Of course, there was no guarantee. After all, nurses were known to be harlots and drunkards. And thieves, too, no doubt. He shook his head as he went back into his house.

She rang the bell and waited. Minutes passed and finally the grand red door opened and James, the butler greeted her, "Good-day, Nurse. You are expected." She entered the expansive foyer, accentuated with plush oriental rugs, high ceilings and a crystal chandelier imported from France. A broad sweeping stairway led majestically to the upper floors. Of all the opulent homes she had worked in, this was luxurious beyond compare. She struggled to appear blasé and unimpressed.

James introduced himself and escorted her to the elegant library where she was to wait for Master Charles. She sank into the plush brocade sofa and waited, clutching her carpetbag on her lap. She had not been offered refreshment, just instructed to wait. These constant slights by servants were a continual irritation. Being a nurse left you in an unusual predicament- not a servant, but not an equal. She never took meals in the kitchen with the servants and she certainly wasn't invited to dine with her employers, so she usually ate in her room. It was a often a lonely life.

Master Charles strode across the room towards her. He was tall and athletic with a decidedly out-doorsy glow. He extended his hand and introduced himself, "Welcome, I'm Charles. You must be Nurse Lucille. I'm so pleased that

you are here. My wife, Lilly, and the baby will be glad to know you've arrived safely." Fumbling with her carpetbag, she stumbled to her feet, "Thank you, sir." He took her hand and gave it a friendly shake. It was like shaking paws with a bear. He continued, "James will take you to your room and show you where the nursery is. As soon as you're settled in, please have James take you to my wife. She has been overseeing the baby's care and needs to get some rest. Good-day." He nodded politely and was out the door thinking, "Dear me, what a dolt. But with hands like that, she won't be likely to drop the baby." She was a large woman, but her hands were particularly big and she had feet to match.

Her room was on the second floor and connected to the nursery. It was spacious enough, with a view of the coach house and window luxurious draped in yards of fine lace. If she leaned over to the left she could see the garden. She unpacked her few, simple belongings from her leather valise. Then she opened her carpetbag and pulled out one enormous gray velvet hat with satin trim, beading and long white ostrich feathers cascading over the brim. She held it up and admired it, turning it round and round. It was the only frivolous thing she owned and she treasured it, wearing it only in the privacy of her room. She never, ever let anyone see it.

But sometimes, on special occasions, after she bathed and powdered she would put a little touch of violet water behind her ears, get into her best petticoat and don her feathered bonnet. Then she would whirl and waltz around her room. She imagined herself engaged in witty repartee with young officers, drinking champagne, a beverage she had never tasted. Nor had she ever tasted any spirits

of any kind. She had never engaged in any unseemly behavior. She was proud of her unsullied reputation. It was her greatest asset. A knock on the door interrupted her reverie. A voice on the other side said, "Madam will see you now, Nurse." She scurried to the door and followed James down the hall to Madam's boudoir. He escorted her into the grand bedroom. She followed him in and he introduced her to the lady of the house, "Madam, allow me to introduce Nurse Lucille." She sat in a sea of pillows, comforters, silk and lace. Her auburn curls were piled elegantly atop her head framing her exquisite face in careless curls. She extended an impossibly small and dainty hand and said, "I'm soooooo very happy that you're here. You'll want to see the baby, of course. He is the most adorable child, but very demanding. I understand most babies are. So, I won't keep you from your duties. My girl, Emma will take you to the nursery." Lucille curtsied and said, "Yes, Madam. I'm anxious to see my little charge."

Emma appeared, seemingly out of thin air and led Lucille back towards the nursery. It was a large, light room (about three times the size of her room). It was furnished beautifully and filled with the finest toys money could buy. At the far end of the room the baby played happily in his crib. So tiny, so sweet. Every mother claims that her baby is gorgeous; in this case the description was accurate. The baby boasted golden curls, rosy cheeks, a sweet pouty mouth and radiant blue eyes. He looked up at her and smiled. Lucille was smitten. She reached down to pick him up. Lucille held the infant in her large, strong, steady arms. She carried him to an over-sized, ornate rattan rocking chair (not a good choice for the nursery). She sat in the rocking chair in the soft morning light and began to lightly

rub his back. The baby melted against her, putting his head on her shoulder in deep contentment. His soft, warm breath tickled her neck. The baby (Charles, Jr.) reached up and pulled her ear and a strand of her limp hair. She laughed and stroked his head and face. He nestled against her. They sat and rocked together for a very long time. Charles, Jr. fell asleep and Lucille gently put him in his crib.

Lucille was happier than she had ever been. She spent her days surrounded by luxury. Mr. and Mrs. Gordon only popped in once or twice a day to briefly visit the baby. So she and the baby had their days free to go for walks, sit in the rocking chair and nap. Lucille supervised the baby's laundry and food preparations. She did not socialize with the servants. In other homes, she was sometimes lonely. But not here, this baby gave her all the affection she would ever need. Each morning Lucille would rise early to get the baby when he woke, they started playing right away, She made up games for everything, dressing, eating, bathing and naptime. She looked forward to every day. It was unlike any other position she ever held. She and the baby would spend hours playing and laughing, so much that the servants scowled and muttered about how much noise they made. Emma even mentioned it to Mrs. Gordon, but she didn't see the harm in it. And so, many happy months passed.

When the baby was six months old, Madam decided it was time to start entertaining again. Oh, visitors dropped by. A steady stream came by every day at tea time to visit with Mrs. Gordon and take a peek at Junior. Often six or seven at a time would sit in Madam's room laughing and chatting for hours. The Gordon's

were well known for the size and frequency of their lavish parties. And so, a glorious ball was planned to kick off their return to the social scene.

The staff was in high gear. Caterers and decorators descended en masse and Madam's dressmaker was a daily visitor. The hub-bub swirled around, but did not intrude into the nursery. By the day of the ball the rest of the staff were in a combined state of exhaustion and high anxiety. But Nurse Lucille peacefully surveyed the activities with anticipation. She looked forward to watching the evening's proceedings. The house looked even more beautiful than usual and the smell of sumptuous food permeated the halls. She was particularly interested in seeing the elegant ball gowns, jewelry and furs the ladies would be wearing. Madam had planned on taking Charles, Jr. to her sister's house just around the corner. She didn't want the noise to disturb him and then he, in turn would then disturb the party. Her sister had a baby just a few months older and Charles, Jr. could stay in their nursery with her and her nanny because there was no place for Lucille to stay. Lucille delivered Charles, Jr. and cared for him until he went to sleep. She would be back first thing in the morning to bring him home. She then returned to the Gordon's.

It was almost time for the party to start. Lucille stationed herself on the balcony just behind a column. She dragged a small chair over and settled in for the evening. Guests started arriving about 8:30. They glided into the main hall, greeted by James and his assistant. Their coats were discreetly whisked off to the closet. Mr. and Mrs. Gordon greeted them on their way to the ballroom. Madam was radiant. Her dressmaker's art was evident in the graceful emerald-green, silk

and taffeta confection that lightly skimmed her bodice and flowed in gentle undulating waves to the floor. The guests entered, one more elegant than the next. Lucille had never seen such grandeur. By ten o'clock there were well over one hundred in attendance. The glittering lights and swirling skirts merged into a dreamscape as the orchestra played one waltz after another. The evening was beyond her expectations and by eleven-thirty Lucille was becoming a little light-headed.

She decided it was time to retire. This was going to be one of those special evenings. She bathed, powdered and splashed herself with violet water. Then she put on her best snow-white petticoat and camisole. She lit a candle for atmosphere. The sounds of the waltz surrounded her. She swayed to and fro like a giant mound of whipped cream. Then she reached into her carpetbag and pulled out her bonnet. She placed it grandly on her head. The ostrich feathers flowed down across her face. In a certain dim light she could almost be mistaken for a girl.

With her ensemble complete, she began dancing around the room with imaginary partners. They were always tall and handsome and from the best families. She giggled and blushed as though there were really someone there. The music sent her reeling round and round. She began to get dizzy and she was starting to perspire, so she waltzed herself over to the window and opened it to feel a lovely soft breeze waft through the room. Refreshed, she began dancing again. Arms out, head back, she floated across the room not even noticing that the orchestra had stopped playing.

The wind became a little stronger and blew across her face. Long, silky strands of ostrich feather stuck to her sweaty face. Some of those devilish strands got stuck in her eye, some stuck to her mouth. She began sputtering and her eyes were burning. Her fingers couldn't get the strands free and she started to reel.

She stumbled, and whirled faster and faster, rubbing her eyes with one hand and trying to catch herself with the other. Her foot got tangled in the ruffle of her petticoat. She started to loose her balance and reached out to steady herself on the dresser, but only managed to knock down the bric-a-brac. It fell to the floor with a bang and her large feet stomped against the floorboards like the rhythm section of a marching band. Then a floor lamp fell and hit the end table pushing a pile of books onto the floor. The racket grew louder. In the midst of all this Lucille was still twirling around trying to get her balance and sounding like a herd of bison in full stampede. The mayhem continued creating such a ruckus that every dog within a city block started howling and barking.

As she was spinning around she knocked over the candle which fell to the floor and landed on the lace curtains. The curtains started smoking and soon the smoke began to fill the room and pour out of the open window. There were no dramatic flames. The fire had spread to the runner on the bureau and smoke was seeping out from under the closed bedroom door.

One of the servants went outside to call a coach for one of the guests. He saw the smoke and followed it around to the back of the house. When he saw it coming out of the upstairs window he started yelling and ran back inside. The

servant burst into the main hall, ran to Mr. Gordon and told him there was a fire upstairs.

Mr. Gordon and several other gentlemen flew up the to the second floor, following the smoke to the Nurse's door. They kicked the door open. Some of the men quickly started to beat the fire out with blankets and quilts they pulled off the bed. The servants were on the scene with buckets of water and soon the fire was out.

Lucille's mazurka had come to an end and gravity had won. She had fallen to the floor, petticoats flying, bonnet askew and feathers falling in her face. She landed in an unholy heap amidst fallen lamps, books and furniture. Her heart pounded, she struggled to catch her breath. By this time her eyes and nose were red and her cheeks were flushed.

Master Gordon and the others were appalled at the sight that greeted them. "Drunk!" Mr. Gordon declared. He continued, "Excuse me gentlemen while I take care of this damn drunken nurse." The men filed back down the stairs eager to share this tid-bit with the other guests. "I am deeply disappointed, Lucille. I expect that you will be gone in the morning." He turned and left the room without even asking her to tell him what happened. It's the privilege of the wealthy to judge. Lucille cried herself to sleep. She was heartbroken and desolate at the thought of leaving little Charles. The sting of the unjust charges brought against her hurt, too.

In the morning she packed her few belongings. She was not allowed to see the baby she loved so much. Heart-broken, she slowly walked away and headed

for the train station uncertain of her fate. It would be hard to find work unless she went very far away.

The Gordons employed another nurse. She seemed so much more professional than Lucille. She never coddled the child or wasted time with silly games. Oh, no, she went strictly by the book. No molly-coddling or silliness would happen on her watch. No loud laughing, baby talk or unseemly games, either. She would never have anything as ridiculous as a feathered bonnet in her carpetbag.

Tea for Two

The sky hung like a dark, smoky veil over the battlefield. The air was filled with the stench of gunpowder, blood, fear and death. As he lay in the trench covered with mud and muck, Joe heard the distant boom of cannon and the crack of rifles. He heard moaning off to his left. Turning his head, he watched his buddy, Tommy gasping for air as blood poured out of his mouth and nose. Tommy was nineteen-years old, a great kid from Clarksdale, Mississippi. He had three sisters and a yellow dog named Pete. His dad ran the lumberyard and Tommy always talked about going home to help him run the business. Joe tried to go over to help but he couldn't. Looking down he saw bone sticking out through his uniform. It was odd, he thought, because he didn't feel a thing.

A rickety, old oxcart pulled up. Two medics jumped out, put him on a stretcher and loaded him onto the cart. He struggled to get out the word, "Tommy". They found Tommy, checked him over, covered his face and left him for the burial crew. Joe felt like he was going to vomit. The cart rolled off.

He closed his eyes and tried to remember what home was like. The smell of dinner cooking when he came home from school, his dog's wet kisses waking him up, the sounds of cicadas on hot summer nights, it seemed so long ago. The medic wiped his face, gave him some morphine and marked his forehead with the letter "M". The mark would keep another medic from giving him more morphine.

That might kill him and it would be a waste of the precious drug. He fell into a deep sleep.

When he woke he was in a tent hospital just like the one he'd passed on the march to the front. From a distance the hospital had looked peaceful enough. But that was only the way it looked from a distance. Inside it wasn't peaceful at all. The sounds of men moaning, snoring, the clanking of carts and other equipment woke him.

By now, the morphine was wearing off and Joe was slowly starting to come around. The first thing he noticed was the pain, then the noise and the smell. What a hellhole this place was. He looked down and saw that his leg was bandaged from ankle to hip. He felt his face and found more bandages. At first everything looked fuzzy. Slowly his vision cleared. He looked down at row upon row of cots. There had to be a hundred at least. At the end of his row, he saw her.

She was standing beside the cot of one of the wounded, giving him some medicine and checking his bandages. Her long skirt, white apron and cap were spotless. She seemed to float just a little off the ground as she glided from cot to cot. Her movements were smooth, fluid and unhurried. She focused on the patient in front of her until it was time to move to the next. He couldn't see her face, but he knew she was beautiful.

He tried to sit up and get her attention. He managed to lift his head, neck and shoulders off the pillow and then he fell back onto the cot. She continued to move from patient to patient until she was standing next to him. She looked over his chart and hung it back on the end of his cot. As she was removing the

bandages from his head she said, "Hello, Joe. I'm Lieutenant O'Malley. I'm going to change your dressings and give you some medicine." She washed his wounds and then started applying clean gauze. "Well, this doesn't look too bad," she said. Her touch was gentle and soft but strong and certain of what they were doing. "I'm going to start on your leg now and it may hurt." Quickly, she removed the bandages and cleaned the wounds. She was right. It hurt. But he didn't care. Beyond the pain, he felt the ecstasy of her touch. He couldn't take his eyes away from her face. He was right. She was beautiful with large gray eyes, soft dark curly hair and a glow he couldn't explain.

When she was done she adjusted his pillow, stroked his brow and handed him a cup of water. "It's time for your medicine," she said. In a daze, he nodded, took the water and pills from her hand and swallowed them. She drifted away and he fell into a deep sleep.

Joe watched her work. Every morning she was there before the sun came up. She made sure the linens were clean and wounds were freshly dressed. She supervised meal preparations and insisted that all of the water was boiled. With just one young helper, she kept the tent hospital and the patients clean. Each of her patients received as much treatment as they needed. When she took her meals, she must have been very quick because she was hardly ever gone from the ward. There was only one other nurse and she had her own ward to take care of, so Lieutenant O'Malley watched over her patients day and night. She must have slept right outside the ward because if anyone needed anything in the middle of the night, she was there.

She was always patient and went out of her way to be sure that each and every one of her charges was well cared for. This had been her life for two years, since she left her home in Bristol, England in 1915. One of her four brothers had been killed on a battlefield much like the one Tommy had died on. She wanted to make sure that as few boys as possible died. She knew what it did to the families left behind and that kept her going. And if she had a patient she knew was going to die, she stayed with him and made him as comfortable as possible, sometimes slipping a little extra morphine to help him on his way. Even though that could have meant being court-martialed. It was brutal and brutish work. Just keeping the patients clean was a twenty-four hour a day job. The work was hard and long but her only complaint was that she wished she could have a cup of tea. It was always in short supply along with sugar, butter, coffee and everything else but cigarettes.

Every day when she got to his cot they would chat about home, family and their plans for after the war. She helped him write letters to his family back in Knoxville, Tennessee. He talked to her about the Blue Ridge Mountains and she told him about holidays at the beach. She brought him books to read to help pass the time when he wasn't playing poker with his buddies. And he got stronger. He started to feel alive again. Before long he could get out of bed and hobble to the outhouse, a great achievement. His days were not unpleasant but hers were an endless round of checking patients, overseeing laundry and cooking and reporting to the doctor. He couldn't help but notice her red, raw hands and even though she tried to hide it, he could see the exhaustion in her face.

Six weeks past and it was time for him to be shipped home. He was excited, elated and exuberant. But he really hated to leave Lieutenant O'Malley. They exchanged addresses and promised to write and stay in touch. She probably promised the same thing to all the guys, but somehow he believed it was different with him. And besides, he had a plan.

He got home in just three weeks. Everything was even more wonderful than he had remembered. His bed was softer, the water was sweeter and Mom's cooking, well, it was just like heaven. His family doted on him and he lapped up the attention from friends and townspeople. They said the war was going to be over soon. He hoped so. He still had nightmares and his stomach would get tied up in knots for no reason. It would be a long, long time before he could sleep through the night.

Once a week he sat down to write to his buddies or their families, and Lieutenant O'Malley. He sent her long, chatty letters. She was the only one who knew about his problems sleeping and keeping food down. In each letter he carefully placed a package of tea. In addition to the regular breakfast tea, he sent Luzianne tea to make ice tea. He also told her how to brew it and serve it with sugar and mint. He liked to picture her sitting down with a nice hot cup or cold glass of tea, relaxing and reading his letters. She wrote back, not as long and not as often. He understood. He never knew that she developed a taste for the exotic Luzianne ice tea.

After several months the wonderful news came that the war was over. There were celebrations all over town. Joe was completely healed now and ready

to get on with his life. He signed up for college on the GI Bill. He wanted to go into engineering. So he left home again. This time he was only a few hours away and it was easy to get home for weekends and holidays. Lieutenant O'Malley was home, too. And for the first time he learned her name, Kate. She got a job in a hospital. She said, "I'm working in intensive care, but this is nothing compared to the field hospital." They didn't write as often. Joe got involved in his studies, friends and soon, a girlfriend. Kate was working very hard and seeing a young intern.

Soon they only wrote at birthdays and Christmas. Each year she would send him a package for his birthday and Christmas. It was always filled with real English and Irish tea. For a few years he sent her gifts, too. Usually he sent something safe, like cologne, a necklace or a scarf.

After college Joe married his girlfriend, Meg and settled down with a good job and bought a house. Life got pretty full pretty quick. He had three kids, two promotions, a car, a dog, a bigger house, and an annual two-week vacation- the American dream. Joe quit writing to Kate, even for birthdays and Christmas. But she never failed. She loved to share her thoughts with him. At home she was always busy and no one seemed too interested in her passion for gardening and travel. At first his wife was a little jealous, but after five or ten years, she settled down. Besides, she loved the tea. At the end of a hard day she looked forward to settling into her favorite chair with a cup of strong English tea. They never knew that Kate had started ordering Luzianne from the states. In the warm weather, Kate would sit in her garden with a tall glass of that southern favorite, sweet tea.

One year Joe decided to send something nice to Kate for her birthday. It had been twenty-five years since they met. He was going to his army unit's reunion and was feeling a little nostalgic. He wondered how things were for her, she never really said too much in her letters. She'd married the intern and had two children. She didn't go into detail about her family life. Mostly, she wrote about her garden or the trips she took. She would write page after page about the hollyhocks by the back fence or the art she had seen in Florence.

One afternoon after work Joe went into a little gift shop near his office. He looked at the shelves piled with ceramic figurines, tiny little boxes, candles, brooches and little books of poetry. Nothing seemed right. Then he saw some picture frames. They were small and ornate. He thought it would be nice to buy two. He would put his picture in one and ask her to put hers in the other. He paid for his purchases and left the shop flushed with pride at his purchase.

But when he got home and started to put a photo of himself in the frame, it didn't seem right. He tried a picture of the whole family and that didn't work either. Then it came to him. He found a picture of himself from the war, from before he was wounded. That was the one. He put it in the ornate, antique-looking frame and knew he found the perfect gift. He wrapped it up with the matching frame and sent it to Kate with instructions to put her photo in the empty frame and return it to him. He was surprised by how anxious he was to get her picture. He wasn't sure whether he wanted a recent one or not. Several weeks passed and he still hadn't heard from her. Not even a thank you note. He was beginning to think that something was wrong when he received a package from England.

The box was a little bigger than a shoebox and heavy for its size. He took off the brown shipping paper and then the striped blue wrapping paper. He lifted the lid and pulled out three framed pictures. The one he sent her with a picture of her in her WWI nursing uniform, just as he remembered her, a picture of her with her family, and a picture that had been taken in the tent hospital where they met. He hoped his wife wouldn't mind if he put them on the dresser, at least for now. She didn't, no point in being jealous after all these years.

Things went back to normal. Twice a year, he received his package from England, only now he started writing back. After all, they had been friends for over thirty years. It didn't seem possible. She was a grandmother. His kids were grown and gone. He'd probably be a grandfather soon. But he felt good. He liked to golf and play tennis and thought he was in pretty good shape. It was a shock to everyone when he dropped dead one day on the tennis court. Heart attack, they said. Dead on arrival at the hospital.

Months later the package came and Joe's widow opened it. There was the tea she loved. She read the chatty little letter and then she sat down to respond. She told Kate about how Joe died and then for some reason she couldn't explain, she kept writing. She told her all about how lonely she was since his death and how she hated being alone in the house. She shared feelings with Kate that she hadn't shared with anyone. Just like Joe had done right after the war. It felt good to put the words on paper. When Kate received the letter she didn't hesitate she called long distance and got Joe's phone number.

When Meg answered the phone and the operator said "overseas call," she was stunned and didn't know what to expect. Then she heard Kate's voice and even though she had never heard it before, it was like hearing from an old, dear friend. They chatted briefly and Kate insisted that Meg come over and stay with her for a while.

Meg was astonished to find herself flying over the big, blue Atlantic. But she did it. She knew Kate right away from her pictures. The two were comfortable with each other from the start. They chatted like old friends. Kate and her husband had a charming seaside cottage with a beautiful garden. Meg went on long walks. Once or twice a week she and Kate would go into the village to shop and eat lunch. She started to feel alive again.

One afternoon after a long walk, Meg came into the garden to find Kate with a tea tray on the patio. The two women sat with their feet up and drank their tea. Kate handed a box to Meg. She opened it to find the picture that Joe had sent Kate. The two women shared stories of Joe and Meg cried first a little, then a lot.

They kept talking and by sunset, Meg knew that she was ready to go home and start her life without Joe. Now she knew that she could go on with her life without leaving her memories and her love for Joe behind. Once Kate healed Joe's wounds, first in a tent hospital, and later in their letters. Now she healed Meg. Kate went inside to make more tea.

According to Plan

It was early afternoon and the whole family was at grandmother's house just like they were every Sunday. It was raining, so she wasn't wasting a perfectly good afternoon. Her name was Rachel. She was named after her grandmother's sister. Rachel was busying herself in the kitchen to make the time pass.

Her grandmother, Maggie was in the kitchen, too. They were sitting at the table snapping green beans for dinner. Rachel had spent hundreds of hours sitting at this table with her mother and grandmother. She had learned a lot listening to their conversations, but her grandmother never talked much about herself. Rachel knew she had been a nurse in the First World War, but she couldn't imagine her grandmother in a war or as a nurse. So she asked her, "Grandma, how did you decide to go to into nursing?" Rachel was about to go off to college and also planned to be a teacher. Her family had always pushed her in that direction. She figured it was as good as anything else.

Maggie got up and went to the stove. She picked up the old kettle and filled it with water. As the water was heating she pulled a tin of tea down from the cupboard and got out two cups and saucers. "Well, it's a long story. I wanted to go to college to be a teacher, but things don't always go according to plan." Over the next few hours and three pots of tea Rachel learned about her grandmother's life.

The war had already started when Maggie's mother decided she should go to nursing school. This seemed like the best thing for Maggie. The family didn't have a lot of money and there was a great need for nurses. She would always have a job. The family thought she would be good at it because she loved working with the animals on the farm or helping an injured wild animal. The Director of Nurses at St. John's Nursing School had other thoughts. It was clear by the end of her initial interview that Maggie was not as prepared for nursing school as she should be. She had not taken the usual prep courses the school required. But a doctor on staff (and friend of the family) recommended her. She was in.

A week later Maggie returned to the school carrying one suitcase. She was so homesick she kept her suitcase under her bed and refused to unpack it for over a month. Her roommate, Linda helped her get comfortable and showed her the ropes. The school had very strict rules and little tolerance for mistakes. Linda's father was a doctor and she was well acquainted with hospital culture. Linda seemed like the epitome of sophistication and style to Maggie and she was thrilled by their friendship.

There were no eight-hour labor laws. The students were assigned patients and they stayed on the floor until the work was done. Because of the war there was a shortage of nurses so the students often worked nine or ten hours at a time. After duty on the wards, there were classes, labs and study periods. That didn't leave much time off and even then, they weren't allowed to go anywhere unchaperoned except for Hill's Donut Shop right around the corner.

Hill's didn't serve anything but coffee and donuts. They served the coffee in sturdy white mugs. The coffee was strong and they always served it with thick cream. Maggie had never had coffee before. She learned to drink it at Hill's and for the rest of her life she never used cream in her coffee unless she was eating a donut.

She learned to drink tea, too. Every Friday afternoon the faculty hosted a tea party for the students in the drawing room. It was a time to relax and socialize with one another and with faculty. The china had been made especially for the school with "St. John's Nursing School" written in the bottom of each cup. Maggie had never been a big fan of tea, but the Friday afternoon tea parties changed her mind. She grew to associate tea with relaxation, conversation and good friends.

Maggie was the youngest and smallest nurse in the class and they used her as the patient model. She had her temperature taken, ears washed out, she was inhalated, bandaged, cupped and given enemas. One time when she was under the tent for inhalation she went to sleep and scared the student nurses half out of their minds because they thought she was dead. She was often the cause of little uproars.

Maggie was transferred from the General Ward to the Women's Ward to the Men's Surgical Ward. One day she was in the utility room next to surgery where she scrubbed instruments. There was a swinging door between the utility room and surgery. The door had a little window in it but it was too high for Maggie to look through. One of the doctors got a box for her to stand on so she

could observe surgery. The first thing she saw were three large men carrying an infant to be circumcised. The baby screamed and hollered until it turned from pink to red and almost blue. The doctors just kept on cutting. They didn't even the give the baby a little whiff of gas. Maggie got angry and she opened the swinging door and told the doctors they were heartless brutes. They just laughed. If she hadn't been so young and dumb she would have been thrown out of school right then and there. But the doctors liked her and didn't report her to the Director. One of the doctors told her later that the baby didn't feel anything because he was too drunk on a sugar tit! "Well, then what was he screaming about"? Maggie asked. The doctors just laughed.

The next day she was transferred to the nursery. This was the assignment she had been waiting for. She wanted to specialize in infant care, but it was hard to get on the regular staff roster because so many students wanted to stay in the nursery. Maggie was determined to do a great job. But sometimes plans just don't work out.

She learned to bathe, powder, dress and deliver the babies to their mothers for feeding. In those days mother and baby stayed in the hospital at least two weeks and the mothers weren't allowed to put their feet on the ground for ten days. The nursery was large with at least forty infants at a time. At feeding the nurses wrapped the babies in their blankets and put one in each arm. One day Maggie had a Caucasian baby and an Asian baby. She delivered the babies to the wrong mothers. As she was delivering the second infant there was a blood-curdling scream from the room of mother number one. Every nurse on the Floor

raced to the room. Needless to say, the two new mothers wouldn't speak to Maggie after that and the staff laughed about it for months. Even experienced nurses make mistakes when there are so many patients to take care of. Maggie was transferred out of the nursery.

Being shifted from one department to another, from night shift to day shift and from adults to children was good training but very strenuous. In addition to caring for the ill, the students prepared bodies for the morgue. Maggie had just finished preparing Mrs. Ragusa, a little Italian lady for the morgue. She removed the IV's and cleaned her up and checked her chart. It was hard for her because she had helped take care of her in the days before her death. Maggie went into the little bathroom and splashed her face with cold water. She took a few deep breaths and got ready to take the body down to the lower level where the morgue was. She wheeled the gurney into the service elevator and pushed the button. The elevator started down and then jerked to a stop. Maggie waited for the elevator doors to open. The minutes passed and she tried to remain calm as she pushed the buttons, finally pushing the emergency button. Then she sat on the floor to wait. The elevator was getting hot and stuffy and smelly and she felt sick and wondered if anyone would ever come. After about thirty minutes she started talking to Mrs. Ragusa. It was oddly soothing to carry on a one-sided conversation with a corpse. Then she cried a little and laid down on the floor. By the time workmen got the elevator working again (an hour later), there were almost two corpses in the elevator. Maggie was relieved of duty for the rest of the day.

It seemed like wherever she went, Maggie got into trouble. When she was on the mental ward one of the doctors told her to stay with a patient who was an alcoholic and dead drunk at the time. She had never seen anyone in that condition. The mental ward consisted of a long hallway with cells on both sides and a desk at the end that was staffed by a male nurse to help with emergencies. Each cell had a small barred window in the door so the nurse or doctor could observe the patient without going in.

The patient was quiet and the doctor didn't want to put restraints on unless he had to. Maggie was supposed to stay with him and give him an injection if he came to. The doctor told her to wait until the patient saw "pink elephants." The patient came to and he was very agitated. He made Maggie sweep imaginary cobwebs from the ceiling, chase imaginary bats and kill imaginary spiders, everything but "pink elephants." Once she got too close to him and he pulled out a handful of her hair. Maggie howled in pain and the male nurse came running. When the doctor arrived he asked her why she hadn't given the patient the injection. She told him the patient never said he saw "pink elephants." A few days later the patient sent her a box of hand-dipped chocolates with an apology for pulling her hair out. The legend of "Maggie's Mishaps" grew.

After three months probation the student nurses take exams as well as private interviews with faculty and if they pass they are "capped." It's an important milestone in the life of a nursing student. Maggie wasn't going to be capped. Her grades were good and she worked hard, the doctors liked her and her patients loved her (she always took special care of flower arrangements and made

sure the patient was comfortable). But she had made some serious mistakes and she thought she would not be capped with the rest of her class. She was heart-broken.

Capping day came and Maggie was on her bed crying. Her roommate, Linda had left for the ceremony. She looked fabulous in her starched uniform with every hair in place. Maggie was happy for her friend but felt sorry for herself. In between sobbing fits, she straightened her dresser, organized her homework trying to keep her mind off the ceremony. About fifteen minutes later Linda burst into the room and pulled the sorry, soggy Maggie from her bed. Linda yanked her out of her rumpled uniform and bib and helped her into a clean one. Somehow, by some miracle, she was going to get capped! Maggie threw her long hair up into a bun and she and Linda raced to the auditorium. They stood in line and waited to be called to the stage.

When Maggie's name was called she marched up the steps to the stage and nervously waited for her cap to be placed on her head. Her hair was so thick that the cap wouldn't fit over the bun she had placed on top of her head. With some effort, the Director jammed the cap down. The girls cheered and for the first time they were allowed a few hours off without a chaperone.

Afterwards the girls went back to the dorm and sat up all night talking about nightclubs, dancing, interns and drinking. Maggie just listened. She had no experiences of her own to add to the conversation. She decided that it was time to start dating but the students were not allowed to go out with anyone without written permission from their parents. Maggie's parents signed a release allowing

her to leave with her brother or Captain Hill. He was a friend of the family and all the girls thought he was good looking.

Captain Hill and Maggie went out a few times, usually for a drive and dinner. Once she persuaded him to take her to Mark's at the Beach, a well-known restaurant and nightclub. They drove the usual route to Mark's. She had never felt so grown up, even with her hair in braids and low-heeled shoes. Their table was small and by the window with a view of the ocean. Maggie had heard the other girls talk about a drink called Horses Neck, so she ordered one. The drink came in a tall glass with a slice of lime and a maraschino cherry. It was so delicious she drank it down and ordered another. She got a little tipsy, but she was having a wonderful time and stayed too late. The Captain took a short cut back to the dorm. They got lost and didn't get back

until 12:30. Curfew on the weekends was at twelve o'clock. The Captain was scolded and Rachel lost the few freedoms she had. She knew she was lucky she didn't get expelled. If there hadn't been such a nursing shortage, she might have been.

The war was in full swing. Maggie's brother joined the Navy. More of the nurses from the hospital left to go into the Army or Navy. The students had to carry heavier workloads and even longer hours. Because of food shortages the hospital contracted with an outside vendor to handle food service for patients and staff. They cut down on food supplies for the staff giving them the bare minimum. The students were tired and hungry most of the time.

About every ten days Maggie's brother, Ted would send her boxes of canned fruit and tuna and crackers. All the girls looked forward to Ted's boxes. As soon the box arrived, they tore into it. Then there wasn't much left for Maggie. She didn't mind. Some of the girls came from far away, many were from poor families and some from local orphanages. The hospital only gave them five dollars a month and that had to cover their laundry, desk supplies, and toiletries. Not much left for coffee and donuts.

In the midst of all the work and study Linda had found time for romance. She was seeing an intern named Joshua. The hospital was very strict about fraternization between doctors, interns and nurses. The nurses were allowed to play tennis with doctors and interns, but no other social contact was allowed. Linda had fallen in love with Josh. Maggie didn't like him. She didn't know why but for some reason she didn't trust him and tried to make Linda realize that he was not her type. In spite of her misgivings Maggie delivered notes between Linda and Josh, knowing that if she were caught she would be suspended right along with them.

Soon Linda gave up nursing school and went home where she announced that she was engaged to a Jewish intern from New York. Her family was horrified but Linda proceeded to make wedding plans in spite of their protests. When the hospital got wind of the romance they dismissed Josh even though Linda had already left nursing school.

Josh went home to New York and Linda quickly followed him. Her father hotfooted after her. Linda's father quickly discovered that Josh was already

married and had a child. Linda was crushed. She had lost her love and her career in one blow. It took a long time for her to recover but she eventually returned to finish nursing school and ended up marrying the man who had been in love with her for years. Although Maggie never said anything to Linda about this painful episode, she felt guilty for delivering the notes and helping nurture the ill-fated relationship. She learned to trust her instincts, especially where men were concerned.

Maggie graduated nursing school and passed her board exams. Now she was a registered nurse but she still felt like the awkward little girl that first walked through into school. Her best friend, Linda still had to finish her last year because of the time she missed and Maggie hated leaving her. She couldn't believe it, but she also hated leaving her dorm room, the cafeteria, and the lab, even the morgue. The hospital had become her home. She could have easily stayed on staff but she knew she had to join her brother in the Navy. Nurses were needed to treat the wounded on the battlefields of Europe. After a few weeks of training, Maggie was shipped out.

Rachel had sat motionless as her grandmother talked. She looked at the woman across the table quietly sipping her tea and saw her for the first time, not as her grandmother but as a young woman starting life on her own. Rachel was the same age Maggie was when she entered nursing school. She needed to know more. What about the war? Maggie said, "Some other time. We've got to finish getting dinner ready."

After dinner their talk continued. Rachel was so intrigued by her grandmother's stories that as they were clearing the dishes, she asked, "What happened in the war, grandma? Did you go overseas?" Maggie finished putting the china back into the hutch and sat at the kitchen table, "Oh my, yes. I worked in the field and treated hundreds of wounded. I thought it was tough in nursing school, but that was a picnic compared to the war. Sometimes we went without sleep for days. And when I got back it was just as rough."

Maggie returned to St. John's after her tour of duty in Europe. She was working surgery and had an apartment with a couple of other nurses. She was enjoying her work, her friends and free time. It was the first time since she came to St. John's as a student that she had any time for dating. The rules were still very strict about nurses, doctors and interns socializing, so one of Maggie's friends fixed her up with a friend. His name was Joe, he was finishing law school and didn't have much time or money, Maggie was used to that. They enjoyed going for walks and having a cup of coffee at Hill's. As soon as Joe graduated, they planned to get married. Life was settling in nicely. Maggie loved being a nurse and planned to keep working after the wedding. But things don't always go as planned.

In 1918 the deadly flu epidemic hit and there was no medication to stop it. The mortality rate was high, mostly from complications like pneumonia. Many of the nurses died, too. They were already worn down by exhaustion and poor nutrition that made them susceptible to infection. Maggie came down with the flu and was sent to an apartment to recuperate. Her mother and sister came to take

care of her. She developed double pneumonia that left her with a weakened respiratory system and she was unable to continue her career as a hospital nurse.

After she recovered she entered college and studied Art History. In her senior year she got engaged to Joe. They would get married after she graduated and move to San Francisco. They would both be able to find work there. She didn't know it, but her nursing career wasn't over yet.

They got married as planned but ended up moving to Tuolome, California because Joe got a good job there. Tuolome is a couple of hundred miles east of San Francisco. It wasn't much of a town. Tuolome mainly served as a supply station for the logging camps. It was small but the countryside was enchanting. The town was nestled in the Central Sierra Nevada region and was surrounded by lovely low mountains, clear streams and woodlands.

Native Americans had lived in the area for thousands of years until the Gold Rush of 1848. People from all over the world came to find their fortune. After the Gold Rush, the loggers came. The virgin Sierra Nevada forest was as great a treasure as the gold in the ground. Logging camps sprouted up like weeds and a few small towns grew among the camps. One of those towns was Tuolome. Joe had been hired by a lumber company to handle labor and land disputes for the region. They chose Tuolome because Joe had a friend, Bill Reed, who lived there. Bill was a physician and he ran the local hospital, Lumber Camp Hospital.

Joe and Maggie moved into the house they were renting. It was small and clean and had a wonderful view of the mountains. After a couple of weeks of unpacking and setting up housekeeping, Maggie didn't have much to do. She was

a little concerned that she might be bored. After all, she had been working full out for years and now there was nothing to do but cook meals and keep house. Maggie planned to spend her time gardening, decorating and reading. She would learn to cook and be active in the church. She had plans.

Shortly after moving in, Bill invited Joe and Maggie to dinner. At the end of the evening, Bill asked Maggie if she would consider going to work for him. That's how Maggie became head nurse at the Lumber Camp Hospital. Since she was the only nurse, it is not really as impressive as it sounds. The hospital was small, just one doctor and some assistants. They handled emergencies until the patient could be sent to a large hospital in San Francisco and they took care of simple primary health care for the lumberjacks and their families. The money would help pay the medical bills from her bout with pneumonia and the work wouldn't be as strenuous as working the floor in a hospital, so Maggie thought she'd give it a try. The lumber camps were closed down for the winter and it was usually pretty slow at the hospital. Maggie thought that the workload would be light enough for her to handle. It didn't work out that way.

As soon as she started the flu epidemic came to the valley. The ward was full, the three private rooms were full and some patients were put on mattresses in the hall. A girl from town was hired to help with the laundry, bedpans, mopping and cleaning. Maggie was so busy she wore the same clothes for three days and could only steal a few minutes of sleep at a time. Most of the patients were lumberjacks. They were young and strong and came through the illness in a few days. As they began to feel better they would help Maggie take care of the sicker

patients. A mutual respect developed between her and the men in the camps. Maggie learned more about nursing in Tuolome than she did at St. John's.

The lumberjacks were always getting drunk and getting into fights. One day a man was brought in drunk and belligerent. His arm was sliced open from wrist to elbow, but they couldn't get him to lie down and anesthetize him. The doctor poured a tumbler full of whiskey and the patient drank it one gulp. They continued this regime until the patient calmed down enough for them to stitch up his arm. After he was bandaged, his friends helped him home, a little wobbly, not from the accident or the surgery, but from the whiskey. A few days later he showed up at the hospital with a large box of candy for Maggie, begging her forgive him for all the trouble he had caused.

Her teachers at St. Johns' would have been horrified at all of the things Maggie did, delivering babies, dispensing medicine, suturing wounds and a thousand other things she had not been trained to do. But none of her patients died and she was considered a great success.

Maggie was surprised to find that she enjoyed the rough and tumble world of lumbering and the freedom she had at the hospital. Dr. Reeds was often gone on house calls that took him great distances and Maggie was left to run the hospital on her own. She enjoyed the autonomy and the responsibility. She was so involved with her job that she was surprised when Joe reminded her that their first anniversary was coming up. The couple planned a long romantic weekend in San Francisco. They would leave on Friday and come back Sunday night. Joe made reservations in the best hotel in town and Maggie bought a new dress and

shoes. They planned to have a great time. But, by now you know that things don't always go according to plan

It was Thursday and Maggie was sitting in her office at the hospital. Things were relatively quiet. The flu epidemic was almost over and there weren't many patients in the hospital. Suddenly there was a noise in the hall and the sound of someone crying. She ran into the hall to see two lumberjacks helping a very small boy up to the stairs to the doctor's office. Dr. Reed was out on calls and so Maggie got ready to examine and treat the boy. When she saw one of the boys little arms stuck in a lard bucket and fastened to his overalls she nearly panicked. The boy had been playing on the railroad trestle when he got caught and run over by a lumber train. His arm was nearly cut completely off and was only attached to his shoulder by a flap of skin and muscle. There was a lot of blood. The boy was moon pale.

Maggie applied a tourniquet to try and stop the bleeding. She gave the little boy a hypo of morphine and had Pol, the assistant set up surgery. There were very few telephones in the valley and they couldn't get a hold of the doctor. In the mean time, she couldn't get the bleeding stopped with the arm dangling the way it was. It would have to come off. It was the boy's right arm. The boy was unconscious from the morphine and loss of blood and there was no bone involved, just flesh and skin. Maggie took a deep breath, said a quick prayer and started cutting. It was done quickly and she was able to put enough pressure on the stump to stop the bleeding. The patient was still unconscious but his vital signs were strong. As soon as she was sure he was fine, she fell into a deep sleep.

The doctor showed up an hour later. Everything was in good order and he praised Maggie for saving the little boys life. He also kept her sedated for three days. So she spent her first anniversary passed out in bed.

Maggie cared for the little boy during his recuperation at the hospital. She made sure that he was comfortable and fought with the doctor over his pain medication. When he was taken off morphine, she made sure that he got other non-addictive painkillers. She brought food from home, books, games and comic books. He bounced back quickly.

After he left the hospital, Maggie visited him at home almost every day and taught him to use his left arm and hand. She gave him a new suit, shirt and underclothes. It was his first pair of long pants. They became close friends and spent many hours in his room. She taught him about books and music. He taught her about Indian life. Out of a crisis came a friendship and new opportunities for the little boy. His time with Maggie had given him a view into the outside world and he continued his studies and eventually went on to a University.

Maggie was very happy living in Tuolome. She and Joe talked about staying there instead of moving to San Francisco. The lumber industry provided Joe with a good living, interesting cases and a bright future. The hospital gave Maggie a source of fulfillment and satisfaction she would never have known in a big city hospital or doctor's office. The couple planned to keep on just as they were, enjoying small town life with occasional trips to big cities for entertainment.

Joe became more successful and well connected. The local Republican Party asked him to run for state representative. He never thought about a career in politics, but he decided to give it a shot. He ran and won. That was the beginning of three decades in public office. As the wife of a legislator, Maggie often traveled the state with her husband. She ate lots of potluck dinners in church basements, hosted many teas and did her best to keep the household running smoothly in spite of their hectic schedule. It wasn't what she planned to do with her life, but she was used to that.

After Joe resigned, he and Maggie finally got to do what they had wanted to do. They enjoyed their home in Tuolome and occasionally took a jaunt to San Francisco or Seattle. Maggie said, "Things really turned out better than I could have planned. All of my kids are doing well, and the grandkids are fine, too."

Rachel got up from the table. She kissed her grandmother good-by and went outside to her car. As she drove away she mentally reviewed all of her plans; go to college, become a teacher, get married, have a family. All of a sudden she knew that her life would not work out that way and she didn't know what would happen. She also knew that it's okay if things don't always go according to plan.

Cecilia

Rose woke to another perfect day on the big island. Living in Hawaii was everything she hoped. She stretched and yawned and lingered under the sheets. Two years ago she never imagined her life could be this way. She had just received her doctorate and was quickly courted by dozens of nursing schools. The shortage of nurses is even worse for nursing faculty and nursing deans. So, she had her pick of nursing schools and she picked the University of Hawaii.

Life on the island proceeded at a lovely, languid pace, especially compared to the hectic graduate school days at Duke. For the first time in years, Rose felt rested. She had plenty of time for sleep and walks and dinner with friends. Instead of working shifts in the hospital, she was strictly in the classroom. It was luxurious. She took long walks on the beach and for the first time, she felt connected to something larger than herself. She wasn't religious and never went to church. But she felt a peace and serenity here that she had never known.

She never wanted to leave. As a junior faculty member she had a large teaching load. She was on the tenure track and if all went well in about five to seven years she would be granted tenure and then she would have a lot more control of her teaching load, her research and her schedule.

Rose was offered the opportunity to work on a demonstration project in Haiti. It would only be for the summer and it would help her bid for tenure. So, she signed up for the three-month medical mission.

A week later she arrived in Port au Prince. Although she had been through an orientation and read background materials about Haiti, nothing could have prepared her for the dramatic shift. From Hawaii to Haiti is quite a swing on the reality pendulum. The conditions were far worse than she ever imagined. The streets were filthy, plumbing hardly existed, there were piles of garbage, and thousands of hungry Haitians everywhere. She rode a rickety old cab to the orphanage where she would live and work for a few days. It wound through narrow roads. They could hardly be called roads, just bumpy trails, really. Finally, she arrived at the orphanage.

The walled orphanage looked tranquil and serene in comparison to the rest of the city. She entered the orphanage and was amazed at how calm it was. There were tiny beds and cots everywhere and each one was full. The building was old and decrepit, but fairly clean. Rose started working right away. She bathed and fed infants, changed diapers and administered medicines. One of the first infants she treated was Cecilia. Rose held the tiny four-month old and tried to coax her into taking some water from an eye-dropper. The infant was dehydrated and severely malnourished, she had pneumonia and a stomach virus.

As Rose cuddled the infant she remembered that when she was a little girl, she dreamed of coming to a poor country to help people. What she didn't dream was that she would fall in love with a sick baby girl. Rose asked the orphanage director about Cecilia. "A cabbie found her abandoned in the street when she was just a few hours old," the orphanage director explained. "She's very sick. We've done all we can with our limited resources."

Rose couldn't put Cecilia down. In between her duties, Rose would always hurry to Cecilia to rock her. Every morning she carried her to see the doctor and every night she slept holding Cecilia in her arms. There was something about the way Cecilia would look at her, hold onto her and when she fell asleep with her head on Roses shoulder, Rose would just melt. "Why of all these sick children do I love this one so much?" she wondered, but had no answer.

Rose was only supposed to spend a few days at the orphanage and then move to another orphanage in a rural area. Because of Cecilia, she postponed her departure for several weeks. When the time came to leave Rose told the orphanage director that she wasn't leaving without Cecilia. The arrangements were made and the two set off for the countryside.

At the smaller, rural orphanage, Rose used an old towel to make a sling to carry Cecilia in. She kept the baby snuggled close to her all the time and when she did put her down, even for a minute, Cecilia wailed and cried until Rose picked her up. Rose marveled at how strong and healthy Cecilia was growing. In just about six weeks, the pneumonia and stomach virus were cured, she had gained weight and was starting to catch up on her developmental progress.

When the other children called Rose "Cecilia's Mama," she began dreaming of adopting the baby and taking her home to Hawaii. Rose tried to initiate adoption proceedings, but she was stopped at each step. After providing all the required forms for adoption, she was told she needed more documentation. When she finally got the application and documents completed, the office lost her application and she had to start all over again. She was then told that she would

have to wait six months before applying again. Rocking Cecilia in her arms she cried and accepted that it wasn't meant to be.

Rose stayed an extra semester in Haiti with the support of the University. But when December came, she knew it was time to go home. She took Cecilia back to the main orphanage in Port au Prince and begged the director and other missionaries, "Please take special care of Cecilia, and show her to anyone who comes looking for a baby to adopt. I want more than anything for her to find a loving home."

The night before she left Rose sat up cuddling Cecilia. She feared she would never see her again and she couldn't explain the attachment and love she had for this poor little girl. All she could do was hope that the baby would be cared for and eventually adopted.

Back in Hawaii, Rose ran up huge phone bills calling the orphanage every day to ask about Cecilia. The orphanage staff said the baby was doing fine. They knew how much Rose cared for Cecilia and how worried she must be.

Rose was busy teaching and compiling data from her trip to Haiti. She made time for walking on the beach. It was the only time she felt peaceful. On the beach she felt connected to Cecilia. One day, after a particularly long walk, she went home and fell right to sleep. At 2:00 a.m. she sat straight up in bed and called out, "Cecilia!" She knew she had to call right away.

It was early morning in Haiti. The woman who answered the phone was new and didn't know about Rose and Cecilia. When Rose asked about the baby

the woman said, "Oh, that poor baby is so sad. Ever since her nurse mama left she just cries and cries. She won't eat and she is getting so small."

"I'm her mama!" Rose sobbed. "Tell Cecilia I'm coming back for her. If they won't let me adopt her, I'll move to Haiti. Tell her I'm coming right away."

Rose called the adoption agency only to find out that another family might be interested in adopting Cecilia. Rose was torn. She wanted Cecilia to be in a good home, but she wanted that home to be hers. She didn't want to be selfish. For the first time in her life, Rose prayed. She asked God for a sign to help her know what she should do.

It was Sunday, Mother's Day. Rose went for a walk on the beach hoping to calm down. She took a different path and ended up walking past a church that was just letting out after services. Rose stopped for a moment to watch. Families were pouring out onto the street. All of a sudden Rose noticed a small girl standing in front of her holding a flower, "This is for the mamas" the little girl said. Rose thanked her and she stood there with tears running down her cheeks until all of the families had gone.

She knew what she had to do. Now there was no doubt. That afternoon she made some phone calls to get her classes covered, bought her plane ticket and packed. Soon she was back in Port au Prince. The ride to the orphanage seemed to take hours. At last she arrived and ran inside. The children gathered around her cheering. The director hugged her and took her back to Cecilia. The family that thought they might adopt her had taken another child just the day before.

Rose sobbed over the tiny crib. Cecilia had stopped eating and her hair had turned red from lack of protein. She had lost weight and looked very ill. "Cecilia, it's me-your mama." Slowly Cecilia opened her eyes and then she smiled.

Rose lifted her up and hugged her. "First, we're going to get you well," she said. "Then I'm going to take you home with me. I don't know how, but we'll manage." Day by day Cecilia grew stronger. Her appetite returned, she gained weight and in a few weeks she was a happy, healthy baby again.

This time the red tape that obstructed her adoption efforts virtually cut itself. Cecilia's adoption was approved, and in less than four weeks Rose was back in Hawaii with her brand-new daughter.

In their cozy home, Cecilia carries her toys and books to Rose and snuggles on her lap. Cecilia watches Rose wherever she goes, her wide eyes follow her every move. It will take time for Cecilia to feel really secure, but she is on her way.

Rose still walks on the beach, but her walks are not quiet and peaceful anymore. She is joined by a noisy, energetic toddler and Rose wouldn't have it any other way. Her walks may not give her peace and quiet, but they give her contentment. It's a fair trade.

I'm Done

"That's it. I'm done," Liz threw down her charts and left the nurses station. Another minute on her feet and she would collapse. Each day was a carnival of irritation, aggravation and just plain hard work. And, it had been that way for twelve years, as long as she had been a registered nurse. "Yeah, I'm done," she thought, "done with the whole damn thing."

In addition to back-breaking work, mind-numbing regulations, cranky patients, demanding families, and arrogant hospital administrators, there were the doctors. Oh, yes, the all powerful, the all knowing, the insufferable doctors. They were abusive, pushy, demanding and did not accept helpful suggestions well. At least once a week a tech or nurse would be reduced to tears by some doctor's harsh words. When a nurse noticed that a physician was making a mistake with a patient's treatments, she couldn't just say so. Oh, no. She had to frame her suggestion as though it were the doctor's idea, "Excuse me, doctor, do you want me to start reducing the patients dosage now or this evening?"

The decision to leave nursing did not come quickly or easily. Liz was not the flighty type. She was an excellent nurse, she had a husband and two children. She was an attractive woman in her late thirties, not a spring chicken, but still young enough to make some changes in her life.

"Well, no more," thought Liz. She had just been accepted to Law School. With her medical knowledge, she would be a formidable opponent in the courtroom. She could hardly wait. Every time she thought about that last comatose patient, she knew she had to go.

Liz was standing at the bedside of patient who had been in a car accident. The young woman was comatose. Liz was performing range-of-motion exercises on her limbs while she played tapes of the patient's three-year-old son. Dr. Johnston, the chief neurological resident walked in and blurted out, "What the hell are you doing?" Liz explained that she was allowing the patient to process her son's voice and keeping her joints limber so she could walk again.

Dr. Johnston laughed, "She'll never walk again. You're wasting time. As a matter of fact, we're taking her off the ventilator tomorrow. If she breathes on her own, she'll be transferred out of ICU to the neurosurgery floor where she'll probably die." Liz felt a chill run up her spine. Something wasn't right. It was too soon after her injury to move her. There was damage to axons of the neurons, which doesn't usually turn out well. But sometimes it does. It was just too soon to tell.

Liz contacted her head nurse to let her know that she disagreed with the doctor's decision. The patient's family begged Liz for help. If they had been "private pay" they could have kept her there, but the insurance company would only cover what the doctor ordered. Liz knew that going against Dr. Johnston was all but pointless. But, she did it and she was successful in keeping the patient in ICU, slowly weaning her off the ventilator and delaying the transfer out of the

unit. She also was successful at getting a written reprimand and was assured of the never-ending disdain of Dr. Johnston. It didn't make life on the unit more pleasant.

"How can I stay in this profession?" Liz asked herself. That was when she started looking into law school. After a few weeks, she applied. "Wouldn't that be something. she thought, If I can't deal with these doctors in the hospital, maybe I'll get the chance in a courtroom. The hours are better and the pay is much better." She wondered why she hadn't thought of it a long time ago.

No more nights, weekends or holidays. No more aching feet and sore muscles. No more sarcastic physicians and patronizing administrators. It's no wonder that tens of thousands of registered nurses have left the profession. Most people who go into nursing have a genuine desire to help people. When they get into the field, what they find out is that they spend twenty-five percent of their time dealing with ancillary staff and doctors, another thirty-five percent on paperwork, twenty percent on training and twenty percent on direct patient care. It's grueling, grinding, frustrating work.

Liz looked up and saw a young woman standing there. "Are you Liz?" Liz nodded and the woman threw her arms around her and said, "Thank you for everything you did! I heard you wouldn't allow them to just let me die!" Liz stood still. She just couldn't place the woman.

Then she saw a family come around the corner. It was the family of the woman Liz had kept in ICU, the one the doctor said would die. Liz didn't recognize her without the intracranial pressure monitor and endotrachial tube.

Her hair had grown back and she was walking on her own. Liz was glad she had done the range-of-motion exercises. The patient and her family gave Liz a beautiful pair of diamond earrings as a token of their appreciation.

Later, Dr. Johnston was making the rounds. As he was reviewing a chart, he asked Liz , without a trace of irony or sarcasm, "When do you think this one will be ready to leave ICU?"

Liz went home and threw out her law school admission. She then filled out and mailed application for graduate school of nursing. She dropped it in the mail with a satisfaction she hadn't known for a long time.

Unsung Hero

In 1952, America was introduced to Elvis Presley, a charismatic young singer with wild hips, and his take on the latest threat to middle class mores: rock and roll music. But how did his career get started and who were the people behind him? Almost everyone knows about Sam Phillips, Colonel Tom Parker, and Sun Records. But RCA record distributor Sam Esgro was just as influential, even though he didn't become as well-known. I know, because he is my father.

My brother and I grew up convinced that our dad was one of the sweetest people on the planet, but maybe a little on the simple side. We watched him go off to work every morning. He always looked so handsome in a suit and tie. His lovely, old-fashioned manners and gentle southern drawl completed the charming package. But when he got home at night, he would put on his comfortable clothes (my mother wanted to put them in the rag bin) and start putterin'. If the weather were nice he would go out in the yard and just sort drift around the yard pretending to do chores. When he couldn't go outside he would putter around the basement or lay down on the couch with a book. He was oblivious to whatever might be going on around him. I mean it. He had the ability to completely shut out the world, so we thought he wasn't too bright. We were wrong. He just has a rich inner life and doesn't concern himself with day to day worries.

Sam and Elvis had a lot in common. They were both sweet simple country boys from Mississippi, they were both devastingly handsome (my father looked just like Tyrone Power), and they were both from deeply religious families. Elvis went on to fame, fortune and early death. My father (the first born son of a Sicilian immigrant) always put family ahead of a career. He is now eighty-five, healthy, active and still handsome.

He was born in 1920 in Clarkdale, Mississippi. His father ran a small produce store. A few years later the family (which now consisted of three sons and daughter) moved to Memphis, Tennessee.

Sam was sent to Catholic schools, Catholic Church and Catholic camps. He was bright, easy-going and good at sports, so he became very popular. He enjoyed school, but he didn't work very hard at it. He knew all he had to do was get a good job and marry a nice Catholic girl.

He got the good job, but then he married my mother, a seductive, psychotic Jewess. What the hell was he thinking? His family eventually got used to it, but his mother was never quite the same. She was sure that Sam and his children were all going to hell and she spent the rest of her life devoting masses and saying rosaries to save our souls. We don't know yet if she was successful. They settled down and had two children, my brother and me. Then the war came.

During World War II, he was a captain in the Air Force. Afterward, he started at RCA Memphis as a record distributor dealing with sales. Part of his job was keeping track of how many records artists on the RCA label sold. He met with independent record salesmen every week to see what they were selling. One

particular meeting would be very important. Dad was shown the sales for one local musician were over 700 a week. RCA's top seller at the time was Perry Como. He sold half of that.

Dad went to a local roadhouse (or honky-tonk) where Elvis was playing to check him out. Elvis Presley was a talented young man who played rock and roll, which teenagers loved. Presley's popularity with the audience and local teens was apparent to Dad. He knew this young man had a great career ahead of him.

He took this information back to the president of RCA and requested Elvis' contract be negotiated from Sun Records, the brainchild of Sam Phillips. But his request was declined. He knew, though, that Elvis would be good for the company. Elvis was going to be the next big thing, if he ever got the distribution, promotion and recognition Dad knew he deserved.

My father is nothing if not stubborn. Once he gets an idea in his head, well it's just going to have to happen. He remained persistent, and the president of RCA finally decided to give Elvis a shot. Under Dad's supervision the legal department quickly drew up an offer for Sam Phillips. The offer consisted of $30,000 for Elvis' current contract and an additional $5,000 for the rights to re-release his first five recordings under the RCA label. And this was $35,000 in 1952, by the way. Dad and the others in the legal department presented Phillips this offer.

Phillips was a canny businessman. He had many other amazing artists in his repertoire, such as Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Carl Perkins. But he

was shrewd enough to know that Elvis was something special and the negotiations got tough. But, as I said, Dad is persistent and eventually the deal went through.

To leave out a few minor details of the negotiations, Phillips agreed to hand over Elvis' contract and records to RCA. Even though there was a lot of hard work done on everyone's part before Elvis became famous.

RCA let Elvis keep his current manager, Colonel Tom Parker. He took over Elvis' career. Parker was very nice to Dad. When Dad admired the hat of another musician, Parker had an exact replica of the hat sent to him, which he personalized in gold. It is a gift that he still owns and keeps in mint condition in a box with the other cards and pictures sent to him by Elvis.

For a few years, Elvis and Parker kept in close touch with Dad and the family. Elvis was a frequent guest at our house. None of this had any effect on me. I was a little too young and unaware to be interested. But when I brought a friend home and mentioned to her that Elvis had been by the day before, she bent down and kissed the floor. I had no idea why. Elvis already had this kind of impact in places like Memphis and his birthplace of Tupelo, Mississippi, where his popularity was very widespread. And his fame hadn't even begun to grow.

By the time Elvis was drafted, he was the most popular musician in America. Teenaged girls cried at seeing his trademark coif being shaved off and cheered when he returned home in 1966 unharmed and with a new look. He had on a leather suit during his comeback special and became even more popular then

his original burst of fame. Even with the Beatles coming to America in February of 1964.

A devout Elvis Presley fan, John Lennon never failed to mention Elvis when asked about his musical influences. "Without Elvis Presley, there would be no Beatles," he'd often say.

A large number of great and influential artists name check Elvis. Legendary hard rock guitarist Jimmy Page, of Led Zeppelin and Yardbirds fame, studied Elvis and his guitarist, Scotty Moore, while developing his style. The lead singer of Led Zeppelin, Robert Plant, would often impersonate Elvis. The Led Zeppelin song "Candy Store Rock" was one of Plant's recorded impressions.

All four members of the Irish rock band U2 have been influenced by Elvis. None more than drummer Larry Mullen, JR, who went as far as to name one of his children Aaron Elvis (Elvis' middle name is Aaron). There is a scene in U2's film Rattle and Hum where the band visits Graceland and spends a lot of time at his grave.

Scenes taking place at Graceland have become a common practice since Elvis' death in 1977. In 1984, it was even spoofed. In Rob Reiner's mocumentary Spinal Tap, lead singer David St. Hubbins, guitarist Nigel Tufnel, and bassist Derek Smalls make a day of going to Graceland. They break into a "barber-shop rugger" version of Heartbreak Hotel, harmonies included, and discuss Elvis' plans for doing a musical version of "Somebody Up There Likes Me."

Spoofing Elvis himself has become common practice in films. In John Waters' 1950's teenage musical Cry-Baby, set in 1954, the title character of Cry-

Baby Walker was a rebellious teen who's style was a carbon copy of Elvis' when it came to his musical performances. His onstage moves, his dress, and his voice mirrored Elvis. Johnny Depp played the Elvis wannabe.

Another movie in which Elvis was characterized was Bye Bye Birdie, made in 1963 and based on the play by Michael Stewart. Ann Margaret plays a teenaged girl who is lucky enough to do a spot on the Ed Sullivan show with musician Conrad Birdie. Birdie is doing a farewell performance before being drafted into the army. Just like Elvis.

Even now over 50 years later, Elvis generates millions of dollars per year. All the money made from Graceland tourism, CD re-releases, movie re-releases, CD compilations, Presley Productions, and numerous other forms of royalties, goes to his only child, Lisa Marie. She recently sold the Elvis Presley Estate to Robert F.X. Stillerman for $100 million. Stillerman wants Elvis' presence to be greater. He wants to develop Elvis-themed entertainment in Las Vegas. There may be something of a similar nature in Europe or Japan, where Elvis is hugely popular.

Elvis makes so much money, $45 million per year, that he has been at the top of Forbes' top dead-celebrity incomes for the last four years. But even when presented with all this, my father remains blissfully unaware of Elvis' impact on popular culture and insists that if he "hadn't done it, someone else would have." Maybe, but I'm not so sure.

Thousands of pages have been written about Elvis, but it wasn't until 1994 that Dad made it into one of the Elvis history books. A writer named Peter

Guralnick tracked him down and interviewed him over the course of several long telephone calls. He is mentioned in Guralnick's book, "The Rise Of Elvis Presley: Last Train To Memphis", on pages 122, 123, and 231.

After working at RCA, we moved to Los Angeles to help my uncle open a chain of discount stores. Dad went on to a successful career, and more importantly, a successful life. He is graced with family and friends who love him, great health, and the sweetest disposition on the planet. He remains oblivious to the world and still doesn't realize the incredible impact he had on modern culture by pushing RCA to put Elvis under contract.

But his greatest career moment was helping to launch the career of a "nice, sweet, talented young man," as Dad often called him. That moment, and the huge impact it had on culture, makes my father, Sam Esgro one of music's unsung heroes.

Characters

I've known people who reminded me of giant, multi-colored lollipops. Their personalities were neon-loud and relentlessly cheerful. I said I knew them, I didn't say I liked them. Others are more like licorice, dark, but sweet and little spicy. Then there are the chocolates, complex, intoxicating and just plain irresistible. And of course, some are just plain nuts. How can I choose just one?

I've had the opportunity to meet some remarkable characters. For five years I produced a weekly radio show and was lucky enough to interview hundreds of fascinating people. Among them were the late Senator Paul Simon and Governor Carnahan. Each was memorable in their way. Senator Simon was the walking embodiment of public service; intelligent, informed, honest, ethical and caring. He was open and without pretense, if you don't count the bow tie. Governor Carnahan had the ability to make me feel like we were old friends from the moment I met him. He shared family stories and showed me photos of him in his leather aviator cap. He was proud of both.

Less well-known but even more memorable and closer to home are the people in my family. For sheer surreal imagery, my family is just chock full of memorable characters. I know how memorable they are because I've spent most of my adult life trying unsuccessfully to forget them. Please don't make the

mistake of assuming my childhood was unpleasant or that I was neglected or abused. A little neglect would have been a welcome change from the ever-present, whacked-out relatives trouping in and out of the house. And my relatives don't have the excuse of drug or alcohol abuse. No, they are just weird.

Here's the background. My mother's family fled Russia to escape the pograms and my father's family are Sicilians who left the homeland for reasons we never discuss. At any rate, somehow they all landed in Jackson, Mississippi around 1910. By the time I came along, in 1949, family reunions were a twisted mix of Russian Jews and Sicilian Catholics combined with 1950's Southern customs, drawls and manners. It looked like a Fellini movie on crack.

A typical family gathering would include my aunts, Nita, Maria, Mimi, Big Charlotte, Little Charlotte, Ione, Mavis, Dymple and Sister (that's her real name) and my uncles, Louie, Frankie, Danny, Jack, Mario, Millard, Shorty, Nathan, Ben, Little Max, Big Max, Bernard and dozens of bizarre cousins.

Uncle Jack is almost memorable material. He is a sportscaster for Mississippi State and at one time he was the rabbi in Tupelo, Mississippi because he was the only adult, male Jew in town. Jack has won numerous broadcasting awards and is successful in his field, but for color and quirkiness he pales in comparison to the rest of the family. Uncle Shorty is another contender for most memorable, he was under five-feet tall, round and quick and light on his feet, a right jolly old elf. He had a face like Edward G. Robinson, the heart of a saint and the hands of a Zen master. Put a pool cue in those little hands and he turned into

Paul Newman, a small time hood and professional pool hustler. He taught me to play the game with uncanny skill. Thanks, Uncle Shorty.

But I guess the two figures who stand out the most are my grandmother, Molly, and her sister, Etia, we called her Tante Etia and rolled it into one word, Tantetia. Both sisters fled Russia when they were in their teens and even though they were peasants, they both displayed decidedly imperial mannerisms. The two women were well under five feet tall with the tiniest feet this side of China. They always dressed to the nines; gloves, hat, brooches, the works. On Sunday afternoons we would pick up Grandma and go over to Tante Etia's house. Tante Etia would sit on an old velvet sofa, surrounded by silken throws with lots of fringe, piles of satin pillows and to her left, a small table with a large samovar. She loved her samovar. How she got it out of Russia I'll never know because it was as big as she was and made of silver and it weighed a ton. She would pour the hot tea into glass cups. She would then ceremoniously put a cube of sugar between her teeth and drink her tea. All of the relatives from the old country were there and the conversation was a thick mush of tortured language; Russian, peppered with Yiddish and English mangled beyond recognition. It may sound pleasant but if you made one wrong move my grandmother (who had a tongue like an adder) would light into you like the Cossack that she was. And when she was done, the rest would swoop in and verbally pick your bones clean.

A few years after arriving in America my grandmother married Ben Cristil (I was saddled with his last name as my first name). In short order she had six children. They were enjoying an upper-middle class American life when my

grandfather died of tuberculosis. For the next twenty years, she worked to raise her brood. Her children still talk about moving from their nice house, selling the car and dismissing the maid and moving to the poor side of town into a small shot-gun style hovel. Grandma dove in with paint, soap and her incredible needle and thread. She whipped up curtains and slipcovers and turned hallways into sitting rooms and sitting rooms into bedrooms. She never accepted adversity or poverty as part of her life. So, she and her family survived, but she did more- she prevailed.

It was during the depression and my terror of a little grandma raised her six children with the money she made as a seamstress. She was like Van Gogh with a needle and thread, a craftsman and artist. She was able to get work at the best store in town where she did alterations on high-end women's wear. She would take the bus downtown, sew all day, bring home the scraps, ride the bus home (carrying sacks of groceries), cook dinner and sew all night. Every year her three daughters were voted best dressed at their high school. That's pretty damned memorable.

I have a quilt my grandmother made for my son when he was born. You can't even see the stitches in it. Her sewing was an art. She would take little scraps of the best material and use them for collars or insets and transform rags to designer finery. She was not just adept with the needle, she had the imagination, skill and knowledge to know how to put it all together to create something new and wonderful.

In the kitchen, she was quick and efficient and just as artful as was in the sewing room. She could perform magic with her hands. What Uncle Shorty could do with a pool cue, Grandma could do with dough and batter. She made the thinnest crepes I've ever seen and she did it so fast you couldn't tell how it happened. Her hands were a blur of speed when she peeled vegetables or plucked a chicken, and she did it all with astonishing accuracy. I still roast a chicken the way she taught me, clean it, salt it, rub oil and herbs under the skin and put it on top of onions and celery tops and into the oven with it. It's simple, but wonderful. And after two or three meals, when the meat is all gone, I make stock just like she did. One sip and your knees buckle. It's that good. If you're sick, you'll get well, if you're tired, it will revitalize you and if you're anxious it will soothe you. Great stuff, that stock.

Even when she was in her eighties (at least fifty years after leaving Mother Russia, she never spoke of her homeland. I was curious and when I noticed that she was in a good mood I would ask her about her childhood, She would speak for about five minutes then she would look around, put her finger to her lips and say "Shh, you never know who's listening." When Russia opened up to the West in the sixties Molly's children offered to send her there on vacation. Her answer was to spit and say, "Who wants to go back to that place." So they sent her to Israel.

She died when she was 96 with all of her teeth and a thick head of hair. Whenever I start to feel tired and sorry for myself I think of her and realize I don't

even know what tired is. So, I guess I do know who my most memorable character is, a tiny, cranky, talented, immigrant, who was my grandmother.

You might picture her as one of those grandmas you see in an advertisement, rosy cheeks, soft, wavy white hair and sparkling eyes. That would be a mistake. Oh, she looked enough like a grandma, she was short and plump and her hair was a beautiful silvery color always worn in a bun on top of her head. But as soon as she opened her mouth, you knew this was no regular grandmother you were dealing with.

Her voice was the antithesis of her hands. Blessings came from her hands, beautiful clothes and wonderful food. But her tongue, that's another story. First let me explain, she had a thick eastern European accent like Eva Gabor. The pitch was okay, sort of in the middle range. The volume was on the loud side, but that wasn't so bad. It was the words. I'm not sure I ever heard a kind word come out of that mouth, or my mother's mouth for that matter. Oh, I know, the depression was tough and they had a hard life and had no time for nonsense. But my Italian grandma had a hard life, too and I never heard her speak a word that wasn't kind. Molly, on the other hand, corrected everybody about everything and she did it in front of whoever was there at the time, her voice on full volume. No child was safe. Her verbal assaults were so brutal that physical discipline was never needed. But a sore hind end heals a lot faster than bruised and battered feelings.

There was something else going on, a terrible fear of not being good enough, of always having to be the best at everything. This fear, this intense anxiety didn't plague the Italian side of the family at all. They were just happy,

still are. But the Russian side, there's a dysfunction there that will take generations to run its course.

The good thing about Molly was that her daughters and grand-daughters learned that men are not important to happiness or survival (unless they are doctors or terribly rich) and that as women we are in control of our destiny. As a child if I had a problem with a teacher or bully, my mother and Molly didn't sympathize. There was no cooing, soothing or nurturing. Their answer was, "You've got a mouth." I was expected to handle my own problems and not to waste time and energy being upset. That phrase still rings in my head when I'm pissed about something. "You've got a mouth." It implies that I've got power, I don't have to take shit off of anybody and most important, things can be changed and I can change them. So, I've got a mouth and now that I have a daughter I want to her to know that she does, too. I hope I can teach her that (minus the accompanying verbal abuse) and adding a healthy dose of nurturing. I'll keep you posted.

Works Cited

Guralnick, Peter. "The Rise Of Elvis Presley: Last Train To Memphis" 122, 123, and 231