1993

# Tales from Around the Kitchen Table

Nancy Jean Sabath Freeman

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An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate
School of Lindenwood College in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Science

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**Abstract**

The introduction to this project, entitled "The Value of Writing," discusses the author's experience of writing, both in her personal life and her career as a writing teacher. The main focus is on writing that is done on a regular basis, as with keeping a journal or diary, and how that activity can lead to emotional, peychological and spiritual growth. Research includes opinions from many prominent writers and teachers of writing about the value of writing in general. The remainder of the project includes samples of the author's short stories, personal narratives and essays, and poetry, which she believes have developed as a result of her continuing experience with personal writing.

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COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY:

Adjunct Assistant Professor Carolyn Scott,

Chairperson and Advisor

Adjunct Assistant Professor John Tieman

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## Dedication

I dedicate this work to my wonderful family without whom I would have no tales to tell, and especially to Tom, whose loving support made it possible for me to pursue my dreams.

**Acknowledgements**

I offer my heartfelt gratitude to Carolyn Scott, whose support and encouragement kept me on track during a trying year and whose friendship helped me realize I could finish this project when at times I doubted it.

I also thank John Tieman for his helpful advice and insightful criticism during his reading of this project, and K. Curtis Lyle, for his enthusiasm and encouragement of my writing in general, both during his creative writing class and his reading of this project.

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## The Value of Writing

"It is well to understand as early as possible in one's writing life that there is just one contribution which every one of us can make; we can get into the common pool of experience some comprehension of the world as it looks to each of us" (Brande 24).

Why do people write? Back in the prehistoric age, as men and women struggled to scrape an existence out of the earth, whatever drove some of them to scratch pictures and signs on the walls of caves? Surely they had more important activities to occupy their minds--finding food, shelter, protection from wild beasts, procreating, learning to get along with others (or not). But some of them felt an urge to record something about their lives on the walls of caves, and those of us who came after them have often felt the desire to do the same.

I teach writing--creative writing, journalism, freshman English--to high school students, and often they ask me why writing is important. I sometimes offer any one of many pat answers, from the philosophical--"Recording our thoughts and reading those of others broadens our sense of our own humanity"--to the practical--"You need to write effectively so you can succeed in college, fill out a job application, design a resume, or write a million dollar novel." While both of these answers, and some of the many others I blurt out, are true enough, they don't really say everything.

I know this--writing is and has been one of the core activities of my life.

I don't think of myself as a writer, just as I don't think of myself as breather, eater, sleeper. But as breathing and eating and sleeping are part of what I do to live, so in many aspects is writing. It doesn't really matter what form the writing takes because most of my writing is something which is meant primarily for myself, such as my journals, notebooks, and diaries, or a select group of friends and family to whom I write my letters, personal reflections, essays, poems, and short stories. I write because writing helps me to discover who I am and what I really think about a situation or a new idea. I write because it affirms my existence, gives me a feel for my life. Writing aids me in sorting through complex issues and making some sense of a world that sometimes appears to be chaotic and absurd. Writing allows me to rediscover my roots, to dig into past memories and find in them the glimmer of truth that I may have missed while I was living them. Writing, for me, is also a spiritual activity, almost a prayer, an act of faith in myself and in the God that dwells within me as well as in His heaven.

I cannot remember any stage in my life when I did not write. As a child I wrote little stories and silly, carefully rhymed poems illustrated with little pictures. I kept a locked diary where I recorded all the important events of the day. High school brought reflective meanderings about the world with my own funny vision of how everything from basketball games to thunderstorms looked to me, poetry that didn't fit any form, and some very bad short stories. For some reason at this crucial time of my life, I stopped keeping a journal, which may be

one reason that I recall it as such a confusing time. At that time in my life, I especially liked to write about literature, which stirred all kinds of reactions in me. I read voraciously, everything from Carl Jung and Erich Fromm to Dostoevsky, and writing about what I read helped me to sift through all these ideas.

I left college after a year and married a year later, but, even as a young wife and mother, writing continued as an important aspect of my life. Before they ever could read, I began a journal to each of my children, where I would write to them at different points in their lives. I kept a personal journal, started a parish newsletter, wrote Marriage Encounter talks with my husband, created services for parish retreat days.

When our sixth child was two and I was 34, I returned to college, where writing once again became one of the center focuses of my life. I prided myself on writing effective, well-organized research papers, but my personal writing really suffered during this hectic time. Likewise, so did my personal life. Many things were changing in my life, and without the anchor my writing gave me, I often slipped through situations without comprehending their significance. I felt lost and confused. Beginning a journal again did not stop the traumatic events, but often it helped me keep those events in perspective and to find balance.

Teaching writing has been a daily reminder of why writing is important to me, and I try not to squelch the emerging voices in my students. In his book *Writing the Australian Crawl,* William Stafford says, "My question is 'when did

other people give up the idea of being a poet?' You know when we are kids we make up things, we write, and for me the puzzle is not that some people are still writing, the real question is why did the other people stop" (Stafford 86). I believe many students stop writing because their teachers red-marked the desire out of them. Teachers are often guilty of the sin of repression, demanding a rigid five-paragraph essay without too much thought as to what creativity and feeling has gone into it as long as every paragraph has a topic sentence. I remind my students (and myself) that their ideas and their experiences are the most valuable aspects of their writing, even more important, at first anyway, than whether or not they have a thesis statement and conclusion. We can always find a computer program that will make spelling corrections and edit grammar mistakes. We can work together to enhance organization. But a computer cannot think our thoughts, share our experiences, give our insights. Only we can do that, and we do it most often by writing.

For myself and for many of my students, writing is an act of self-discovery. Some days when I sit down to write in my journal, I have nothing in particular in mind to say. But the simple act of forcing pen to paper often gets my mind flowing, and I am surprised by a thought or opinion about something I wasn't even aware I was thinking about. Even the great writers have this experience of self-discovery. The poet Robert Frost once said, " For me the delight is in remembering something I didn't know I knew...I have never started a poem yet whose end I knew. Writing a poem is a discovery" (iv).

Poets aren't the only writers who have shared in this act of self-discovery. The novelist James Baldwin said, "You go into a book and you're in the dark, really. You go in with a certain fear and trembling. You know one thing. You know you will not be the same person when this voyage is over. But you don't know what's going to happen to you between getting on the boat and stepping off" (147).

I see similar things happening in my students all the time. I give a writing assignment in my Basic English I class, and the room rustles with discontent and mumbling. "What are we supposed to write about ?" they ask repeatedly. Or "How long did you say this has to be?" Then they begin. The room quiets down. I can hear the pencils scratching across the papers. Suddenly one of them hunches down and begins writing rapidly. Soon he is standing beside my desk, smiling shyly, holding his paper carefully in his hand, offering a gift. Something happened. He remembered something of his past, or discovered a relationship between things he had not seen before. He's surprised at himself, and he is proud. It doesn't matter if the words are misspelled or the sentence structure isn't the best at this point. He found out he had something to say, something he cared about, and he began to find a voice to say it.

Sometimes when I sit down to write in my journal, I am only aware of a vague feeling of discontent. Perhaps I have not even had time during the day to sit down and think about what really is bothering me. I keep myself busy moving from one task to the next, unaware that there is a problem, but I snap at my kids

and my neck is tight and my shoulder blades feel pinched. Not until I sit down and begin writing do the feelings begin to surface. The anger or resentment or frustration that lay seething under the surface begin to rise as my pen starts moving across the page, and soon I've worked down to the source of the problem. I remember a hurt I felt at someone's remark early in the day, or recall that this is the anniversary of my mother's death which I hadn't consciously remembered, or find myself trying to figure out what to do about the student who always writes about being sexually molested as a child. Sometimes as I write I am amazed at the mixture of things that emerge, the combinations of joy and sorrow and confusion and frustration and hopefulness that coming pouring out onto the pages. Just being aware of all these emotions through writing a journal has helped me to see the sweet paradox that life is and has often gotten me through many situations that might have otherwise seemed overwhelming. If I were not writing, much of the reflection that takes place in my life would be missing.

The novelist E.M. Forster once said, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" (Arnold 77), and the playwright Edward Albee echoed this idea when he wrote, "I write to find out what I'm thinking about" (26). I have seen this same phenomena happen over and over again, both in myself and in my students. That is why so often when I am trying to figure something out or when I am presented with some new, perplexing information, I write. Writing forces me to digest the information and to assimilate it into my body of beliefs and the

world as I already know it. Writing is thought slowed down, forced to commit itself to paper, and this more leisurely, disciplined ritual aids me in making connections and insights that I often do not make as quickly without its assistance. This idea of writing enhancing learning is the basis of the concept of writing across the curriculum, where students in every subject from math to history are encouraged to write about the information or the process they are studying. In his book *Write to Learn,* Donald Murray says, "Writing, in fact, is the most disciplined form of thinking. It allows us to be precise, to stand back and examine what we have thought, to see what our words really mean, to see if they stand up to our critical eye, make sense, and will be understood by someone else" (3).

One of my journalism students, an extremely bright young woman, testifies that writing has helped her to make many connections between English, history, art, math, and science which she would not have made as readily without keeping a journal. She has embraced this interdisciplinary type of thought, relishing the way all ideas are linked together into a pattern. She is an example of what Marilyn Ferguson discusses in *The Aquarian Conspiracy*: "In most lives insight has been accidental. We wait for it as primitive man awaited lightning for fire. But making mental connections is our most crucial learning tool, the essence of human intelligence: to forge links; to go beyond the given; to see patterns, relationship, context" (46). For many of my students and myself, writing is the anvil where those links are forged.

Journals or diaries are most often where this kind of activity takes place, although I have seen it come to full bloom in personal essays or reflective essays as well. Poetry is another good outlet, where a mind making metaphors also creates connections to a broader picture. Many authors and poets speak of this illuminating aspect of writing. In *The Poetic Image,* C. Day Lewis writes, "First, I do not sit down at my desk to put into verse something that is already clear in my mind. If it were clear in my mind, I should have no incentive or need to write about it. We do not write in order to be understood; we write in order to understand" (29). Murray insists that writing is how we explore our world and learn (1). He believes in the value of writing on a regular basis, as in a journal or diary. "Sometimes we write just for ourselves, to record what we have seen or felt or thought. Sometimes we write to celebrate experience. Many times we write just to find out what it all means, for by writing we can stand back from ourselves and see significance in what is close to us" (3). This idea is not only echoed throughout recent writing research, but it also can be found in older works. In 1938, Brenda Ueland first published *If You Want To Write,* in which she states, "Another reason for writing a diary is to discover that the ideas in you are an inexhaustible fountain....No human being, as long as he is living, can be exhausted of his ever-changing, ever-moving river of ideas. There is much, much in all of us, but we do not know it" (146).

Personal writing has an additional value. It builds up a sense of self-affirmation and allows the writer to experience the validity of his or her own

experiences. Writer Natalie Goldberg writes that it is very difficult for us to comprehend and value our own lives, and writing can help us to do that. She states the following:

> I know this working with my tired, resistant brain is the deepest I'll get on this earth. Not the joy or ecstasy I feel sometimes or the momentary flashes of enlightenment, but this touching of the nitty-gritty of my everyday life and standing in it and continuing to write is what breaks my heart open so deeply to a tenderness and softness toward myself and from that a growing compassion for all that is around me. Not just for the table and the coke in front of me, the paper straw and the air conditioner, men crossing the street on this July day..., but for the swirling memories and deep longings of our minds and the suffering we work through daily. And it comes from me naturally as I move the pen across the page and breakdown the hard, solid crusts of thoughts in my own mind.... (136-137)

Ueland reiterates this message. "It [keeping a diary] has shown me that writing is talking, thinking, on paper. And the more impulsive and immediate the writing the closer it is to the thinking, which it should be. It has made me like writing. It has shown me more and more what I am--what to discard in myself and what to respect and love" (140). The details I record on a regular basis are not important in themselves. It doesn't matter if I record my delight in

watching the groundhogs playing in our backyard or my frustration in driving in rush hour traffic or my description of the early morning sun rising through the trees. I can mull over the quandary of what we should do with an aging grandmother who needs help or grieve over the loss of a dear friend. I can ponder how God is speaking in my life, recall the silliness I shared with my daughter on the way home from school, or cherish a moment of particular tenderness with my husband. But when I read back over those experiences, I touch my own humanity and begin to have a sense of my own life.

In many ways writing is the corollary of reading what people before us have written, not just great works of fiction, but the journals and diaries and essays of those that came before us. I love Samuel Pepys' diary, not only for its famous bawdiness, but also for its honest recording of a life, and for the way I can find my own connectedness to his thoughts and reflections. Some of the things I value most are little scraps and bits of papers written in my mother's or grandmother's handwriting that record some bit of relatively inconsequential thought. Some of them are poems or recipes which they didn't write, but which they had clipped from some magazine or another on which they had scribbled little side notes. How much more I would have loved to have whole reams of their words since they are no longer here. Perhaps writing is my quest for immortality in some sense, the desire to record and pass on that which sits in the deepest part of me, even if I don't actively seek a large audience in the present. I know that is why I began recording a journal to my children, so I could give to

them, when they were old enough to comprehend, a record of some of the things I thought and felt as they grew.

One of the saddest things I can recall recently was finding out that my mother-in-law, whom I deeply loved, had burned all of the old love letters between my father-in-law and herself before she died. Her death already hurt, but to lose all those beautiful vestiges distressed me even more. My husband said perhaps she thought the things they had recorded were too personal, too private, and I do respect that, but part of me still aches. Even if all my journals are full of nothing but drivel, I vow to leave them--along with all my love letters, all my endless notes, poems, stories, and any other mindless gibberish I happen to create--behind when I go. Anyone who cares to ramble through them and pick up a twig or two of what once were my thoughts and feelings is welcome to do so. Some of them may be embarrassing, but I doubt by then I will care.

Stafford discusses the psychological freedom that comes with writing:

> Writing itself is one of the great, free human activities. There is a scope for individuality, and elation, and discovery. In writing, for the person who follows with trust and forgiveness what occurs to him, the world remains always ready and deep, an inexhaustible environment, with the combined vividness of an actuality and flexibility of a dream. Working back and forth between experience and thought, writers have more than space and time can offer, they have the whole unexplored realm of human vision. (97)

Writing helps us to create meaning out of the seeming chaos of our lives. Sometimes things happen in our lives which are hard to comprehend and even harder to accept. We lose a child or a parent whom we dearly love. We lose a job, or we suffer the pain of seeing a child in trouble. We must suffer through a debilitating illness, or worse, watch someone we love suffer through one. We see injustices in our world, and we aren't sure how to correct them. We lose our faith in our government or in our God, or both. We come face to face with our own inadequacies. Writing can help us to get a grip on some of these realities and to work through them. The novelist Joyce Carol Oates says we write "to seek out the meanings of life which are hidden. We write to give a more coherent, abbreviated form to the world, which is often confusing and terrifying and stupid as it unfolds about us" (xii). At such times in my life, when life seems confusing and terrifying and stupid, writing is a source of therapy, the way I work through my pain and remain at least relatively sane. Goldberg disagrees with the idea that writing is therapy. She writes:

> Writing is not therapy, though it may have a therapeutic effect. You don't discover that you write because of lack of love and then quit, as you might in therapy discover that you eat chocolate as a love substitute, and seeing the reason, stop (if you're lucky) eating Hershey bars and hot fudge. Writing is deeper than therapy. You write through your pain, and even your suffering must be written out and let go of. (13-14)

Recently my own life has held many traumatic events. Last November, Tom, our oldest son, age 22, announced that he and his girlfriend Kristin were planning a small wedding during the holidays. We handled that announcement without a blink, but two days before the wedding both Tom and his brother Kevin, three years his junior, were arrested on federal drug conspiracy charges, dealing with some activities surrounding the 1991 sale of LSD that, unknown to our sons at the time, had been transported through the federal mail at some time before they received it. The shock of their arrest was followed by the bittersweet beauty of Tom's and Kristin's wedding, where in the face of such calamity they pledged their love to one another and their hopefulness for the future. They had written all the ceremony themselves and read to each other from Kahlil Gibran, e.e. cummings, and Native American prayers. Their beauty and optimism almost hurt against the backdrop of the legal proceedings that entangled them.

Then before we could adjust to the shock of that situation, Tom's mother discovered she had terminal cancer in mid-January. At 68, she was an active, seemingly healthy, woman and a mainstay in our family. She was involved in many church projects and had lived with us for many years, helping to take care of our large house and family. In addition to assisting me in keeping track of the laundry, the house, and the kids plus handling her endless list of service projects, Mom was the main care-giver for her own mother, who also lived with us and had suffered a series of strokes several years ago. At 87, Grandma was

physically spry but had suffered complete dementia and needed constant care. With Mom trying to recover from surgery and battling her own serious illness and me working full-time, my husband and I decided we had to find a nursing home for Grandma, which we were fortunate to do on such short notice. The doctors predicted that Mom would have at least six months to a year, but her condition rapidly deteriorated, and on March 7, she died. Our family had gone, in a few short months, from an unusual four-generation household which we thought was strong and whole to a nuclear family with two sons facing jail terms and a new generation on the horizon. My friends were almost afraid to call for fear that I would either be shattered by the series of events or some other new tragedy would have befallen our family.

Writing during this time was my coping mechanism. I would sit down and pour out the range of emotions I was feeling and somehow just the expression of them helped. Also writing allowed me to experience all of what I was feeling, both the bad and the good. There were days in the beginning when the pain was numbing but eventually it found a voice and found its way to the writing pad. And what happened there was almost miraculous. In my writing I began to see shades of hopefulness in the midst of the blackness. Each day after pouring myself out on paper, I was able to turn back to my family with renewed energy and work through some of the many problems that confronted us. As I wrote I began to distinguish some actual positive elements in the midst of the negatives. Our family pulled in tighter, out of necessity and heartache, and we experienced

some much-needed healing of some of the rifts that adolescent problems often create in families. I rekindled my faith in the power of God to work through our weaknesses and in the midst of adversity to bring new life. I let go of my need to control and take care of everything, for in most of the situations with which I was confronted there was very little else I could do. I came face to face with my own inability to rescue three of the people I loved most from circumstances in their lives that at times seemed harsh or unfair. My writing actually helped me to come through everything with a basic sense of inner peace and calm. Goldberg spoke of this kind of experience when she wrote,

> To begin writing from our pain eventually engenders compassion for our small, groping lives. Out of this broken state there comes a tenderness for the cement below our feet, the dried grass cracking in a terrible wind. We can touch the things around us we once thought ugly and see their special detail, the peeling paint and gray shadows as they are--simply what they are: not bad, just part of the life around us--and love this life because it is ours and in this moment there is nothing better. (107)

I have seen this experience many times in my students as well, especially my creative writing students that must keep a writer's notebook as part of their course requirements. Sometimes it is painful to read some of the things that begin to come pouring out onto the pages of their journals, and I always feel privileged to share their struggles to make meaning in their own lives.

Sometimes they are dealing with typical adolescent hassles, such as the wondrous pain of first love and trying to discover who they are, but some of them are also dealing with abusive home situations, parents who have lost their jobs, friends or even themselves fighting a chemical dependency or discovering they are pregnant. They are searching out answers to questions that don't have easy, pat responses. They are fighting to find things that mean something in their lives, and over and over they bring these battles to their notebooks and try to make some sense of them and themselves in the midst of it all. In one of the texts we use in class, *Writers INC.*, Patrick Sebranek writes, "It (writing) helps you make meaning out of your experiences. You may not always like what you discover when you write, but if you give writing an honest chance, it will help you understand *you* and the people you care for" (1). I think my students take him at his word, and their notebooks are filled with growing understanding. This experience of dealing with their lives in writing enriches the rest of their writing. I can usually pick out who my poets and fiction authors are going to be by their notebooks in the early days of class. Their notebooks not only help them to find their voices, but they also create in them a respect for character and detail and life which colors the rest of their work. And if written in honestly, their notebooks break them open, crack through the walls and defenses they have built around themselves, and let their spirits run free.

Writers are at times faced with the duty of imprinting the page with their particular vision of a situation, their insights which may or may not have been

discovered by others as well. "We write because we are ordained to a noble task, that of making clear mysteries, or pointing out mysteries where a numbing and inaccurate simplicity has held power" ( Oates xvi). For example, I've had the experience of watching several people I care for deeply suffer complete dementia from various causes. The first time this experience was almost overwhelming; I felt only the pain of losing the relationship with the person involved, my mother, who at age 48 died from Alzheimer's. But in both my own grandmother and my husband's grandmother, I began to see a different reality that accompanied their loss of mental capacity, perhaps because they were both much older than my mother had been. Before my grandmother's senility, she had fallen and broken her hip. She was never again able to walk completely by herself, and she hated that she could no longer physically do all the things she had once so loved-- gardening, cooking, crocheting--because of the crippling effect of her arthritis. During this period of her life, when I visited with her at the nursing home, she often complained about her situation and talked about how much she wished she were somewhere else or even dead rather than to be shut up there. But once the senility had taken its effect, she seemed much happier, seemed to glide easily from one memory to the next without having to be bothered by the harsh realities of the present. Every time I visited her after that she seemed content and peaceful. She didn't know what day it was, and not often was she sure who I was, but I had the impression of her floating among her own memories of a life well-lived. One minute she would be on the way to her long-

dead mother's house for dinner, and a few minutes later she would speak as if she were still a little girl. But she was no longer unhappy. She was still capable of giving and responding to affection, but she wasn't aware of how physically limited her life had become. In her demented world she had not outlived her husband and friends, and she was not confined to a wheelchair in a nursing home. It occurred to me as I wrote about this that while this disease had robbed me of the chance to have the kind of relationship I was used to having with my grandmother, for her it was almost a blessing in disguise. Reality in her world was much more painful than the gentle journeys she took through her past life. I began to see the flip-side of the coin of which I had previously seen only the top, only my own perspective. That insight found its way out of my journal into a short story called "Violet Memories," which is included in this work.

My writing has also helped me to find my roots and to dig back into past experiences. Isaac Bashevis Singer once said in an interview, "If you write about the things and the people you know best, you discover your roots. Even if they are new roots, fresh roots...they are better than no roots" (Brezin 48). Each of us must come to terms with our beginnings and the things and people that have affected us, and writing can encourage us to do that. In his book *Indirections for Those Who Want To Write,* Sidney Cox writes:

> You will always be the son or daughter of the hereditary chromosomes. You will always be the creature surrounded by the certain nest. You will always be the one who had your particular

> grandparents, lived so many years in a certain special psychic atmosphere, and had a unique set of pressures to yield to and resist. Breeding, bringing up or being left to come up, and the composite interplay of family remains determinants of you. And usually you will cherish, even though you may regret; you will be glad of the fostering that was partly crippling, while you see how this trait got overdeveloped, that gnarl got fixed in your main trunk. Do what we may about it, to the family we belong. (26-27)

Here is where the richness of detail is most deeply engrained in our beings; the sights, sounds, smells are etched deeply into our hearts and minds, and we have only to run our finger across the indentations to release a flood of memories. Sometimes it seems no matter what I write about, it always comes down to family and my experience of family, both as a child and an adult. Goldberg writes, "We are products of the modern era--it is our richness and our dilemma. We are not one thing. Our roots are becoming harder to dig out. Yet they are important and the ones most easy to avoid because there is often pain embedded there--that's why we left in the first place" (145). But it is only by going back and making peace with ourselves, our past, and our heritage that we can reach beyond our own tradition to others. "In the ability to connect with one people lies the chance to feel compassion for all people.... You can penetrate quietly and clearly into your own people and from that begin to understand all people and their struggles"

(Goldberg 145).

Writing is also, at least for me, a spiritual experience. It helps me connect with my own spirit if nothing else. During troubled times, my writing often resembles a prayer, and, in fact, I have used it as a means of praying, reflecting on scriptures, sermons, life. It brings its own sense of peace and order in time. Writing provides a place of vulnerability where we can lay our souls bare and not feel the judgmental reactions of others. Goldberg puts it this way:

> While we are busy writing all the burning life we are eager to express should come out of a place of peace....Some place in us should know the utter simplicity of saying what we feel.... Not in anger, self-recrimination, or self-pity, but out of an acceptance of the truth of who we are. If we can hit that level in our writing, we can touch down on something that will keep us going as writers. And though we would rather be in the high hills of Tibet than at our desks in Newark, New Jersey, and though death is howling at our backs and life is roaring at our faces, we can just begin to write, simply begin to write what we have to say. (167-168)

Murray says, "Most of the time writing is a private act with a public result" (3), and eventually most people who write on a regular basis want to share some of the things they have written with others. Sometimes I can be convinced to hand over a journal to someone I really trust, but often it still feels too

vulnerable to give my writing, myself, in such a naked form. Usually I feel as if I have to dress myself, at least a little, before I let others see me. So my writing begins to take shape into poems, personal narratives, essays, and short stories. The raw material hammered out in my journals is bent and twisted into other forms. Sometimes I play with the same idea over and over again, molding it like a piece of literary clay into one genre, then another. The act of going public, even to a highly select audience, is always a bit risky for any writer, and sometimes I think the closer we are to the audience, the riskier it feels. Sharing my writing in a creative writing class with other student writers whom I most likely will never see again after the next three months is a little intimidating but not really threatening. Sharing a piece of writing that talks about how I experienced my father when I was a child *with my father* is much more frightening, but it is also freeing. It can build and heal relationships that have been distant or strained, and, just as easily, it can destroy them.

I always insist that my creative writing students share some of their work with the rest of the class. I don't make them share everything. They can choose what they want to share, but I think it's important for them to have a real audience and to experience the impact their words have on others. Murray writes, "There are many side benefits to writing. Writing allows you to discover that you have a voice, a way of speaking that is individual and effective. It allows you to share with others and even to influence others" (3). It is important at some point for writers to savor the effect their voice and their vision have on

others, no matter what the response is. Ueland wrote:

> At last I understood from William Blake and Van Gogh and other great men, and from myself--from the truth that is in me (and which I have at last learned to declare and stand up for, as I am trying to persuade you to stand up for *your* inner truth)--at last I understood that writing was this: an impulse to share with other people a feeling or truth that I myself had. Not to preach to them, but to give it to them if they cared to have it. If they did not, fine. They did not need to listen. That was all right too. (24)

One of the problems I encounter with my students as they shape and mold their writing is their quandary about what part of their writing is "true" and what part is fiction. I always ask my students if fiction writing is true. They aren't sure what to say to that. I ask them if every detail they record in their notebooks is absolute truth, and they can't answer that with certainty either. Joan Didion writes:

> So the point of keeping a notebook has never been, nor is it now, to have an accurate factual record of what I have been doing or thinking...Perhaps it never did snow that August in Vermont; perhaps there were never flurries in the night wind, and maybe no one else felt the ground hardening and summer already dead even as we tried to bask in it, but that was how it felt to me, and it might as well have snowed, could have snowed, did snow. *How*

> *it felt to me:* that is getting closer to the truth about a notebook. (47)

It also the truth about most personal writing and fiction. Cox says:

> You will not be afraid to make up as much of your story as you need to. And you will make sure that the part you make up rings as true as the recollected part. You will not let us know when you are inventing. It will still be your experience that supplies the elements. They will come from long ago and yesterday and though they never went together so before, you will make the whole inevitable. For, beneath your conscious thought, you will be matching all the time with your private pattern of the way things are. Your imagination will be using only what you know. And you will discover that you know a lot more that you didn't know you knew. (43)

So while I have never found myself in the exact circumstances of Marci in my short story "Being Practical," I know her feelings and frustrations and hopes. I have lived them. My brothers may argue with me about the chronology of events in my personal narrative "The Day the House Stopped Talking," but they recognize the feeling of our childhood home and its impact on our lives. Truth becomes a relative, somewhat subjective, quantity in such situations. I tell my students to write the deeper truth of their lives or their experience and to let such insignificant details as names and events change as they need to change them. I

try to follow that advice myself. Even completely non-biographical writing will contain its own truths, based on our own perceptions of the world around us.

I have enclosed here a variety of my more "public" writings, including short stories, personal essays, personal narratives and some poetry. I use the word "public" to distinguish between these pieces and my journal writing, which I consider my more private stock. I believe all of them deal with the issues of family and belonging in some way. They have been written over the past few years and shared with small groups of people, but none of them have ever been submitted anywhere for publication. Sometimes my friends encourage me to try that, but to this point it has not seemed important enough to pursue (or perhaps I haven't wanted to risk the inevitable rejection). They were never written with the idea of being published. Ueland writes:

> I want to assure you with all earnestness, that *no* writing is a waste of time--no creative work where the feelings, the imagination, the intelligence must work. With every sentence you write, you have learned something. It has done you good. It has stretched your understanding. I know that. Even if I knew for certain that I would never have anything published again, and would never make another cent from it, I would still keep on writing. (15-16)

All I can add to that is amen.

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# SHORT STORIES

## BEING PRACTICAL

It always happened right at dusk, just as the coral fire of the sun faded into pinks and purples, little wisps of glory lingering in the clouds. Sometimes it was in the garden with the fragrance of lilacs floating in the air; sometimes in the park near her girlhood home, on the little vine-covered bridge that crossed over the creek; or sometimes in a magical place she couldn't quite recall. But always she wore that yellow sundress. The one she had worn when she went to kiss Stephen good-bye. The one with the tiny spaghetti straps and the fitted bodice and the skirt that floated around her legs when she walked. Her long, blond hair cascaded around her shoulders, and her face was bright with color from the sun. Looking 17 again and feeling 17 again, she walked towards him, innocent and trusting in a way that had long since vanished. Those eyes she had never been able to avoid brightened, and that smile that had haunted her for so long broke across his face. He would tell how good it was to see her or how much he had missed her or how often he had thought about her, and her heart, full of first love, would pound as if it would break. Sometimes they would talk about how their lives had been. At other times, they would just look into each other's eyes, and she would feel idealistic and hopeful again, just as she had been when she was 17.

Marci woke with a start and rolled away from John's arm draped limply around her side. She stared at the clock. It glowed 3:36. She felt clammy and slightly sick to her stomach, but she dreaded the thought of getting up, hated to

chance waking John. She didn't want to talk right now, as they so often did in the middle of the night when one of them couldn't sleep. He would roll over and ask, "Something wrong, babe?" and what could she reply?

She poked the pillow, struggled with the covers, trying to get comfortable, but the air hung still around her. The quiet of the house irritated her already unsettled mood. She longed for the noise and emotional distractions that normally filled her life. Silently, she slid one leg to the floor, rolled over on her stomach and slid out the other leg, letting her knees come down gently on the carpet. Then slowly--very slowly--she lifted her body away from the bed, so the mattress wouldn't move, and the springs wouldn't squeak. She had learned this trick when Brian, their oldest child, was two and insisted she lay by him at night while he fell asleep. It had been the only way she could get out of his room without waking him up. It still worked; John only shifted slightly and continued sleeping.

Marci crept across the bedroom carpet to the bathroom, with its marble jacuzzi and polished brass fixtures, sat down on the toilet and began to shed silent tears. Marci didn't know why she was crying; and she didn't know why, after 20 years, she still dreamed of Stephen.

She cried silently in the dark, not wanting to disturb John or the children until the first streaks of morning began to filter through the bathroom curtains. Then she sneaked back to bed, slid under the covers and waited for the alarm to go off. John stretched in response to her presence, pulled her close to him and kissed the back of her neck.

"Morning, babe. How'd you sleep?"

Marci turned to him, cuddling her head to his chest. "Okay, I guess, but I think I need a hug."

She held him tightly. (But last night she had dreamed of Stephen.)

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, really. I'm fine. Just a little tired today, that's all."

Marci kissed John's chest and got up, pulling on her robe. John grabbed for her hand., looking at her questioningly.

"You sure you're okay, hon? You act like something's wrong."

Marci could see the look of concern on John's face, but it only irritated her even more. She snapped at him curtly, "Really, John, I'm fine. All right?"

God, how she both loved and hated John's uncanny ability to sense her feelings. She could never hide from him, and today that irritated her beyond belief. (But last night she had dreamed of Stephen.)

She put on her slippers and hurried down to the kitchen to take part in the morning ritual of preparing breakfasts and lunches. Brian dashed in, grabbed his lunch and headed for the door without saying a word.

Marci grabbed his sleeve. "Hey, did you have any breakfast yet?"

Brian pulled his arm free and sighed. "Mom, I'm old enough to decide when and what to eat."

Oh, boy, here we go again, Marci thought. "I know you are, Brian. You don't have to be so defensive. I only asked a simple question."

"It's just that I'm not a baby any more, Mom, and you keep trying to treat me like I am."

Brian grabbed his books and opened the door, balancing the pile of supplies on his hip. "By the way, I'm staying late to put the school paper to bed. I don't know when I'll be home."

"Do you think you'll be home for dinner?"

"MOM!" Brian glared and stomped out the door.

Every conversation--if that was what you called what had just happened--with Brian ended in conflict lately. Marci watched him out the window, trying to conjure up the feelings of maternal tenderness that she had always had for him, but today it was hard to imagine that this defiant, young man, dressed in cast-offs from the Salvation Army and with his hair buzzed in stripes around his head, was really her treasured first-born. (But last night she had dreamed of Stephen.)

Just then, Danny charged down the steps with the twins in hot pursuit.

"Mom, he took something from our room!" shrieked Abigail.

"And we want it back NOW!" yelled Amanda. "Make him give it back!"

Danny held his hands behind his back, looking firm in his five-year-old resolve not to give in. "But, Mommy, Mandy called me 'baby' and looked at me funny, and Abby scratched me. Twice! In the same spot!" He offered up his elbow as evidence, careful not to remove his hand from behind his back. A little gouge at the tip of his elbow was bleeding slightly. (But last night she had dreamed of Stephen.) Marci felt tired again. These were the kinds of things that

no one ever told you before you had kids. No one dared, she thought, and I probably wouldn't have listened anyway. She sighed.

"Okay, girls. You know Danny doesn't like to be called a baby. And, Abby, the scratching stuff has to stop. If you want to be allowed to grow your fingernails long, then you may not use them as weapons. Okay? Now, what did Danny take that belongs to you?"

"We're not sure, Mom," spoke Amanda. "I just saw him grab something and run."

"Danny, you know you can't take other people's things without permission. Give it back to the girls."

"No," Danny replied firmly, with his hand still tight behind his back.

"Danny, I mean it." Marci's voice began to rise.

"No. They didn't say 'sorry'."

John's voice came booming down the stairs. "Danny, listen to your mother. Mandy and Abby, settle down and stop teasing. Does this place have to sound like a madhouse every morning?"

"Sorry," offered Amanda, but Abigail stood silent.

"Here," said Danny, pushing out a ragged piece of wrinkled hair ribbon.

Marci looked in amazement. "All this fuss over a piece of shredded hair ribbon?"

The three shrugged their shoulders as the frazzled ribbon fell to the floor, then they ran back upstairs to finish getting ready for school. (But last night she

had dreamed of Stephen.) John came down the steps just as Marci was waving good-bye to the kids as they got into the neighbors' minivan for carpool.

"Everybody off?" he asked as he cuddled up to Marci.

"Yeah, it's just you and me." She turned towards him smiling, anxious to put away the images and restlessness from the night before. "I was thinking we could have some breakfast out on the deck. It's such a beautiful morning. Don't know how many more we'll get before winter sets in." She looked at him, in that questioning, half pleading way she had when she was trying to convince him to do something. She could tell by the look on his face that the prospects weren't good. (But last night she had dreamed of Stephen.)

"It sounds great, Marci, but I have an early appointment with a client." He gave her a hug. "What's on your agenda today?"

"Oh, come on, Johnny, I'm not giving up that easily." She began to tickle him flirtingly. "Come on, stay for just a little while." She winked playfully. "I'll make it worth your time. I could even call in sick, and we could spend the whole morning doing something wild and foolish," She raised her eyebrows playfully. "What do you say?"

John gave her a kiss on the tip of her nose. "Sounds tempting, hon, but I'll have to take a raincheck. I can't just call in late with a client waiting. We've got to be practical."

Marci pulled away. "Damn being practical. John, I'm fed up with always doing what's practical and expected. We ALWAYS do just exactly what we're

supposed to do. When do we get to do what we WANT to do, not just what's expected?"

John took her in his arms. "You're just having a bad day, babe. You know I'd like to just blow off everything and spend the day with you, but I can't today. I have clients."

"What would your clients do if you were sick or had a family emergency?" Marci looked at him directly, all kidding aside. "They'd somehow survive for a day without you, wouldn't they?"

"But I'm not sick, Marci, and this isn't a family emergency. It's you wanting to take off on a fling." His voice had an angry edge to it, but he got control and stroked Marci's hair gently. "Let's plan a day in a couple weeks when we both just take off and spend the whole day together, doing whatever you want. Okay?"

"Sure," Marci agreed, but she knew planning a day away was much harder than John realized. Everyone's schedules would have to be considered, and she knew somehow a conflict would come up somewhere. She tried to hide her disappointment as she walked John to the door. (But last night she had dreamed of Stephen.)

"So what ARE your plans for the day now that your fuddy-duddy old husband won't take off and play?"

"Just the usual routine of my ever-exciting life--work this morning, pick up Danny, hit the grocery and bank, and throw in a few loads of laundry before

fixing dinner." She forced a smile. "If I'm a real good girl, I may even get to go to McDonald's with Danny for lunch."

"Oh, lunch with another man," he kidded, trying to lift her mood. Then he looked into her eyes. "Don't go getting mopey on me now. See you tonight, babe. I love you."

Marci clung to him a little longer than usual. "I love you, too." (But last night she had dreamed of Stephen.)

John squeezed her gently and gave her one last kiss on the cheek, and then he was gone. Marci fixed herself a cup of tea and carried it out onto the deck. The first hint of fall was in the air, crisp and cool, and she thought back to an October long ago when she and John had skipped their college classes and gone for a picnic in the woods. They had lain on a soft quilt with the sun filtering through the trees and had talked about their dreams and their plans for the future in between kisses. It was the first time she had really known that John loved her. He had been willing to break a few rules for her, and that was not something he did easily. She smiled. She had fallen in love with John because he was so practical, so confident, so sure of himself and where he was headed. Everything with John felt so secure, so safe and predictable. (But last night she had dreamed of Stephen.) Why now did that drive her so crazy?

Marci sat staring off into the trees, stirring the remains of her tea as though it were a bowl of thick porridge. A tear slowly rolled down her cheek. What was wrong with her? She had gotten everything she thought she had

wanted in her life, a loving husband, four lively children, a beautiful home, but it just wasn't enough. What more could she want? And why was she dreaming about Stephen again lately?

Back when she and John had first gotten married and were having normal adjustment problems, she had thought often of Stephen, had even daydreamed about meeting him. But she had long ago given up driving past his parents' house, hoping he'd be there. She deliberately had stopped asking her friends if they had heard from him or what he was doing. Once when Brian was playing little league ball, she had seen a boy with JACKSON on his shirt, and she had watched the boy closely to see if he resembled Stephen. He did, indeed, have a similar smile and way of walking. She had searched the stands carefully hoping that Stephen would be there, not sure how she would respond if he were, but she hadn't seen anyone that even vaguely resembled him. Now she rarely thought of him consciously except when one of their old songs played on the radio or for a few days after one of these crazy dreams.

Marci took her cup to the sink. She remembered a poem she had written about Stephen, late one night last summer when she couldn't sleep. She had gone for a drive by herself, and the car radio had been broken. The silence had made her reminisce all the more, and when she had gotten home she had sat down and written a poem. She wondered where she had hidden it. She didn't want to throw it away. It had expressed so much of her anguish at the time, but she had wanted to put it somewhere John wouldn't find it. She knew he would be hurt

if he read it, even though she didn't think it said anything that SHOULD hurt him. (But last night she had dreamed of Stephen.) Where had she put it?

Marci went up to her room and began to rummage through her drawers. Where? Where? At last she discovered the carefully folded paper beneath her stationery in the antique secretary that had belonged to her grandmother. She knew John would never look there because he hated to write letters of any kind to anybody. She unfolded the paper carefully as she walked over to her favorite overstuffed rocker and sat down. She began to read:

"Thoughts While Driving with the Radio Broken"

Sometimes I welcome this silence
It wraps its arms around me
caresses me with its peace
Tonight I fight against it
The silence hurts my ears
I long for the company of noise
I try to sing to myself
but I can't remember the words
and the notes sound flat and hollow

Suddenly
I wonder
in the stillness of the silence
where you are
and if life has been kind to you
I can never wear yellow
without thinking of you
and the yellow sundress I wore
to come and kiss you good-bye

You said you were afraid
I wouldn't make it on time
You said you stood there
your face pushed up against the glass
watching
You said your stopped beating

when you finally saw me
walking up the street
My face tanned with the sun
my dress bright with color
my heart full of first love
You kissed me and we pledged
a bond
too deep
too strong
too forever
For seventeen-year-old hearts to fathom

Twenty-one summers have passed
since that day
My heart is overflowing full
with other loves
rich in color
varied in hue
But still
sometimes
in uneasy silence
I think of a yellow sundress and you

Marci sat very still for a moment, then carefully folded the poem and tucked it into the pocket of her robe. She wondered what her life would have been like if Stephen's father had not been transferred away for those three years. Their relationship had just started to blossom when Mr. Jackson was transferred to California. Being young and idealistic, Marci and Stephen had promised to write and to wait for each other. But three years was a long time, and there were proms and fraternity parties and college. And then, of course, she had met John. By the time Stephen had returned to St. Louis, Marci and John were engaged. She had seen him a couple of times, but it had always been rather awkward. She had heard that he married not long after she and John did.

Marci looked at her watch and realized she would have to rush if she were

going to make it to her job at the preschool on time. It wasn't a job she loved, but the kids were cute, and it still allowed her to spend her afternoons with Danny. Maybe next year when Danny was in first grade, she'd look for something she really wanted to do. She laughed sarcastically at herself. Maybe I'll decide what I'd like to be when I grow up some time before I'm 40, but I better get moving. I don't have too long left.

Marci was finishing up her makeup when she began to stare intently at the image in the mirror. Where did those lines around her eyes come from? And the beginning of that double chin? Sometimes she felt as if she were still 18, but long ago that long blond hair that had bounced when she walked had been cut short and permed into a generic cut for women in their late thirties. She no longer wore those sexy little dresses that accented her bust or showed off her shoulders and four-inch heels and silk stockings. Instead she had on a sensible red blouse and a khaki skirt with an elastic waist and tan loafers with support hose. She glared at the image in the mirror. (But last night she had dreamed of Stephen.) She took the poem from the pocket of her robe, stuck it into the private compartment of her purse, and hurried out the door for work.

At 12:30, Marci picked up Danny from school, and, as she had expected, he wanted to go to McDonald's for lunch. She hated McDonald's, but it was Danny's favorite spot, right ahead of the frozen yogurt place. She knew she wouldn't have many more days like this to spend just with Danny. All too soon he would be a teenager, and this gentle camaraderie would come to a shrieking

halt.

Marci remembered Brian at Danny's age. At the time she thought he would never grow up, and she often had wished he would move on to the next stage. But it had happened all too fast. Nothing about life with Brian had ever seemed easy, as it so often did now with Danny. Once at three years of age, Brian had insisted she play Cinderella to his Prince Charming. He had refused to answer to anything but "Prince" all day. Marci had made him a construction paper crown and fixed a special lunch for the ball, and they had danced in the kitchen until time for dinner. But even that had not been enough for Brian. He had torn up his crown when Marci said she had to stop playing, angry that the fantasy had to end over something as dumb as dinner. As he stomped tearfully down the hall, Marci had thought she would never get the job of mother right no matter how hard she tried. Maybe Danny was her last chance, but Marci had the feeling that, try as she might, it would never be enough. Life had its own way of taking shifts and turns that she could never quite predict or control. (But last night she had dreamed of Stephen.) Marci squeezed Danny's hand as they walked into McDonald's.

"Can I play on the playground after we eat, Mommy?" Danny asked eagerly.

"Sure, for a little while," she agreed as she mentally ticked off how many minutes she could spare without throwing her whole schedule out of whack. The lines were unusually long, and Danny was getting antsy, dancing around her legs,

hanging on to her skirt.

Suddenly she heard a vaguely familiar voice. "Marci, is that really you?"

Her heart began to race; that was Stephen's voice. Oh God, she thought to herself, no, not here in McDonald's, with my sensible red blouse and support hose and Danny twisting my skirt around. This isn't how it's supposed to happen. Maybe I'll just pretend I didn't hear him, she thought, as she stared straight ahead.

But Danny had heard him. "Mommy, that man is talking to you. Aren't you gonna answer him?"

Marci blushed and turned to look. She scanned the line next to hers, and at last her eyes met a pair of twinkling green eyes in the middle of a pudgy, balding face. And then she saw the smile and she knew--it had to be Stephen. She was almost shocked, but at the same time she felt a flood of relief.

"Stephen, I can't believe it. How are you?" Her mind tried to reconcile the man she saw before her with the young man she had held so long in her dreams. She hoped her surprise didn't show.

"I'm doing okay, I guess. Are you here alone?" He looked at Danny, peeking from behind Marci's skirt. "I mean, except for the little guy. Maybe we could eat together and catch up on old times."

"Sure, that will be fine. Won't it, Danny? Honey, this is Stephen Jackson, an old friend of Mommy's. Stephen, this is my youngest son, Danny."

His green eyes looked at Danny tenderly, and then back to Marci. "I'd

heard you had another one, but I can't believe he's this big. Your oldest one must be in high school by now, and didn't you have twins along the way?"

"Twin girls--Abigail and Amanda--they'll be 12 soon. Brian's 16 and thinks he's 21." She was amazed at how much he knew about her life when she knew so few facts about his.

"Well, you always wanted a big family." He looked at her in a way that made her feel a little awkward. She fidgeted with her purse.

"Ma'am, ma'am," repeated the girl behind the counter, "may I take your order now? Sorry you had to wait so long."

Marci turned away from Stephen and gave her order. Then she glanced back at Stephen and said casually, "Danny wants to eat outside. We'll meet you out there."

The sun beat down on the concrete tables outside, but Marci tried to find one with at least some semblance of shade. She felt confused and skittish as she sat waiting for Stephen to join them. More than once she thought about taking Danny's hand and heading for the car. Danny ate a few bites of his burger, a few fries and ran off to play, sensing somehow that today he could get off without finishing. Marci didn't say a word; in fact, she hardly noticed. She was too busy trying to understand the coincidence of running into Stephen, today of all days, and how much he had changed.

Stephen walked towards her, carrying his tray. She could see remnants of his old self, in his walk and his general bearing, but she had to smile at his

paunchy stomach and balding head. And she had been worried about how she looked. Misery loves company, I guess, she told her self.

Stephen smiled at Marci awkwardly as he walked towards her. She thought he looked almost as nervous as she felt. Just as Stephen was sliding onto the bench next to her, his tray wobbled and his coke came splashing down, all over Marci's skirt and shoes.

"Oh, geez, Marci, I'm so sorry," Stephen apologized. "God, I'm such a klutz. I haven't seen you for almost 20 years and the first thing I do is drop a soda on you." He began fumbling for napkins, dabbing at Marci's shoes and skirt awkwardly, and Marci just started to laugh. She tried not to; after all, she didn't want to make him feel any worse than he already did, but she just couldn't control herself.

It began as a little giggle in between words, as she tried to say, "Don't worry about it; everything's washable," but it kept growing into a full-bodied, side-splitting laugh. She almost had gotten control of herself when Danny walked over and said innocently, "What happened to you, Mommy? You're all wet." And the laughter came bellowing out all over again.

Stephen just sat there apologizing repeatedly and looking quite chagrin. Several of the other patrons were staring, but Marci just couldn't help it. How utterly like her life. She finally meets the old love she's been dreaming about on and off for 20 years, and he turns out to be a chubby and balding and spills coke all over her. It was the funniest thing she could ever imagine happening.

Danny stood next to her, grinning and puzzled. "Mommy, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, honey, " she giggled. "Just give me a minute. I'll be right back."

She excused herself and went into the bathroom, where she locked the door and laughed until tears were streaming down her face. Finally she splashed cool water on her face and tried to settle down. Oh God, she thought, poor Stephen. I must have made him feel like such a fool.

She walked back out to the playground area. Danny was waiting, but Stephen was nowhere to be seen. Oh God, now what have I done? she wondered. Danny walked up and took her hand. "You okay, Mommy?"

"I'm fine, Danny. Do you know where Mr. Jackson went? I wanted to apologize for being so rude." She scanned the inside restaurant to see if she could see Stephen anywhere.

"He said he had to leave and that he was really sorry, Mommy. And he said to give you this note."

Marci sighed and sat down on the sun-warmed bench. She opened the note written on the back of a bill envelope:

"Marci, I have often thought fondly of the time we shared so long ago. I almost called you after my wife died two years ago, but I thought you might misunderstand what I had to say or think I was trying to cause trouble between you and your husband. I wasn't even sure you would remember me after all this

time, and now you'll always think of me as a klutz. I think, now, that I really wanted to return to a simpler time when life didn't seem so complicated and painful, a time you will always represent. I'm sorry if I embarrassed you today. Love, Stephen"

A tear began to roll slowly down Marci's cheek. I feel so bad, she thought. And then she remembered the poem. As soon as she got home she would send the poem to Stephen, to let him know that she too had often felt the same way.

Marci sighed. She didn't know how she had ever gotten to this point. It was never anything anyone had said or done explicitly that had made her feel as if she had to live her life by everyone else's rules. Maybe the flaw lay within herself, an inherent compulsion to do whatever she thought everyone else expected her to do. Keep everything nice and everybody happy. Don't rock the boat. Think of everyone else first. What was she afraid of? And what would she do if she weren't so afraid? She had always regretted dropping out of college when she and John married, after only two years of college, but her mother thought it wasn't proper for a wife to be going to school instead of starting a family. Her mind began to reel with the thoughts of what she might do, if she ever got enough guts to just try. She knew John might balk at a change in schedule--so might the kids--and she hated the thought of putting everybody else out for something she wanted to do. It seemed so selfish. She brushed a tear away and shook her head. Get a grip, Marci, she told herself,

this is all foolishness, brought on by a stupid spilled soda.

Marci looked up to find Danny staring at her, sitting amazingly still. Finally, a smile came across his face.

"Hey, Mommy, I know something to cheer you up. Come with me." Danny took Marci by the hand and led her to the back of the tallest slide on the playground, the one with the corkscrew twists and a tunnel. "Come on up, Mommy! It's a whole lot of fun, and I know it will make you feel better."

Marci pulled away from him. "Oh, no, Danny, I couldn't. What will everyone think? It's just not something mommies are supposed to do, at least not mommies my age."

But Danny grabbed her hand again. "Come on, Mommy. I know you'll like it. It's so much fun, especially if you hold your hands up as you come out of the tunnel and yell really loud."

Marci stood there for minute. Everything in her said she shouldn't do it, that it was foolish and silly. (But last night she had dreamed of Stephen and of something more.) She looked at the soda stain that covered her skirt. Then she carefully placed her practical tan loafers on the first rung of the ladder and climbed up to the top. She felt the smooth, slick steel beneath her as she sat down behind Danny, her legs cuddling his body as her sensible khaki skirt scooted up to mid-thigh. She hadn't done anything like this since Brian was a baby.

"Are you ready for the fun, Mommy?" Danny whispered excitedly.

"You bet I'm ready for the fun," she replied as they pushed off. When they came out of the tunnel, she felt the warmth of the October sun on her face. She raised her arms high and let out a yell, her voice mingling with Danny's in a triumphant shout of joy. When they reached the bottom, she kicked off her shoes, and wiggled her pantihosed feet in the sand around the slide. Finally she took Danny's hand, smiling at him happily, "Guess it's time we move on, partner."

"Yeah, time to move on," Danny echoed.

And, hand in hand, they headed for home.

## VIOLET MEMORIES

"Mrs. Barnes, it's time for your medication."

Matilda pushed the sound away, the way you brush away the annoyance of a fly buzzing around your head.

"Mrs. Barnes."

She did not want to be bothered. She was busy playing with Henry when he was a baby. She bounced him high in the air, and the fullness of his face spilled out gurgles and coos all over her face. She rocked him steadily and could feel the weight of his head on her arm, snuggled against her breast. She caught a glimpse of his smiles as he turned into a toddler, then a man.

"Mrs. Barnes!"

Matilda gave up and opened her eyes.

"Hello, miss." Matilda gave her a toothless grin. She didn't recognize Lucille Williams, the nurse who took care of her nearly every day.

"It's time for your medication." Lucille held out two capsules.

"Oh, no, honey. I can't take these." Matilda pushed Lucille's hand away.

"These are the same pills you take every day," Lucille sighed, sick of repeating the same information three or four times before getting a response. "They're your heart medication and your vitamin. Now, please Mrs. Barnes, take them for me. I have other patients to attend to."

Matilda Barnes, 91 years old, had been a resident at Villa Coeur Nursing

Home for the last four years, ever since she had broken her hip in a fall. She was one of the lucky ones who could afford a nice nursing home, but no one would have suspected that Matilda was a wealthy woman. In fact, Matilda no longer even realized this fact herself. Whether or not she had money made very little difference in the way she lived her life. She no longer had any real possessions , except for her favorite rocker, a few old knickknacks lining her windowsill, and a small porcelain pot of artificial violets on her dresser. Her room was nearly the exact replica of every other room at Villa Coeur. The same smell--a combination of urine and strong disinfectant--seemed to permeate every room. And in every room, one could hear the repetitious mumbling of some of the residents who repeated their stories, or more often their outbursts, like an endless litany of the saints.

Matilda did have one thing in her room that no one else in the home had. She had Leona, who never seemed to stop talking. Often throughout the day, sometimes several times an hour, she yelled out in a loud voice, "Help me! please help me! Somebody help me to find salvation! How will I ever find salvation? Tell me, where can I find the state of grace?" Leona's raving had made her the bane of the administrator's existence. No one wanted to share a room with Leona. None of the nurses wanted to feed her because she wouldn't stop talking long enough to get a bite of food in, and when she did, she often would spit it right on the floor. No one wanted Leona for a roommate either, and so after moving her from one room to another, Leona had recently landed in with

Matilda. And for the first time, no one was complaining. To tell you the truth, Matilda scarcely even noticed Leona was there.

Matilda rocked near the open window, gazing longingly at the house on the hill in the distance. Annie, the nurse's aide came in.

"How you doin' today, Matilda? You ready to go outside for some fresh air?"

Matilda smiled. She always liked it when Annie came in. Once she even thought Annie was her daughter, even though Annie was black. She wasn't just sure how she had come to have a black daughter; in fact, she wasn't certain she had ever had a daughter of any color, but she didn't care. If she had a daughter, she would wish her to be like Annie.

Annie untied Matilda from her rocker, helped her to the wheelchair and secured the belt around her.

"I don't like to be tied in," Matilda protested.

"I know you don't, Matilda, but you know Nurse Williams will be after me if I don't. Besides, I don't want you to go and hurt yourself again."

Matilda had refused to use the walker to get around when she first came to the home. She knew she could walk on her own, even after she had fallen several times. Finally the staff decided she would have to be restrained for her own protection. At first, Matilda would wheel the chair from one patient to another until she found someone whose fingers could still undo the restraints and set her free. But Nurse Williams had always scolded her so when she did it and

had reprimanded her accomplices as well, that Matilda no longer tried to get loose, even though the restraints irritated and humiliated her.

Annie smiled as she finished tucking Matilda into her chair. "You sure are lookin' pretty today."

Matilda giggled like a school girl. Yesterday the beautician had cut and permed her grayish-white hair. She was wearing a pink gingham duster that zipped up the front and pink fuzzy slippers. She liked pink.

"Charles and I live on that house on the hill," said Matilda, still staring out the window. "And there are African violets in every room."

Annie patted her arm as she began to push Matilda's chair to the sun porch, passing the rows of blank faces. Sophie, in the room next door held tightly to a baby doll, crooning softly. Henry, three doors away, tapped incessantly on the wall. Annie nodded to them as she walked by, but they didn't notice. Neither did Matilda.

"It sure is a pretty place, Matilda. You're lucky to have such a fine place. Say, did you remember that it's your turn to help cook next week? We're going to bake apple pies."

"I don't know how," Matilda complained.

Annie smiled at her. "Don't worry. I'll be there to help you. We'll remember together."

Matilda lost track of Annie's voice. She was in the kitchen at her old country home, cooking Thanksgiving dinner--the smell of the turkey turning

golden brown filled the air. She carefully prepared the German potato dumplings, the big round ones with little cubes of toasted bread in the center, and she made apple crumb pies with crusts so tender and flaky they practically melted in your mouth. Then she was out in the garden, the early morning sun warming her back and arms as she pruned and picked. She could smell the strawberries and cantaloupes, see the tall poles of green beans and the ripe, red tomatoes, feel the soft, moist dirt in her fingers. She stayed in her garden a long time.

"Mom." Someone was touching her arm.

The touch disturbed her. Delores, her daughter-in-law, stood next to her chair. In the background, Leona was beginning her rocking ritual, swaying wildly in her chair. She began to yell repeatedly, "Help me! Please, help me! Won't someone help me find salvation? Please get me to the state of grace."

Delores turned towards Leona. "Do you need some help? Do you want me to get you a nurse?"

Leona just ignored Delores and kept repeating her chant. Delores walked out into the hall and spoke with the nurse. "Is that woman in Mom's room okay? She seems awfully agitated."

The nurse shrugged. "That's just Leona. Try to ignore her. She's okay."

Delores walked back into the room. Matilda had inched her chair closer to Leona and was patting Leona's hand. Both women smiled as Leona rocked and chanted, and Matilda patted.

Delores rolled Matilda to the other side of the room. "How are you today, Mom?"

Try as she might. Matilda could not place this woman. She didn't remember having a daughter, or did she? She couldn't be sure, but this woman had a kind face so Matilda grinned at her.

"I'm fine."

Delores talked to her about the grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Matilda listened politely to all the names that sounded vaguely familiar. She wondered when Charles was coming to see her, forgetting that he had been dead for seven years already.

Delores had brought some handwork to do. A variety of animal shapes were spread across the top of Matilda's bed. "See, Mom, I've sewn all these together, and all you need to do is stuff them with these shredded pantihose."

Matilda picked up a dog shape and began stuffing it, just as Delores had shown her. The little animals were cute and reminded her of her little dog Bootsie. Delores thought the work would be good therapy for Matilda and help her to pass the time. When they were finished, even if Matilda didn't want them, they would make nice gifts for the children who came to visit Matilda whose names she could not quite recall. At one time, Matilda's fingers had crocheted beautiful doilies in patterns so delicate that they looked like imported lace, but her fingers were so knobby and stiff she could no longer hold a crochet needle.

Matilda's hands kept stuffing the little animals full of pantihose, but the

whole time she was standing with Charles in the parlor of the priest's house. The crocheted edge on her glove was shaking. She was not Catholic and so could not marry Charles inside the big church. They stood instead in the priest's parlor, ready to commit their lives to one another. Charles was wearing his army uniform and looked dashing. In two weeks, he would leave for France. He looked at her with soft, warm eyes, and the crocheted edge of her glove shook, the violets Charles had brought her trembling in her hand.

In the afternoon, Matilda fell asleep. When she woke, she wasn't sure where she was. She felt frightened and alone, and she began to cry. She cried for her mother, and her mother came to her and held her close. She took Matilda's hand, and they walked to the side of the ship that was bringing them to America. Everywhere Matilda looked was sea and sky. Everything was blue and vast. She was eight years old, and she longed to see her father, who was waiting for them in St. Louis. Then her father lifted her to his shoulders, carrying her through the crowds at the World's Fair. The colors and smells excited her, and she savored for the first time the taste of ice cream in a funnel made from a waffle.

Matilda looked around her room. She couldn't quite place where she was, but she felt calmer. Leona was crying once again for salvation, and Matilda wheeled over next to her and began patting her hand. Leona seemed to like it. A man with a dark suit passed her door, and Matilda smiled at him. Perhaps that is my son, she thought, but she couldn't be sure. She wheeled her chair to the

door and peered down the hall. The man was just walking into someone else's room. "Henry?" Matilda yelled after him, but the man did not return.

Matilda returned to her spot near the window, arranging her chair so she could see the house on the hill, the house that belonged to her and Charles. Looking at it made her feel good. They had such a happy life there.

Later in the day, her son Henry talked to Nurse Williams out in the hall.

"Delores was here earlier, and she was certain Mom didn't recognize her at all. But she was quite upset about the raucous Mom's new roommate was making. She was afraid that the woman's carrying on was agitating Mom."

"Leona's not harmful, Mr. Barnes, and to be honest your mother seems to be tolerating her better than most of the other residents do. They seem to be good for each other, but we'll observe them closely, and if there really is a problem we can move Leona again."

In the room, Charles had come. Matilda and Charles waltzed in the moonlight. He held her close, and the wind blew her long, dark hair as they whirled beneath the stars. Charles looked lovingly into her face, and the smell of violets filled the air. Leona was begging for salvation, and her head rested on Matilda's arm where Matilda patted it gently.

## A MODERN PARABLE--
## THE HEART OF GOD

"Through Him with Him and in Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is Yours, Almighty Father, forever and ever."

Father Frank Forbes chanted the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, and the small choir and congregation sang out the Great Amen.

Three rows back from the altar, in the little mission church of the Sacred Heart, Joshua Adam Phillips waited. His wife, Sarah, blonde and petite, sat at his side. His two children, Zachary and Elizabeth, flanked them. He was 46 years old, and he had been waiting for a long time. He hoped the time was near.

Every Sunday, Joshua came to Mass. He had never missed, not even if he had been sick or up all night with a needy patient. And every Sunday, Joshua prayed for a miracle. He longed to be on fire once again with the flame of God's spirit. He desired only to know and share in the heart of God. So far, nothing miraculous had happened, but every Sunday, Joshua prayed and waited.

Joshua remembered when he had been an altar boy, back when the Mass was still in Latin. He used to stand near the altar, enthralled by the mystical sounds, enchanted by every action the priest so reverently performed, and as the incense rose, so did his heart. He had longed to be like Jesus then, had felt the fire of holy passion coursing in his veins. To receive the Eucharist had nearly moved him to tears. He had often gazed at the picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, transfixed by the flame burning in that heart. Joshua yearned to possess the intense mysteries he knew that heart must contain.

But somewhere--around the onset of puberty--all the spiritual fire had died down and cooled to only faint embers, little sparks that occasionally burned his soul, but only for an instant. At first, Joshua had not missed the fire; he was, after all, consumed with passions of a more earthly variety, but after a few years, he had longed for that old fire to burn in him again. He wanted to feel that conviction of faith. He began to yearn again to know the heart of God.

Joshua was not sure how to regain the fervor he had lost. Because he was a young man and full of other longings as well, Joshua believed he might find his way back to God through human love. He knew God was love, so he thought that if he loved someone else totally, he would surely come to know the heart of God.

About this time he met Sarah in his English literature class. She was blonde and daintily beautiful, but her tiny frame hid an inner strength that attracted Joshua to her. As they discussed the poetry and novels they were reading, they naturally fell into discussions about God and the meaning of life. Joshua eventually trusted Sarah enough to tell her of his desire to know and feel the heart of God. Sarah was so overwhelmed with the beauty of this longing that she could only look into Joshua's face with tears in her eyes. She vowed to do anything she could to help him fulfill his quest. From that moment on, Joshua and Sarah loved each other deeply.

They married, and their days were spent working and studying together. Their nights were spent in happy exploration of one another. Joy blossomed

between them, and Joshua felt closer to God than he had in many years. But, eventually, he had to admit to himself that it was not enough. As much as he loved Sarah and she loved him, he still ached to know the heart of God more fully.

In his confusion, Joshua thought perhaps by using his talents to the best of his ability, he would grow closer to God. After all, God had given him these talents. Surely using them would please God. So Joshua set out to make the most of himself, and Sarah devotedly supported him. Joshua decided to become a doctor, and he poured himself into his studies. He and Sarah willingly sacrificed every luxury to pay for medical school. Finally, Joshua graduated at the top of his class. Two weeks after graduation, he became a father. Joshua was ecstatic. He knew this must be the answer he was looking for, and the birth of Zachary was a confirmation.

Joshua became an outstanding doctor, known for his compassion and expertise. His life continued to prosper. His love for Sarah was warm and steady. Zachary was the source of joy and amusement and was joined two years later by Elizabeth, who won her daddy's heart. After so many years of sacrificing, Joshua was pleased to give his family a beautiful new house. He liked providing his children with both time and treasure. He settled into a comfortable life. But the restless yearning for the heart of God would not let Joshua rest.

When the Phillips family walked into St. Alban's, Joshua was proud of his

family. Everyone knew and respected them. He and Sarah were deeply involved in the parish--helping with socials, working on the liturgy, leading adult education programs, raising money for the needy. Joshua hoped that this would be enough, but his hope was in vain. The old longing returned, making Joshua restless and uneasy. He would sometimes go into the side altar of the church and kneel before the picture of the Sacred Heart, gazing at the flame in Jesus' heart. He knew he would never rest until he shared in the love of that heart.

One evening after attending a class on social justice with Sarah, Joshua told her once again of this restlessness. Sarah smiled at him tenderly, aware of his goodness and touched by his faith. She told him she would stand beside him however he chose to pursue his dream. Joshua explained that he feared all their material wealth was a hindrance, that perhaps their lifestyles should be simpler, their lives more of service to the poor. Sarah looked wistfully at their home, then looked back into Joshua's eyes. She saw his vision there and was ready to walk away from everything to help him in his quest.

So Joshua and Sarah sold their home, took their children out of private schools and moved to a small town in rural Mississippi. Joshua ran a clinic for underprivileged children, and Sarah opened a shelter for the homeless and a warehouse for food and clothing for the needy. They lived in a small house near the little mission church of the Sacred Heart. Zachary entered fifth grade at the public school; the nearest Catholic school was miles away. He could no longer play soccer; the school couldn't afford a team; but he worked in the clinic with

his father and played kickball with the neighborhood kids on the fields that weren't planted in cotton.

Elizabeth was the envy of the third grade class because she had more dolls than all the other girls combined. At first, she maintained this privilege haughtily, but watching her father and mother give so freely to others eventually softened her heart. She began giving away her dolls until she had only one left, the little rag doll her daddy had given her when she was two. Joshua was pleased seeing his children giving to others, and he tried to console himself with the knowledge that his life must surely be worthwhile to have children who were so loving.

Joshua poured himself into his work at the clinic, trying desperately to feel the fire of God's love for the suffering poor who came to him. He looked at them with pity and compassion, but it was not enough. At night when everyone was sleeping, Joshua would sense that deep yearning return to him once again, and he would bury his face in his pillow to hide his tears. He could not ask Sarah or the children to give up anything more for the pursuit of his dream, and even if he could, he did not know where else to look. He only knew that he must come to know the heart of God, to feel that flame that burned in the Sacred Heart of Jesus sear his heart as well.

Sometimes, Joshua thought he had waited so long for the fire of God's love to return to him, had searched so desperately to no avail, that he began to doubt God's presence. His faith began to waiver. His whole life had been

consumed by this one desire, and he began to wonder if he had indeed been a fool. Perhaps God could not touch him. Perhaps God would not share His heart with anyone, least of all, Joshua. Perhaps God was not even real, only a phantom of his deluded imagination. Still Joshua could not give up hope, though he felt as if he were walking on the edge of a precipice. He went daily to the little church of the Sacred Heart and begged God to touch him. And every Sunday, at Mass, just as he sat today, he waited.

"Oh, Lord, I am not worthy to receive You, but say the word and my soul shall be healed." The sound of Sarah's voice mixing with the congregation's prayer called Joshua back to the present. He approached the altar to receive the Eucharist, praying silently as he walked, "Touch me, Lord. Fill me with Your Spirit. Speak to me, Lord. Show me Your heart."

Joshua held up his hands to receive the Eucharist. He longed to believe that Jesus was truly present here. He ached to feel God's fire. As he placed the wafer in his mouth, the world suddenly flashed glaring white. Everyone in the church faded, and Joshua was alone.

The voice of God whispered in his ear. "Hello, Joshua, my son. You have been very patient. What is it you desire?"

Joshua shook his head. He couldn't be sure he was really hearing anything--the voice was so delicate and soft, like the sound of the wind whispering in the trees or the still, small voice of conscience.

"Is it really You, Lord?"

"Yes, my son, I am that I am. What is your heart's desire?"

"Lord, I long to feel Your fire burning once again in my soul. I long to have a heart like Your heart."

"You do not know what you ask, my son. My heart bears things You cannot understand."

"But," Joshua argued, "I have waited so long, and, even with all Your many blessings, my life is restless without the fire of Your Heart. Please, I beg You; make my heart like Yours."

The voice was silent for a moment, then whispered gently, "Your desire has been granted, my son."

Joshua opened his eyes. Sarah was standing over him and Father Forbes was splashing his face with holy water. Someone had called an ambulance. Joshua could not understand all the commotion. He had never felt better in his life. He looked into each face around him and felt an overwhelming sense of love and compassion. Each face seemed precious and beautiful, as if he had never really seen any of these people before. He tried to speak, but no sound would come from his lips. He tried to get up. God had touched him, had called him by name, had called him His son and given him his heart's desire. He wanted to leap for joy, but his legs would not cooperate. He suddenly realized that he was paralyzed.

The ambulance came and rushed Joshua to the emergency room in Jackson. The doctors poked and probed, sent him for x-rays and CT scans and called in specialists from all over the country. They could find no explanation for Joshua's paralysis and loss of speech.

Joshua felt quite helpless. He wanted to share with everyone the joy he felt from God's touch, but he could not. He wanted to assure them he was fine, never felt better, but the words would not come. Sarah hovered around the bed, looking worried and anxious. He wanted to reach out and touch her brow, brush the wrinkles from her forehead, and hold her tenderly. She looked more beautiful to him than ever. Elizabeth came often and stood near his bed, with a tear in her eye, clutching her rag doll. She held it tightly, hoping that doll might somehow give strength to her daddy. Zachary held back, standing near the end of the bed, unable to understand what had happened. Joshua longed to hug them with a big bear hug, to tell them something funny that would make them both laugh. He realized that he had often expected more from them than mere children were able to give.

Joshua tried to tell them with his eyes how much he believed in them, how much he cared, but neither of them really looked into his face. They avoided looking into his eyes, afraid of the pain they feared they would find there. They touched his hands, but they did not search his eyes. His heart ached with love for them. He wished someone would comfort them since he could not. It hurt him when no one did.

During the long nights that Joshua lay alone in his bed, his heart burned with love, a love unlike any he had ever known. His consciousness began to absorb all the hurts that filled the world. It began in small ways. He felt the pain of the father whose three-year-old died in his arms after being hit by a drunk driver, and he also felt the anguish and despair of the driver. He absorbed the distress of the mother who fell asleep at the wheel and flipped over the van filled with her sleeping family, killing her husband and son, severely injuring her seven other children. He ached with their pain, longed to do something to relieve it, but could do nothing. Nothing but love them with the fire of his passion and long for someone else to help them.

Joshua's heart was breaking. He felt such an immense joy and sorrow intertwined. If he had been able to speak the emotion would have been beyond his power to explain. His heart heaved within his chest filled with unimaginable love, aware of the countless sufferings of all those in the world who were lost and alone, searching for peace. He longed for just one person to comprehend the depth of love he felt.

Sarah and the kids moved to the city to be near him, but, in time, Zachary and Elizabeth came less often. He understood; after all, they had to get on with their own lives. Sarah faithfully came every day, talking softly and stroking his hand, but she could no longer bear to look into his eyes. It hurt her to think of the light that used to be there, and she did not want to risk seeing the blankness she feared would be in its place.

Each night Joshua's heart expanded a little more, allowed in a little more of the pain of the world. He took on the despair of the ten-year-old girl who was dying of cancer and of the family who had to watch her die. He felt the hopelessness of the mother in Bangladesh who had to listen to her son crying from hunger, belly distended and ribs jutting out, with nothing to offer him. He experienced the grief of the parents in Sarajevo whose son was killed by the Serbian forces, and the twisting agony of the hatred that distorted the Serbian man who fought out of prejudice and fear. He felt the isolation and horror of the young man who had just been diagnosed with AIDS. And the terror of the old woman living alone in the Bronx who heard someone rattling her windows, and the despondency of the mother in the ghetto watching her child lured into drugs and gangs. All the thousands of ways that people suffer and ache began to settle in his fiery heart, and he could do nothing. Nothing but love them with a love he could not convey. Joshua thought if only one person could understand the depth of this love that he felt, perhaps he or she could go and make a difference in the lives of those who were in pain. Perhaps this one person could tell others of this great love and point out the depth of all the unending suffering and together they could be his hands and feet to go out and help those he loved but could not reach.

In time, the doctors and nurses, unable to find any cure or hope, relegated Joshua to a corner room where he was out of the way. Except for Sarah, people came to see him mostly out a sense of duty or because they once had been close

to him, but they never dared to look into his face and so could not see the fire of his love shining in his eyes. They stopped talking to him, assuming that since he could not speak in a language they could comprehend, he could no longer hear or understand them either. Joshua longed for someone to understand his love, to just listen to the tenderness he felt for the world. His heart swelled with the unbearable burden of love.

One day, Sarah brought his little nephew John, who was only four and whose heart was still pure as only the heart of a child can be. John had been asking to come, but all the adults had thought it would be too traumatic for him to see his uncle in such a condition. Finally, his persistence won them over and they relented.

John crawled up on the side of the bed and looked deeply into Joshua's eyes. He looked for a long time, until Sarah tried to pull him away. John held tightly to Joshua's shoulders.

"Wait, Aunt Sarah," he protested. "Uncle Joshua is telling me how much he loves me."

Sarah lowered Jacob to the floor and turned back to Joshua. She too looked deeply into Joshua's eyes and was nearly overwhelmed with the depth of love that flowed through her. "Oh, Joshua," she whispered.

As she spoke these words, a tear ran down Joshua's face. Then he closed his eyes and died.

The doctors and nurses swarmed around Joshua, as perplexed by his death

as they had been by his inscrutable illness. They decided to make one last attempt to understand the mystery by performing an autopsy. When they opened the chest, all those present gazed in awe--Joshua's heart was so enlarged that it almost filled his entire cavity. It was charred and broken right in two.

# PERSONAL NARRATIVES

## Grandpa Sabath's Car

*Everyone in the family knew Grandpa Sabath was cantankerous. I mean,* we all loved him; after all, my brothers, baby sister and I were his only grandchildren, but we always knew what the limits were where Grandpa was concerned. He had slicked back white hair, and he always smelled of cigar smoke, even though Grandma Sabath made him smoke outside or on their little screened-in porch on the back of their house.

On Sunday afternoons, about once a month, Grandma and Grandpa Sabath would make their visit to us from Villa Ridge. Grandma, always larger than life in my memory, would emerge from Grandpa's perfectly polished Ford, carrying a picnic basket filled with some kind of pie or other homemade goodie. At the time I really wasn't a pie-eater, but even I couldn't resist the crumbly strudel topping she would put on her apple pies. They were always wrapped in newspaper to keep them fresh. She would never dream of wasting waxed paper--a luxury--when newspaper did just as good a job and was just going to be wasted anyway. (Grandma was big on recycling before anyone ever mentioned the word.) She would smile her big, toothy grin and give out German hugs to everyone as she greeted them. Grandpa always came up quietly behind, carrying his felt hat in his hand, his shirt colors starched and buttoned up.

As soon as Grandma had set her things in the kitchen, Grandpa took his post at the front door. His biggest fear was that one of those "wild kids" in the neighborhood, or even--God forbid--one of his own grandsons, was going to

scratch his treasured car. As I look back on it, I think he just wanted to be near the front door so he could sneak out and get a few puffs on his old stogey away from the searching eye of Grandma, but protecting his property gave him a good excuse to hover there. If anyone started to run or play to near the car, he would yell out to them, "You kids, be careful near that car now. I don't want any scratches on it."

This statement always made all us grandkids a little nervous because if anyone got Grandpa too upset he wouldn't give out quarters. This was a big deal to kids under 12 back in the fifties when we never really had a regular allowance. If we all survived Grandma's and Grandpa's visit with passing marks, Grandpa would reach in his pocket as he walked to his car and dole out shiny new quarters to all of us. You could never ask for quarters, which was a certain method to lose out altogether. First of all, Grandpa liked to think he was surprising us when he gave them out, and he wanted us to know it was purely out of his own generosity that the quarters were being lavished on us. Plus, if our dad heard us ask for money, he would forbid Grandpa from giving us even a nickel. That was something his kids were just not allowed to do. So around the time that Grandma and Grandpa were leaving, all of us were sure to hang around the house and walk Grandpa to his car. You never really knew until the moment came when his hand descended into his change pocket if you were going to get a quarter or not, but you didn't want to take any chances on missing out either. And no matter what, we certainly didn't want anyone making Grandpa upset by scratching his car.

Poor David, my little brother, learned the hard way what dire consequences might befall anyone who dared tempt fate by playing near Grandpa's car. He was only five at the time and probably didn't realize how stupid he was to ride his new two-wheeler so perilously close to the car. Grandpa caught a glimpse of the misdeed though and rushed out onto the front porch.

"What in the world is he doing?" he yelled, nearly throwing his lit cigar into the front bushes. "Why, he's going to run right into my car!"

David, better known as Davy at the time, was so flustered by Grandpa's commotion that he really did lose his balance and fall. We all held our breath as the bike teetered and then crashed to the ground--away from the car. David's knee was badly skinned, but he was young and he'd heal. If the car had been scratched, things would never have been the same, and we all knew it. We all rushed out to comfort Davy, but Grandpa walked over slowly and carefully inspected and patted his car, to make sure it had not somehow been hurt in the fray. Grandpa never quite forgave David for that error in judgement that so nearly met with disaster. Until Grandpa died, when David was a teenager, he thought of Davy as "that wild kid." He always seemed to have even less patience with him than he did the rest of us, and he frequently warned our parents about how they had better keep a close eye on that one. We all knew Grandpa would.

During the spring and summer, Grandpa's visits were especially anxious times for everyone. Our house was on the end of a cul-de-sac, and when the

weather was nice, all the kids in the neighborhood gathered in the circle in front of our house to play a variety of games from kick-the-can and hide-and-go-seek to kickball and even baseball. More than one picture window was broken on that court as the boys grew into power hitters, and Grandpa's concern for his car and his agitation always increased whenever a game started up out in the circle. He would pace back and forth in the living room or even out on the front porch in plain sight of all our friends, mumbling loudly to himself about those little hooligans, and chomping on his old cigar. All the neighborhood kids would tease us about him being such a crab, and even though we knew it was true, I always defended him. "He's not so bad, really," I'd tell them. "He gives us quarters when he visits." They never seemed very impressed.

One summer, Dennis Dean, the boy who lived two houses, over came into his own with a bat. He only had one flaw. He always pulled to the right which would send his balls streaking towards our yard. Grandma and Grandpa had shown up for their usual visit, and Dad had pulled Grandpa away from the front door with the lure of a baseball game on the radio out back and a cold bottle of beer. Grandpa had reluctantly left his post, but Dad knew that we'd never get an inning in with Grandpa watching our every move. We had divided up sides with my brother Ricky and Dennis as captains and the less adept boys and all us girls evenly dispersed on both sides. It was the middle of the third inning when it happened. Dennis was up to bat, with two foul balls. He swung hard, and the ball went flying straight towards Grandpa's car. My brother Ricky tried to save

it, backing up and reaching as far across the hood of the car as he could, but it just wasn't enough. The ball hit with a thud smack in the center of the hood, leaving a little crater about 18 inches behind the hood ornament. No one said a word. We just walked slowly over to the car and stared. We were all afraid to move. Who was going to tell Grandpa?

Just then Dad and Grandpa came strolling around from the back yard. As soon as he saw the crowd gathered around his car, Grandpa got the strangest look on his face. He walked over to the car and didn't say a word. He gently touched the crater and looked up in almost disbelief, shaking his head. Dennis swallowed hard. "I didn't mean to do it, sir, " he croaked apologetically.

Grandpa turned and walked towards the house. He sat down on the front step and just stared. None of us knew what to do. We expected him to yell or to cuss or to do something, but he just sat there staring straight ahead. The neighbor kids silently gathered up the ball equipment and went home. Dennis came over and asked my dad if he could help to pay for the damages.

Dad shook his head. "It won't be that much. It's just that he never had a new car before this one. That's why he's so protective of it."

I felt sad seeing Grandpa sit there looking dejected. I walked over and sat down next to him, sliding my hand into his and leaning my head up against his arm. I could get away with it, being a girl. Everyone else drifted on around the back, but Grandpa and I just sat there in silence. Soon Grandma came to the door. She came and touched Grandpa gently on the back. "Come on, Dick, we

better get the car loaded up, so we can get home before dark."

Grandpa stood up and took her hand. "Okay, Gert, I'm coming." Then he turned and gave me his hand to help pull me to my feet. He almost smiled at me.

My older brothers, Bobby and Ricky, had kind of made themselves scarce, fearing they would be blamed for knowing better than to play ball in the court, but guilt got the better of them and they came out of hiding long enough to say good-bye. No one expected quarters that night for sure, but it didn't matter really. We just wanted to make Grandpa feel better. But as we were walking Grandma and Grandpa to the car, Grandpa reached into his pocket and pulled out three shiny quarters and gave them to Ricky and Bobby and even Davy. Then he turned to me and, for the first time I can ever remember, he hugged me and slipped a coin into my pocket. I almost wanted to cry, but I didn't. Instead, I joined the others to wave good-bye. As Grandpa left, I pulled the coin from my pocket--a silver half-dollar!

I find it hard to believe all these many years later that silver half-dollars were not really that rare.

## IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT

When I was growing up, one thing I knew for certain was that you did not mess with my dad. He wasn't mean; it was nothing like that. But he was tough and hard and busy. He often worked two jobs when I was little, and he didn't much like kids to be fussing and acting up when he was home. He always had a kiss for me if I waited up with Mom when he was working late, but then it was time for bed, and he didn't want any whining about it either. Mom was one of those mothers kids could talk into almost anything, but I knew that Daddy meant business. When he said something I did it right now. I didn't argue with him, at least not when I was little.

I can only remember being spanked by him once--when I was four. But he didn't have to hit me. He had a way of letting his anger show--this booming voice and this scowl of disapproval--that would sting worse than any physical blow could have. Sometimes it seemed as if I never could really win his approval, or at least he didn't give it to me in ways I could always understand. For one thing he was a man's man, and he naturally related much better to boys and boys' pastimes. He always had time for my brothers' ballgames and playing catch and going fishing. He didn't exactly ignore me, but he couldn't figure out on a regular basis how to spend time with me either.

Sometimes we had very special moments together. Often if we were driving somewhere we would sing together, songs like "I'm in Love with You, Honey" and "You are My Sunshine." Daddy's favorite was "Heart of My

Heart," but my personal favorite was "I've Been Workin' on the Railroad" with its rousing "Dinah won't ya' blow" chorus. And when we were on camping trips, he would show me the stars and point out the Big Dipper. We would lie on our backs, looking up at the stars and his arm would be curled under my neck. We'd see which one of us could count the most shooting stars. In the morning he would walk me down to the river, with the fog creating a magical fairyland, and show me how to splash cold river water in my face to wake myself up.

Back then I thought he was the strongest man I knew. Once on a trip to Big Springs State Park, he was pushing me on a swing. I kept yelling "Higher, Daddy, higher!" He would laugh his wonderful deep laugh and push even higher. I felt as if I were soaring, and the swing went so high that it would jump as it swung back. I envisioned myself swinging totally around the pole, but the thrill of the moment overcame my fears. I yelled once more to go higher, and Daddy gave me one final big push. This time the swing lurched hard, and I flew backwards into the air. For a second, I knew I was going to die because a huge oak was right behind the swing. But before I could even scream, my daddy's strong arms were wrapped around me pulling me to safety. It was if he had snatched me right from death itself, and I held onto him and cried, feeling small and safe in his arms, believing that there no harm could come to me.

But time passed, and our relationship changed. Although I had two older brothers, I was his oldest girl, and at times I thought Daddy had ridiculous expectations for me. When I got my first serious crush at 14, he thought I was

much too young to even have a boyfriend. Going out in cars had to wait until the summer after I turned 15. His curfew rules were strict, and if I was even five minutes late, he would be standing at the front door with the porch light on, wearing his bathrobe. I found this out one night when the boy I was out with really did have car trouble, causing us to arrive home 15 minutes late. It was too humiliating for my adolescent mind even to contemplate, so I tried to always be on time.

At times he seemed so unreasonable to me. At times, he grounded me for things I didn't even do. The first time I was allowed to go out on a single date in a car is a good example. My date and I were going to an American Legion ballgame and then out for a soda. Daddy had said to be home by midnight at the latest. The game went into extra innings, and it was after 11:30, and I was getting nervous about being on time.

The young man I was with questioned my nervousness. "I'm just worried about getting home on time," I told him. "I sure don't want to be home late this first night. Would you mind if we skipped the rest of the game and the soda and just headed for home?"

He smiled and said he understood. We were just heading for the car when I saw my dad's blue Ford station wagon turning into the lot. What in the world was he doing here? My confusion turned to anxiety as he squealed his wheels through the lot, pulled up beside us, and said in his booming voice, "Young lady, get in this car right now."

My face grew hot with embarrassment, and I couldn't even look in my date's eyes.

He squeezed my hand and said he'd call me the next day. I got in the car with Daddy, too angry and humiliated to even speak.

As soon as we were out of the parking lot, Daddy let loose. "I don't know who you think you are, staying out all hours of the night. You're not even 16 years old yet, and you will NOT be roaming the streets at 12:30 at night."

I looked at my watch again. I was sure it said 11:40. I took a breath and spoke up. "Daddy, I don't understand why you are so upset. You said my curfew was midnight."

"Yes, midnight. Not 12:30 or quarter to one. I'll not have you out an hour after your curfew, and that's why you're grounded for a week."

"But Daddy," I protested. "It's not even midnight yet. It's only 11:40. I don't understand what I did wrong. Sometimes you make no sense at all. Just look at your watch."

"I'm warning you, young lady, don't talk back to me and don't use that tone of voice!"

"Daddy," I screamed, "Just look at your watch, PLEASE."

By this time we were at a stoplight, and he looked carefully at his watch. I could tell that he knew he was wrong, but he would not back down. "Well, you're still grounded for a week for your back talk and sassy mouth."

As it turned out, Daddy had fallen asleep on the sofa, and when he

glanced at his watch he had thought it said 12:30 instead of 11:30. Worried and angry, he had jumped into the car to come looking for me, which led to the scene described above. It did not matter, because I ended up serving out my sentence, thoroughly convinced of his unreasonableness. Even pleading with Mom to intercede didn't seem to help.

This turned out to be the first of many conflicts. I was much more independent and headstrong than my brothers had been, and Daddy and I would often butt heads over my activities. We didn't have a lot of money, and Daddy often would yell at Mom or at me about spending too much. So as soon as I turned 16, I got a part-time job, so I could have money that I could spend with no questions. Then he was unhappy because I was gone too much and didn't help with the chores around the house. He thought I was self-centered; I thought he was stubborn and cold. I thought he should be proud of me. After all, I was a straight-A student, my teachers loved me, I wasn't doing drugs, and I earned my own money, but he would never say a word to me about being proud of me.

Around this time I also noticed that Mom was no longer acting quite herself. I thought she was getting hard of hearing, because you could tell her something and a few minutes later she was asking you the same question again. People would call, and before she walked into the next room she couldn't remember who had been on the phone. She had been head cashier at Kroger for years, and she began to get poor reports at work. Something was wrong, I could tell, but somehow, in the cocoon of teenage life, I never connected how Mom's

condition might be affecting Dad. I only noticed he seemed colder, less patient, angrier. And I thought it all had something to do with me.

Dad seemed to expect me to be able to pick up the slack because Mom wasn't doing well, but he didn' t really know how to ask. He just expected it and yelled when things weren't done. I reacted with hostility. My older two brothers were both off to college; my younger siblings Lori and David were still so young and confused about what was happening to Mom. Everything seemed to be falling apart. I knew Dad expected me to help with the house, the laundry, Lori, Mom, and I tried to do as much as I could, but I also had a personal life. Tom and I were just starting to date, plus I was working and going to school. I didn't know what Daddy wanted from me.

One night when I was working things came to a head. I worked on the lower level of this department store at Northwest Plaza, and one night I had a late customer. It caused me to be about 20 minutes late getting off work, and by the time I got out, all the lights on the mall level had already been turned out. I was tired, and when I walked out, I expected my dad to be there to pick me up, but he wasn't. I waited for a few minutes, then walked to a pay phone to call and see if he had fallen asleep. When he answered the phone, I said, "Dad, did you forget me?"

To my surprise, instead of an apology, I got blasted. "I don't know what you're up to, young lady, but I'm not going to put up with you lying to me. I don't know where you were tonight, but you certainly weren't at work. I know

because I was there when they turned the store lights out, but you were not!"

I tried to explain to Daddy what had happened, but he just kept yelling. Finally, I was so hurt and angry that I just slammed down the receiver. It seemed that no matter how hard I tried, nothing I did ever pleased him He bragged about the boys all the time, Rich with his sports, Bob with his grades and his music, but I never heard him brag about me. But this was the last straw--to accuse me of lying to him just because I had to work late, something I couldn't even help. I began stomping the two miles home.

I was about halfway home when my father pulled up beside me. "Get in, Nancy," he said.

I thought back to the night at the ballpark. I wasn't playing that little game any more.

"Forget it," I yelled back. "You didn't want to come back up here; you think I'm a liar or worse. Nothing I can do pleases you, and I will NOT get into that car."

This scene continued for several minutes, with me storming angrily down St. Charles Rock Road, and Daddy following right behind, telling me to get into the car. He would not apologize, and I would not get into the car without an apology. Finally, he pulled in front of me, and afraid of what he might do next, I relented and got in. It was a silent ride. The next day I asked my boss to write my dad a note explaining what had happened the night before. I self-righteously presented it to my dad. Still no apology. I fumed. I thought he was the most

stubborn, unreasonable man I had ever met, and I couldn't wait until I had the chance to be away from him.

The situation was getting worse at home. Mom could do less and less and really needed someone to be with her all the time. None of us could be there. The doctors couldn't tell us what was going on. Menopause, they speculated. Then they guessed at a nervous breakdown. Perhaps a stroke. They put her in the hospital for more tests. After she came back, Daddy seemed more stressed out than ever. He had no patience, not even with Mom, which only made me angrier. Mom would wander aimlessly around the house or sit and watch television hour after hour. Lori was only six or seven, and she couldn't understand why her once-doting mom would no longer talk to her. I became the surrogate mom, and Lori would often hang on me when I was home, crying and pulling on me if I tried to leave the house. Mom would try to cook at times, but she often would burn things and could no longer follow a recipe. Sometimes Daddy would yell when supper was ruined, and Mom would cry, and I would just want to scream at him. How could he be so unfeeling?

Mom seemed to be slipping more and more. Sometimes she would get out of the house and wander up and down the street in her nightgown. She would slip out and stop the ice cream man without any money and the man would come up to the house and ask if he should give her something and get money from us. She especially liked to splash through puddles of water. At moments, she would seem to glimpse herself and feel pain. Once she asked me, "What's wrong with

me? Am I crazy?"

I put my arm around her. "No, you're not crazy, just sick, and soon you'll be well again. What made you say that?"

"Well, I was outside and one of the boys said, "Mrs. Sabath belongs in a looney bin.' I just wondered." I wanted to cry as I saw the pain on her face, and later when I tried to talk to Daddy about it, he stood silently for a moment and then just turned and walked away.

One day, when I came into the house, I heard a commotion in the back room. Mom was laughing and had a cord wrapped around Lori's neck. She was saying, "Giddy up!" as if she were playing like Lori was a pony and she were the rider. Lori had tears of terror streaming down her face and was screaming, "Mommy, please don't do that!" I came in and got the cord away from Mom and had her sit down. I held Lori and calmed her down, trying to explain that Mom didn't know what she was doing. She sobbed for a long time, and I cried too. As soon as everyone was settled down, I called Daddy. His voice sounded so exasperated on the other end.

That night when he came home, he said he had made a decision. "I've talked to Mom's doctors, and we've decided that Mom is no longer safe at home alone. None of us can be with her all the time, and I can't afford a nurse to be here all the time either. The only thing we can do is put her in Malcolm Bliss until I can find a nursing home I can afford to put her in."

"But, Daddy," I protested, "Malcolm Bliss is a nuthouse. Mom's not

crazy."

"I don't know what she is right now, Nancy." His voice sounded detached and resigned. "I only know she can't stay here anymore. Just looked what happened today. We can't go on this way. The doctor said I would have to sign commitment papers in order for them to keep her there."

"Commitment papers? What does that mean, Dad? You're going to say she's crazy? But what if she gets well, will they ever let her out again? And how will she ever get well in there?"

Daddy just looked at me with those same detached eyes. "At this point, Nancy, they don't think she will ever be well again. They think she has something called Alzheimer's Disease. What you've seen these last few weeks is only the beginning."

"Alzheimer's Disease? What is that? Is there a cure?" At last we had a name to put on this thing that had been robbing us of the Mom we loved, but it was a name I had never heard before.

"I don't know much about it yet," Daddy replied. "I don't even know if the doctor's know for sure. It's some kind of disease that causes the brain cells to die, kind of like senility in old folks, but the doctors are just starting to do research into it. They're not even sure if that's what this is. I think they're just grasping at straws at times."

He turned and walked into the kitchen. He got a beer and sat down at the table. "I'd appreciate it if you and Tom would help me take Mom down there

tomorrow. I don't know how far away we'll have to park, and I think it would be easier if we don't have to make her walk too far."

I agreed, but I could hardly sleep that night. All the horror stories I had ever heard about Malcolm Bliss or any place like it came into my mind. I couldn't understand how Daddy could even consider allowing the doctors to put Mom there. I thought he had really loved Mom at one time, but I guess he just didn't any more. I knew we couldn't leave her alone with Lori, and that she probably shouldn't be alone at all, but surely something else was available.

The next morning, we took Lori to a friend's so she wouldn't be there when we took Mom away. Dad rode in the back seat with Mom as we headed for Malcolm Bliss. It was a fairly silent ride, but when I looked in the mirror, I would see him stroking Mom's hair or rubbing her shoulder. It made me want to cry. We got there, and Daddy walked Mom in as Tom and I parked the car. I watched Daddy walking away with his arm around Mom guiding her. I remembered how much they used to like to go on long evening walks together after supper. Often they had held hands back then, but this was not a happy walk.

The whole atmosphere of the place gave me the chills. The bars on the windows made me sad. We discovered that Mom would be in a lock-up ward, and it seemed so cold and dark. Daddy went away to sign all the papers, and Tom and I tried to make small talk with the nurses. They tried to reassure us they would watch over Mom, but I ached at the thought of leaving her in such a

place. Daddy came back, and he kissed Mom on the cheek and we left.

We began the ride back home. We had just gotten on the highway when I heard a noise from the back seat. I looked around, and Daddy was sobbing like a broken-hearted child. His big body shook with the sobs. My heart wanted to break. He sobbed the whole 40 minutes home, and when we stopped at the house, I held him in my arms, and felt the wetness of his tear-soaked shirt and face against me. He held onto me tightly and I remembered his strength holding me and protecting me as a child. I wanted to protect him now, but I wasn't sure how. Seeing his pain was a new experience for me.

That moment transformed our relationship, opened up a space where Daddy could share his tenderness and weakness with me as well as his strength and toughness. I saw Daddy in a new light, and I wasn't nearly as afraid of him and his reactions anymore. The next few years were hard as we watched Mom slowly losing herself more and more and finally dying. We didn't always agree about exactly how she should be handled, but something had happened to us that day that would bond us together through it all.

**The Day the House Stopped Talking**

I fingered the chipped edges of the platter. The blue flowers were faded, and the gold edge was worn away in spots. A slight crack grazed its surface, but I looked at the platter lovingly as I carried it to my car.

"Nancy," Daddy's voice called after me, "You're not gonna keep that old broken platter, are you?"

"Dad, I just can't throw it away. I remember so many family dinners served on this platter." I hesitated, then smiled. "It was Mom's, and I want to keep it."

Daddy smiled at my sentimentality. "Okay, but it seems like you have nicer things to remember your mom with than that."

The past two days had been hard on both of us. My mom had died ten years earlier, the year after I had gotten married, but Daddy had forced himself to carry on. My younger brother and sister, David and Lori, had still lived at home, and he had made himself keep going for their sakes. The house had never been quite the same with Mom gone, but they had managed. Now it was time to move on. Lori had married last spring, and David had been out on his own for several years. Daddy had recently retired. He was finally going to do something for himself--get away from the hectic life in the city and settle down in a small community on Bull Shoal's Lake. Still, getting rid of the old house was hard. The family had lived there so long that the house seemed to echo with memories.

I had left my own family for the past two days to help Daddy with the garage sale. He couldn't have possibly moved 30 years of junk to his new surroundings. We had just finished sorting through all the things that hadn't sold, picking out a few of the treasures--like the platter--that on second consideration we could not part with, and packing up the remains to be hauled off to the nearest Salvation Army or the dump. We hadn't spoken much, but we didn't need to. Everything we touched seemed to tell their stories for us. We only looked at each other, and the words hung loudly in the air. The memories surrounded us.

After Daddy loaded up his truck with the boxes, he and I walked through the yard and house one last time, just to make sure everything was in order. Lori and I had spent several days there earlier in the month giving everything a good cleaning, so the place would look nice for its new owners. It seemed strange to think of anyone else living in this house, I thought, but it did look nice.

The backyard was neatly cut, but it looked empty, compared to the way it once had sparkled with life. I thought about the days we had come there when I was only three years old, before the grass had grown and the trees had been planted, while the house was being built. Some of my earliest conscious memories are of Mom packing a picnic lunch, and the five of us spreading a picnic cloth on the sun-warmed earth to eat our feast. My older brothers, Bobby and Ricky, at five and seven, would run around playing Indians and dragging me through the dust. Then the family would hold "the official inspection," checking over the rafters and beams, and Daddy would point out how much the builders

had accomplished (or not) since the week before. I smiled at the recollection and walked further into the yard.

In the middle of the yard lay the spot where the weeping willow had stood until it had been struck by lightning. Beneath its shade had been one of my favorite childhood resting and playing spots. Its drooping branches had been converted to everything from a kitchen to a movie star's dressing room to a booth at the penny fairs my friends and I had held in the summer. To anyone else, it was just a bare spot in the middle of the yard, but it would always speak of childhood imagination to me.

The sweet gums that once served as second and third bases when they were younger had grown much too tall for such sport any longer. Only the skinned bark retained any remnants of the noisy life that had once filled that yard. More than one branch had been knocked out of those trees by flying bats, balls, and croquet sticks, not to mention a few tree climbers and hangers.

The flower garden along the fence was barren. It had been many years since Mom had tenderly cared for it, even longer since I had sung lullabies to the drowsy flowers at sunset, thinking they had to have melody to help them close up at night. The flower bed had been rich and fertile then; now it seemed bitter and shriveled up.

I stood for a moment looking over the back fence. Highway 70 and the recently added runways at Lambert all but drowned out the sounds of the earth that lay beneath them, but I could faintly recall the quiet rustle of the cornfields

that had once stood tall and inviting in place of the highways and runways. They had often called me into their alluring, but frightening, presence when I was so small that the tall stalks had towered over me. They had offered the perfect place to hide as well as the overwhelming possibility of being lost forever in their encompassing shadow. I recalled the day David, at two, had gotten tangled in the weeds in the middle of the cornfield, and everyone could hear him crying, but it took what seemed like forever for Mom and the neighbors, searching frantically, to find him. The cornfields had been the entrance to the woods and the creek that lay beyond them where the neighborhood boys had built tree forts and held mock battles. Being a girl, I had only rarely been allowed to venture into the woods, with its caves along the creek bed. After Ricky and his friend had found the car with the dead body in it--the poor man had committed suicide--I had never dared to go there alone. Still the memory of the woods enchanted me

I walked away, through the trellis that had once been covered with morning glories, and onto the patio. Everything was empty now. I was glad Daddy lingered behind, inspecting the apple tree. This patio had been the site of many family gatherings from birthdays to anniversaries to lazy Sunday afternoons with the family. I recalled all the family barbecues that had graced its presence, times that had been taken so for granted in their ordinariness when they were happening but were filled with such deliciousness now as I looked back. The smell of the meat cooking, the laughter and teasing while we kids did our job of shucking the corn on the cob, the helping each other carry out the plates and

forks and glasses, the lingering at the table and telling stories, the boys slipping off to toss a frisbee or a football. Somehow, the patio reminded me that food had always tasted better outside, and just the idea of having a barbecue had made the day seem exciting.

Then I was flooded me with other memories of the patio, of hot summer nights when I was just awakening to my womanhood, of kisses shared in the hammock, of lovewords nibbled in my ear, of doubts and dreams and expectations. I recalled that it was here I first experienced the beginning of my search for God, when I had lain awake in the starry darkness praying and thinking until the morning came with the sun rising quietly in the sky. Here, as a teenager trying to escape an overheated house, I had fallen in love with the early morning stillness and the pale light that lingered right before the dawn. Since then I had always been a morning person. And it was here that I first knew that I loved Tom, that somehow he was different from the others I had dated. I looked around and took a breath. This yard and patio contained incomprehensible mysteries.

Daddy caught up with me, and we entered the back door of the house together. We came into the back room and it was empty. This room had been added six years after the original house was built. Initially it had been one big room and dancing and parties had filled its knotty pine walls. Later, after the birth of Lori, it had been divided into a dining room and a bedroom.

The dining room seemed totally naked, stripped of its meaning, without

its table where bread had so often been broken. The family had gathered here daily to share meals, to pray, to fight. Anything worth any consequence to the family had been discussed in this room, and the walls seemed stiff and silent in response to all they had heard. Here was where Mom had announced she was pregnant with Lori, her eyes twinkling with happy tears. And it was here that Dad had told us that, at 44 years old, Mom had Alzheimer's Disease, and there was no cure. These walls had borne much, but they also had been the source of joy. Laughter and tears mingled together in this room.

David's room stood empty. It was tightlipped, just as David was. The day I had told David, only 16 at the time, that Mom was dead, he had sat on the edge of the bed in this room, unable to cry or speak, and something in the room seemed to die too. It had closed itself off from life, felt cold and forlorn. Once it had been full of David's baseball trophies and the gimmicks he had invented, like the switch that controlled the lights and radio from next to his bed and the strobe light he had attached to his stereo, but all those had been stripped away, and the room was silent.

My old room, that Lori had moved into when I left, filled me with thoughts of giggling girlish fantasies and adolescent hopefulness even as it stood bare. If I blinked I could practically see my shoes still scattered across the floor and hear Mom yelling for me to make me bed before I left. Looking at the empty closet made me recall Mom, wearing a gorilla mask, jumping out of it at one of my friends and me, scaring us out of half a year's growth, and then the

three of us rolling on the floor in laughter.

The little bedroom, where I had slept as a child, looked dark and gloomy in its emptiness. The room had once been at the back of the house, with a window facing the yard. When my dad had added the addition, the window that had been there became an odd little curio shelf that separated the bedroom from the dining room. I recalled the babyish fantasies that had unveiled mysterious shapes and faces in the every crevice of that shelf when I was young. I remembered the sound of my mother's voice reassuring me as I cried and the touch of her hand brushing away the tears and the hair from my face.

I hurried out into the hall. In this house, the memories hung around me, seemed to cling to me like Saran Wrap. They came alive and danced before me with such intensity that I could hardly believe they were old memories. Even though the rooms were empty, the memories that filled them lived and spoke clearly to me as if they had happened only yesterday.

I walked into the kitchen where I found Daddy puttering with the faucets and pipes. The kitchen had never really been big enough for our family of seven, but now it seemed empty and sterile. It had seen more than its share of baking and bickering that had once taken place in its confines, when Mom had baked nearly every week, made-from-scratch brownies and cream puffs, pies and chocolate chip cookies. We kids would fight over who got to lick the spoon, the bowl, the beaters, and who got the first cookie off the sheet. No wonder I still had a sweet tooth. The real fighting started though when we had to figure out

whose turn it was to do the dishes. It was in this kitchen I first learned to cook. At first it had been fun experimenting with a cake or cookie recipes, but as Mom had gotten sicker, I had learned to cook at times for the five of us left at home. Mom's illness had been so hard on everyone.

Daddy and I moved into the living room and hugged each other. "Remember all the Christmas trees that stood in that corner, Daddy?"

"I sure do, hon." Even in its stark emptiness, the room brought back such strong images that I could almost hear Christmas carols, and once again, for just a moment, the magic of our family Christmases filled the room. Mom and Daddy had always gone out of their way to create special Christmas memories for each of us kids, always gave us more than they could realistically afford to give. I remembered all the nights we had searched the lots for the perfect Christmas tree, and, after bringing it home, how many happy hours we spent decorating it. By the time we had finished the tree looked as if it dripped silver tinsel. I recalled those anxious days right before Christmas, when the house had been filled with the smell of Mom's cookies baking in the oven and the sound of Mario Lanza singing Christmas carols on the hi-fi stereo. The doorways to the room had been the receptacles of all the Christmas cards taped around their frames. The windows had been frosted with artificial snow, in anticipation of the real thing. I remembered how on Christmas Eve, we had all bundled into the car, our stomachs filled with butterflies, and we had ridden around in search of the house with the absolutely most beautiful light display. We would also begin our search,

aided by Daddy's booming announcements, for Santa's sleigh and reindeer. Some years, as if by elves' magic, Santa would have come while we were gone. If he had not, we would have to force ourselves to sleep for just a little while, until with plaintive whispers we would beg at the foot of our parents' bed--"Mom, we think Santa's been here! Can we PLEASE go look?" And the room also brought back sad refrains of later Christmases, when the love was still there but Mom was not. Although we would still laugh and share here, everything always seemed different without her, especially in this room, in this house that had so absorbed her presence. The room's spirit seemed to envelop us, and both Daddy and I were on the verge of tears.

I pulled away from Daddy, and walked down to the master bedroom at the end of the hall. There, in its emptiness, I stood and let the memories come. The room seemed to be filled with secrets it didn't really want to reveal. Once, in this room, I had found a love poem that Daddy had written Mom, and I had cried because of its beauty. I had always looked at Mom and Daddy differently after that, knowing they were really lovers. The bed was gone from the room, packed away for the move, but even the space where it had stood for so many years seemed holy. The space had shared so much of my parents' love. Sometimes they had opened that space up to us on Sunday mornings, and one or two of my brothers and I had jumped under the covers and snuggled in between Mom and Daddy, feeling the warmth of their love surrounding us. Then Daddy had begun to tickle us a little at a time until we were all rolling around the bed. Daddy

wouldn't stop tickling us until we each squealed through fits of laughter, "Please, Papa, let me go!" And Mom would slip out of the covers, her green eyes dancing and her face flushed with excitement and laughter. She would smile at our antics and say, "I'll leave you wildcats alone and go get breakfast." I felt the love that almost shouted from this room and the loneliness of the past ten years when Dad had been in this room alone without Mom.

Daddy broke the silence. "C'mon, Nanc, let's lock her up. I want to get on the road before it gets too late."

We walked out the door, closing it tightly behind us. As I walked to the car, I took a long look back at the house. Its blinds were drawn tight, and no lights shown from its windows. I knew it would never reveal its secrets to anyone again.

* * * * * * *

An older couple moved into the house, and I heard from the neighbors that they had replaced the kitchen cabinets and bought new carpeting throughout the house. I occasionally drove my kids past the house, and once when no one was home I had them all pose in front of it so I could take their picture. It made me sad so we didn't stay there long. About two years ago, I heard they were going to tear down the houses on our street to make way for more airport parking. I drove by the place a few weeks later and sure enough, the house was gone. I

cried that day, but it reminded me of the day Mom had died after six years of battling Alzheimer's. The light had already gone out years before, and so the death had been like letting go of a shell of what had once been there. I only hoped the parking lot developers knew they were building on sacred ground.

# PERSONAL ESSAYS

## TEN RULES FOR PARENTING TEENS

Few people know this until it's too late, but parents take a sacred oath never to reveal certain information to childless people for fear that it might result in the end of the procreation of our species. Most people might have some hint as to what raising teenagers would be like if they could only manage to honestly remember their own behavior as teens; however, few people ever really do this. For some reason unknown to modern science, most human brains seem to go into the selective recall mode when they try to bring up recollections of adolescent behavior that probably drove their parents crazy. This only reinforces my belief that most teenagers become brain-dead at the onset of puberty, slowly recovering brain function as they exit their teens. So depending on reliable memories of anything from those inscrutable years is a highly questionable means of ascertaining helpful information for raising teens.

Therefore, I have decided to break my vow of secrecy and disclose some basic facts to help parents whose children are just approaching the critical stage of adolescence. At this point parents probably have succeeded in establishing at least some sort of emotional bond with their offspring which might survive the strains of living with those same offspring as teenagers. Perhaps some of the following rules will also help.

1. NEVER SHOP WITH A SEVENTH OR EIGHTH GRADER. This rule is of paramount importance to the health and safety of both parent and child. It is a known fact that anything the parent approves of at this stage will be met

with automatic disapproval, if not outright disgust, by the teenager in question. This will be accompanied by a rolling of the eyes and a look of such contempt that many parents have been known to respond with vulgar language, if not violence.

In addition, children in this age category refuse to be seen in public with their parents because it is too "embarrassing," which we all know is a worse fate than being covered with honey and stuck in a hive of bees. Any parents wishing to attempt this activity must be willing to either walk on the completely opposite side of the store from their offspring or risk being shoved under the nearest rack of clothes should an acquaintance of said offspring appear.

I personally refused to shop with my oldest daughter for two years because I knew one of us would end up dead if we tried it. I sometimes persuaded my husband to go, and at times he could even charm her into forgetting for a minute that he was her dad and they actually found something both of them could agree on. If you are lucky enough to have a sister or brother that your teenager actually likes, you might consider paying them hazard pay to take your child shopping. Teenagers are never as embarrassed by, or as rude to, favorite aunts and uncles as they are to parents, because, as everyone knows, no one is as stupid as parents are, even if they happen to be someone else's parents.

2. NEVER SAY, "MY CHILD WILL NEVER DO THAT!" This is a curse which ensures that your teenager will not only do the act mentioned but worse. So no matter how repulsed you are by some other teenager's actions,

don't even THINK this, much less utter the forbidden words. The reasons for this may not be clear to anyone without several teenagers to tame because it is a little known fact that teenagers are somewhat, shall we say, changeable.

One teenager I happen to know rather well--he is my firstborn--actually seemed to undergo major mutations in a matter of a week's time. It is dangerous to believe that any particular stage is permanent, no matter how good or how bad. At 14, he was a dyed-in-the-wool preppy. Style and fashion were second nature, and he refused to wear anything but brand labels. His hair was razor cut, and he wanted to do some modeling for Dillard's to earn money. He made straight A's and hoped to some day fly for the Air Force or be a CIA agent. Within a year, he was buying his clothes from Salvation Army, with everything deliberately mismatched, pinned together, and dingy. He had his hair buzzed close to his head, sometimes in stripes, and sported an earring. During the course of his high school years, he went through periods of time when he wanted to be a hippie, a doctor, a writer, an actor, a teacher, a member of the Communist party, a government official, a computer wizard, a dropout, a scholarship winner, a musician, a poet, and an entrepreneur. Those are just the phases I remember. Each shift was accompanied by a change in clothes, hair, attitude, books, and his parents' sanity. Multiply the possibility of this kind of behavior by the number of teenagers you have, and you will see the hazard of making the above statement.

3. NEVER AGREE TO HAVING FOR A PARTY. If high school

students even hear the word "PARTY," all the manners and courtesy imposed upon them by parents seem to take their leave. We found this out quite innocently when our oldest daughter was a freshman. She asked if she could have a party, about 20 of her friends over after a basketball game at a nearby high school. We naively agreed.

Being somewhat ignorant in the realm of teenage parenting, we thought no one would be there until after the basketball game was over, so we went shopping earlier in the evening. By the time we arrived at home about 9:30, our entire street was full of unfamiliar cars. Christie met us at the front door in tears. She didn't know who half of the people there even were nor how to get rid of them. The party was to be held in the rec room in the basement. Even though Christie was turning away people she didn't know at the front door, other kids were letting them in through the doors--and windows-- in the basement. Our house, only a few months old at the time, was overrun.

My husband, being the calm man that he is, went downstairs and yelled at the top of his voice, "Anyone who is old enough to have a car outside is too old to be at this party. This is a freshman party, so if you can drive, leave right now!" He came back upstairs, confident that the problem was resolved. Christie explained that she had heard the word was getting around at the basketball game that there was a party on our street, so she and her friends had come over early to try to keep things under control. She said many of the kids were from the opposing high school.

We waited 10 minutes, expecting the uninvited guests to respond to Tom's invitation to leave, but only a car or two had moved, and they had been replaced by even more cars. Tom descended the steps again, this time visibly angry. He went to the basement door, opened it and announced that he was calling the police in five minutes if people were not gone. A couple of people began to drift out. He asked Christie's freshmen friends to go upstairs, and then he began to physically escort kids out the door. It took us over an hour to clear the street and yard. Until 1 a.m. carloads of kids were coming by, looking for the party.

At the end of it all, we surveyed the damage. Our new carpet was ruined by feet covered with mud and by someone deliberately unraveling two or three inches of fiber across the hallway. Beer had been smuggled into the kids' shower and was also hidden in the bushes in front of our house. The crowning blow came a few weeks later when the telephone bill came and we found $15 worth of calls to a sex hotline on the night of the infamous party.

If this scene strikes terror into your heart, then remember to never allow your teenager to use the word *party* in connection to your house. Friends can *stop by*, or a few kids *can come over to watch a movie*, but no parties. Beware! Parties and teenagers can be an extremely volatile combination.

4. BE SPECIFIC. This may seem like a dumb rule, one that could have no bearing at all on anyone's safety or sanity, but don't be fooled. Teenagers are experts at finding loopholes in parents' rules and then claiming they didn't know

what they really meant. So any mom asking her daughter to clean her room on Fridays needs to make sure her daughter understands that means every Friday, not the fifth Friday in any month having an *R* in it. If a son tells his dad he'll be home by 12, the father needs to ascertain whether dear son means 12 midnight or 12 noon, or for that matter 12 noon some time next week. If a teen daughter asks to spend the night at Sue's, parents may think it is only logical to assume that if they ask, "Is anyone going to be home?" that they are referring to adults of the parent-type. But their daughter may answer yes, meaning *Sue* is going to be there along with half the kids in the junior class.

Another area that being specific is important is school. Many teenagers simply don't want their parents to really know anything about what they actually do at school. They will avoid most questions like a bad case of herpes. If cornered, they will usually give the standard information, "Everything's going great." Parents often make the foolish mistake of assuming that this means their child is doing well in all his or her classes, but it may only mean that cute guy in algebra just asked me to homecoming or the red-head in English finally smiled at me. So learning to be specific will help to save **your** mental well-being, if nothing else.

5. NEVER TAKE SIDES IN YOUR TEEN'S BATTLES WITH BOYFRIENDS OR FRIENDS. This rule seems like such common sense in all relationships that you might wonder why we even need to mention it here. But when a mother is faced with a broken-hearted daughter whose love of the month

has ruined her sixteenth birthday party by throwing a jealous snit, she might be tempted to commiserate with said daughter by agreeing with her that the offender is a neurotic, self-centered jerk. I speak of this from personal experience. Mom may even feel justified, in an effort to comfort their daughter, in sharing some suspicions of her own about this particular member of the male gender. But beware! This is treading on the edge of a dangerous precipice. Teenage hearts are known to be on the fickle side, and at any given moment the guy who she will never speak to again as long as she lives no matter what may once again be Prince Charming. Unfortunately, she will likely remember every nasty word her mother had to say about her man, and mother will become the evil ogre. It's just like the saying goes, he may be a jerk, but he's her jerk, and no one else better say one unkind remark about him. The same goes with friends, sometimes with the same intensity and sometimes not. But to be on the safe side, it's best to let the teen do the talking when they are upset and confine the parental role to the listening mode.

6. ENCOURAGE SNEAKINESS. This rule is important for the preservation of all parents' peace of mind. I'm not talking here about outright lying and major infringements on all household rules, just a little old-fashioned teenage sneakiness. After all, parents should think back to their own fuzzy recollections of being a teenager. Do their parents, even to this day, know every detail about what they did? I don't consider myself as having been a bad teen; in fact, in most ways, I think I was fairly commendable. Still my father will go

to his grave not knowing many things that I did back then. I think that is as it should be. My basic premise is that there are certain things parents should never know about what their child is thinking, feeling, and doing as long as they aren't doing anything that will cause long-term harm to their minds or bodies.

Our oldest daughter knew how to tread this line of sneakiness quite well. She always told us just enough to make us trust her honesty, without giving away too many of the details that would keep us sleepless at night. Her brother, on the other hand, demanded to tell us EVERYTHING and consequently gave us premature gray hairs and insomnia for long periods of time. So remember, any parent desiring a good night's sleep will not demand to know everything from their teens.

7. NEVER LAUGH AT THEIR ANTICS--AT LEAST NOT IN FRONT OF THEM. Teenagers have a tendency to take their lives quite seriously and sometimes fail to see the humor in some of the ridiculous ways they react to life and its problems. To interfere with this delusion by laughing outright at their earnest attempts at rebellion or independence may do serious damage to their delicate psyches. Parents should wait at least until they get to the privacy of their own rooms before the chuckles begin and be sure to turn on the TV or radio if the chuckles turn into guffaws. They may also want to keep a file, complete with photos, report cards, police records, traffic tickets, and notes, which they will someday share with their teens (or use as blackmail material) or their teens' future children. Someday teens may see the humor in some of their

behavior.

8. CREATE AN ESCAPE HATCH. Any vessel traveling on such hazardous waters as parenting teenagers needs to have a life preserver or two to help the crew over the rough spots. Sometimes finding other parents whose children or as bad as (or better yet, even worse than) theirs provides a good escape. After all, misery loves company. And besides, often in talking about the wild antics of their children, parents actually become good friends. At the very least, one discovers that other families are piloting similar rough waters. Good sex is another excellent escape hatch which can often release some of the tension implicit in living with teens. If all else fails, take up drinking. It may not make a parent's problems any better, but at least he or she won't have to focus on them for a while.

9. DON'T MAKE AN ISSUE OVER INCONSEQUENTIAL THINGS. All teens will do things that will embarrass their parents on one level or another. Many of them will experiment with clothing, hairstyles, friends, activities and political views that are quite different than what parents would like. Some have even been known to choose these things specifically because they know their parents disapprove of them (although admitting this is against some unwritten code of all teens). It is perilous to attach too much importance to these external things or, given once again the capricious nature of the being involved, even the more internal. Some teens seem to have to toss away all the values of their childhood in order to pick up the remnants that they truly treasure as adults. This

may be painful to watch as parents but is sometimes necessary to the formation of well-developed adults. To safeguard the well-being of both themselves and their budding adult, parents should avoid fighting with their teens over unimportant matters, even though they have to swallow a bit of pride to do so. For example, when our son came to church sporting a black T-shirt with a skeleton head on the front, a dangly dagger earring, and combat boots, we had to ignore all the strange looks from the people in the next pew. We bit our tongue and acted as if we were really happy he decided to join us. If nothing else, this behavior will drive your teenager totally crazy for a change, since he will be expecting you to blow a gasket.

Sometimes this rule applies to communication as well. Teenagers have a knack for knowing just what to say to drive parents straight off the deep end. Sometimes they do it with vulgar language, sometimes with tone; others use only facial expressions, but each seems to find that perfect combination that will send the lightning bolt of anger shivering down their dear parents' spine. If confronted with this behavior, your teenaged offspring will swear they are only trying to express themselves, and you are just misunderstanding them because you have no clue as to what goes on in the real world. Often, in fact, they are looking for an excuse to be angry with you so they can use that as a reason to do whatever they please without having to worry about what you think. If you buy into this power struggle, you give them the perfect out. To avoid this potential quagmire, I always make myself do the following exercise. When one of my teens loses

control and begins to verbally attack me, my beliefs, my intelligence (or lack thereof), or my attitude, I know what they want. They WANT a fight, but right when they are in the midst of being the most obnoxious, I walk over, put my arms around them, look into their eyes and say, "I'll always love you no matter what." They find this statement so confusing they don't know how to respond, except to go their rooms, turn on their stereos real loud, and try to figure it out. (This also helps to remind me that, as hard as it is to believe at times, that statement is really true.)

10. NEVER JUDGE YOUR RESULTS AS A PARENT UNTIL YOUR OFFSPRING IS AT LEAST 30. This bit of advice came to me from the devoted mother of ten, who lived to tell of her experiences even after having a child on drugs, one who served time in jail, and a daughter who was pregnant at 16. All of her children are past 30 now, and all of them are contributing members of society. Some teens have a harder time growing up than others; some of them take a lot longer to complete the task. But most of them do get their acts together eventually and go on to find their places in life. The danger here is that if you judge your child too soon, before he or she is done cooking, you just might destroy the chance to have a mature relationship with him or her once they finally do grow up. Sometimes all that is needed is an abundance of faith and time.

## THE KEVIN CHAPTER

Nearly every valuable in our society--from dishwashers to cars--comes with an instruction manual. Except kids. Our three oldest children also came at a time when, although I thought I was mature and wise, I was still much of a child myself, and so as hard as I tried to be a good mother, I made innumerable, inevitable mistakes.

At 20 I yearned for nothing more than to have a child. Every time a baby passed by, I nearly drooled. In fact, I wept when I had my first period after our honeymoon. I didn't cry a second time for that reason. Six weeks after our wedding, I was pregnant for the first time. I loved being pregnant, all six times, especially once I could feel the life moving within me. I devoured books about parenting and prayed for the wisdom to be a good mother. I quit my job three months before Tommy was born and waited expectantly for his arrival. I painted the nursery like a circus, made curtains, painted clown faces, cross-stitched pictures. All the love and longing I felt for this child went into preparing his nursery. I wanted nothing more than to be a good mother. The thought of holding my baby, caring for him and watching him grow consumed me at times.

But that was Tommy. Kevin is another story. I was so enthralled with motherhood at the time of Tommy's birth, so certain I had the right formula, that 22 months later, Christina was born, and Kevin followed 12 months to the day after Christie--Irish twins my OB called them. So there I was, 24 years and 17 days old, the mother of three children and the oldest was not yet three.

My friends thought I was crazy, but I didn't. Back then I was naive enough to believe that giving my babies love and time was all they needed, and I showered them with both. We spent our days playing together, going to the park and zoo, reading, singing, entertaining imaginary friends as well as the neighborhood kids. I was determined to show the world that I could handle three small children with patience and care, and I seldom yelled at them, much less spanked them. We had time-outs and logical consequences, not punishment.

Soon it became apparent that as close in age as these three siblings were, they were distinct individuals, who just might not respond to my shotgun approach to parenthood. By the time they were 5, 3 and 2, I suspected that sometimes love was not enough, and that the answer to how to be a good mother to each of them wouldn't necessarily be easy to find. Times came when my husband and I honestly didn't know how to respond to situations. Tom and I would talk over the problems, pray, and make what we thought were the best decisions at the time. Even now, looking back, I can't pick out any one specific decision that I would absolutely change if I could.

Three more children joined us in time--Bridget, Julie and Billy--and we continued raising our family, planning family experiences, struggling to pass on our faith and traditions, trying to make wise choices for each child, worrying, laughing, playing, fighting, hoping, talking, praying for the best in each child. At times, Tom and I have disagreed about what to do as parents. Sometimes, Tom, as an only child, thought we should have had a sterner hand. Perhaps, he

has suggested, we had made a mistake by encouraging our kids to say whatever they wished to us, to voice their anger and frustration as well as their joys and fears. He thought perhaps we should have demanded more restraint and respect from them. I'm still not sure, for I see four of my children handling that freedom in loving and sensitive ways. But I'm sure with our oldest two boys, their teenage years would have been much quieter if we had not allowed them to speak their minds so freely, but I don't know if it would have been worth the price. At 21, our oldest daughter Christie is exceptionally close to both of us, I think, because we have always allowed her to speak openly and honestly about her feelings and her life. Still something must have gone wrong, as I've said, but I just don't know where.

One day last summer, I sat in court with Kevin, then 19. Several months before one of his best friends had been killed in a motorcycle accident. Kevin and several of his friends had spent the night after his funeral getting drunk, then decided in the lucidity of their alcoholic stupor to go spend the night in a cave. They had no money but wanted a flashlight, so they had gone into a store and taken one. On the way to the car, they were stopped by the security guard who called the police. When the police arrived, they searched Kevin's car, finding alcohol and marijuana. We had to go to court for the disposition of his case on the charges of shoplifting and marijuana possession. I was embarrassed to be there, honestly. His attorney was a good friend of ours, and I knew several other attorneys in the crowded courtroom, I didn't want to look up and meet any of

their eyes when Kevin's name was called. I felt as if I had failed as a mother, and everyone in that court knew it.

I watched Kevin with his brawny good looks, judiciously dressed in a black blazer, tan slacks, white shirt and mottled tie. His golden hair was moussed back carefully to hide the lengthy lock that usually dangled mischievously across his forehead and left eye. He was polite as the judge addressed him, actually deferential, and he flashed that smile that he had always relied on to get him out of trouble. I remembered the day he was born with the sweetest round face and strawberry blond hair. For the first six months of his life I called him my joy-baby because he was such a sweet and easy baby. I wanted to cry, wondering how things had ever gotten to this point.

After Kevin got past early infancy, he never really was an easy child. At nine months, he was climbing out of his crib before he could even walk. As soon as he could walk, he ran and climbed up anything he could find, including bookshelves and curio cabinets. He feared nothing, which resulted in many trips to the emergency room. At 18 months, he jumped off the back of a chair on to a concrete floor, knocking himself unconscious with a concussion. Three months later, while poking a stick into a nest of fire ants in Mississippi, he was bitten over 200 times. His curiosity and agility cost him more stitches than all our other children combined.

He always loved to take risks. At age three, we bought him a little bike with training wheels. His grandmother lived around the block and you could get

there by staying on the sidewalk and not crossing any streets. He wanted to ride his bike to grandma's house. I thought he was too young, so I told him when he could ride without training wheels, he could go to grandma's house. I was confident it would be at least a year. Kevin just looked at me and in his husky little voice said, "Take them off." To prove I was right, I removed the wheels. Kevin got on the bike and took off without a wobble. By the age of four he was the neighborhood champion at popping wheelies--one of which accounted for another emergency room visit and more stitches. It was nothing to walk in the house for a few minutes while the kids played in our fenced in back yard only to return to find Christie crying because Kevin was at the top of the highest tree in the yard and ready to leap from the top.

His engaging smile and funny antics combined with his amazing physical skills made Kevin one of the most sought after players on any team and one of the most sought after buddies in the neighborhood. Kevin played with anybody, kids three years younger, three years older, it never mattered. He just loved to be with people. He also had a tender, generous heart, nearly giving way to tears if he thought another child's feelings were hurt, giving away his most valued possessions to anyone who wanted them.

Despite all of Kevin's physical activity and accidents, I never seriously worried about him until he went to school. Looking back, kindergarten was the beginning of 13 years of torture for Kevin. His need and desire to be physical didn't fit well into a school system that required seatwork and quiet . The first

of many parent-teacher conferences revealed the judgment that Kevin was immature, that he just needed to grow up a little, that, he would be fine in a year or two. No one ever suggested holding Kevin back a grade. He was too bright they would say. But two years later, we were still in the same spot. Kevin's second grade teacher said he could make more animal noises and move his body in more creative ways than anyone she had ever met, but his reading skills were low. Again we heard, he just needed to grow up a little. By the time Kevin was in fourth grade, he could no longer hide his disappointment when Tommy and Christie came home with A's and B's, and he struggled to make C's and D's. We tried to tell him that everyone had different skills and that he should just do his best, but he didn't buy it. He would cry that everyone thought he was stupid. We had him tested, hired tutors, worked diligently on his homework, but nothing seemed to help much. At least Kevin had his sports as solace, a place where his brother Tom did not excel. He did it all--soccer, baseball, basketball, track. He won medals, trophies, awards. He was named most valuable player on his baseball team three years in a row.

But the glory on the sports field only seemed to intensify the pain of the classroom, and a bitter side of Kevin began to erupt when he was about nine. He was sweet, open, funny with anyone he thought liked him, but if he believed someone did not like him or had treated him unfairly, he would brood, snarl, and aggravate. He was going to get attention one way or the other in the classroom and elsewhere. Fourth grade brought the first of a stream of conflicts between

Kevin and one of his teachers. He knew she didn't like him; it was all her fault; he stopped trying. It was a pattern we would see repeated over and over again over the next eight years. It was if he decided not to even try because he was so afraid he couldn't do it well enough to please any more. We started family counseling, and we debated whether we should keep him out of sports if the school behavior did not improve, but the counselor thought that was a bad idea. She thought that Kevin needed something positive in his life, and school was not it.

His talent as an artist budded, and we encouraged him to draw and paint. We bought him an easel, and he would spend hours creating wonderful things on it. He started going on long biking trips with his friends and he became an expert at skateboarding. But none of these successes seemed to help the distress he felt in school.

In sixth grade he got his first F's. More conferences. More testing. I could sense he was getting fed up with it all. His self-esteem plummeted, and he complained that we didn't love him. Couldn't he see that I thought about, prayed about, worried about, and generally spent more psychic and emotional energy involved with him than all five of the other children combined? I seldom missed a game; I listened patiently to every complaint of injustice; I comforted, encouraged, praised. And sometimes in my frustration with his frustration, I lost my temper. During eighth grade we had Kevin tested again. This time the test results showed that Kevin had a slight learning disability, a grapho-motor

weakness, where he had a hard time translating what was in his head onto paper. He also tested 15 points (a large difference) higher on a non-verbal IQ test than on a verbal one. The tester said Kevin needed to be tested orally and to be given a chance to express himself in non-verbal ways. Sound easy? Guess again. In the remaining five years of Kevin's schooling, only two teachers out of 30 really attempted to work with him successfully. As an educator, I have become increasingly disenchanted with the lack of concern and care for students like Kevin who need to be taught by other than traditional means, but that too is another story.

Kevin floundered even further when he got to high school. The one positive thing he had going for him was sports, but because his grades were poor he could not play. The frustration and embarrassment was too much. He began to resent the athletes at school, resent everyone who seemed to do everything he wanted to do so easily. We tried to offer him other alternatives, but nothing interested him. He began hanging around the skaters more. He got an earring which set off a big conflict with his father. He wore his hair shaved close to his head except for a long braid down the side of his face. I tried to tell myself that this was not the worst thing that could happen, but inwardly I knew he was in trouble, and I didn't know what to do to stop it. It wasn't the haircut, but his apathy, his reckless attitude, his anger that frightened me.

In the fall of his sophomore year, Kevin got in trouble with the police for the first time. One of his friends' families had been housesitting for a neighbor.

Kevin's friend was responsible for feeding the neighbor's dog. Kevin and Chris had gone to feed the dog one night when Chris's parents were gone for the evening. Once inside the house, the boys noticed the keys to the Mercedes in the garage lying on the counter. They decided to take the car for a drive around the block. After all, who would know? Unfortunately, neither Kevin nor Chris at 15 had much driving experience. They indeed took the car for a drive around the block, but as they re-entered the garage, Kevin scraped the side of the Mercedes. In a panic they put the car back in the garage and the keys back on the counter, locked the house and left. Neither boy told anyone, but one of the other neighbors had seen the incident and reported it to the police. Kevin and Chris were taken to juvenile court, given a year's probation, and told to seek counseling, plus pay for the damage to the car. Several months and several thousands of dollars later, the counselor told us Kevin was the kind of kid that liked to take risks and didn't think about long-term consequences, as if that were news to us who had lived with him all these years.

At home, Kevin was essentially confined to quarters until probation was up. Friends could visit him at home, but he could only leave the neighborhood in the company of his dad or me. We also told him he could not get his driver's license until probation was up and he paid for his own insurance. Kevin seemed to try to cooperate although he was still floundering at school.

Finally his probation was up. Maybe this would be a turning point, we thought. He had convinced us he would do much better at the nearby public

school than he had been doing at the local Catholic high school since its grading scale was a little lower. I had done my student teaching at the public high school only two years before, and I thought the school might be a good change for Kevin, but I was wrong. He did pass all his classes (not with flying colors, but at this point we just wanted him to graduate), but he also fell in with a rough crowd. Soon he was getting into fights, skipping school and getting into minor scrapes with the police.

Shortly after his seventeenth birthday, he left us a note, saying, "Dear Mom and Dad, don't worry about me. I need to get away for a while. I love you." It was February, and he had taken off with three of his friends for God only knew where. He was already on probation at school, and I was afraid if they found him skipping again they would either suspend him or expel him. I felt sick and for three days sat with the phone in my lap, waiting to hear from him. He was the only one of the four who did send messages home via his girlfriend. She would call to say, "Kevin called. They're in Kentucky (Tennessee, Georgia). He said he loves you." But that wasn't what I wanted to hear at that time. On the fourth day, he returned home. They had simply been on a four-day lark to Atlanta, had run out of money, and finally come home. He couldn't understand why we were so upset. He balked at a three-month grounding from the car, but he obeyed.

His art became increasingly morbid and scary, and he stopped wanting to talk. He stopped going to church. We agonized, and he withdrew. Finally, he

graduated from high school, and we thought perhaps he could find something that was more appealing to him than school had been. He took a full-time job with my brother-in-law, and we agreed to signing on a loan for a used truck that he wanted. Everything seemed to be going well until the night he was arrested. We let him spend part of the day in jail before our attorney got him released on his own recognizance. We restricted the use of his truck to work only until the situation was resolved. He responded shortly by quitting his job. We "repossesed" his truck and sold it.

All of this led to our sitting in the court last summer. I heard the judge tell him he would be fined $200, spend a weekend in jail, do 100 hours community service and be on two years probation, which could be cancelled after the service hours were completed if he decided to enlist in the military, an option he'd been exploring. In some ways, he's still so much a little boy, and I want to comfort him and protect him, but I know I cannot. He must take responsibility for his own life, though my heart breaks for him. I only wish someone had given me that instruction manual.

# POETRY

**The Fairy Tale**

I used to dream of living in a house like this
I would drive by, peering into leaded glass windows
Imagining that inside dwelled enchanted people
    Living storybook lives

Now I peer out of the leaded glass instead of in, but
There is no magic here
Dust still settles on the table tops

**Writer's Block**

Unformed images play hide-and-seek inside my head
showing themselves briefly
behind dark tree trunks,
like shadows cast by the mid-day sun,
then darting away when the clouds come out.
I catch glimpses of them
but cannot hold them,
cannot drag them to base
where they would be mine.
Instead they scamper through my head,
disturbing my peace,
like the sound of mice in the rafters,
gnawing at my solitude,
the way the squirrels chew holes
in the lid of my trash can.
I cannot catch them
though I set all kinds of traps.
They roam wild and free,
refusing to be tamed.

**Enough**

She shuffled through the woods
kicking at the stones and twigs
that cluttered her path
A flock of geese flew above her
honking their way home
but she did not bother to look up
She walked on unblinking
her jacket flapping in the bitter wind
her foot crushing the unseen crocus
To the sounds of children
running through the decaying leaves
she only winced and walked on

When she reached the clearing
she suddenly stopped
The somber winter sky
resurrected into an Easter-egg blend
of coral and azure
She rested
in flame and deep purple

## The Dance

The sound of your heart
beats in my ear
I cannot tell
where you begin
and I end
But it isn't always so

Tomorrow we will dance again
twirling away from each other
fingers barely touching
caught up in other rhythms
moving to different beats
At times we can barely see each other
across the crowded room
to send a smile or a glare
At times we dance so fast
we have no time no energy no breath
to even speak

But soon we will catch each other's eyes
spinning back together again
dancing rapidly at first
until the rhythm
finally
slows
and we are renewed

**Searching**

Connected by a telephone wire,
we nurtured each other with friendship,
giving transfusions of hope
via ear-to-ear resuscitation.
We talked of maternal bonding and unconditional love,
laughing at our frustrations and frailties,
crying at the shape of the world and our thighs,
searching for the meaning of life
while wiping runny noses and dirty bottoms.
One day the phone stopped ringing.
She said she wanted to be free,
needed to be alone.
She began searching for herself
in a bottle,
in the eyes of another man,
but she was lost.
She wandered into St Vincent's Psychiatric Hospital
by way of an overdose,
but she couldn't find herself there either.
Finally she fled to sunny California,
leaving behind five children
and her telephone.
Last week the doorbell rang,
We hugged and cried
over cloudy tea and tuna salad,
remembering what it means
to be sisters of the heart.
Unencumbered, she still is not free,
aching for the hugs and frustrations,
the ringing phones and dirty diapers,
haunted by living specters
whose lives she can no longer touch.

**The Untold Lie**

No one ever told me
that neatness might not count
that my children might not die
if I didn't change the sheets every week
that I might do what I wanted sometimes
and the family wouldn't disintegrate
No one ever told me
that pregnancy and childbirth might be the easy part
that each stage of parenting might have
its own sweetness as well as problems
that having teenagers might be as physically exhausting,
emotionally frustrating and spiritually enriching
as having an infant,
that just when your children get old enough to enjoy,
they might leave home
No one ever told me
that a mother might not have all the answers
that aging might bring confusion as well as wisdom
that the things I saw so clearly at 25
might blur into fuzziness at 40
No one ever told me
that one day I might look into your eyes and be unsure
that moments of such sweet tenderness and honesty
might spring up between us
that I might lie next to you, crushed by stony silence,
unable to sleep, unwilling to leave
that in a single day we might be the best and worst
we have ever been together
No one ever told me
that I might thrive in the midst of
imperfection and uncertainty
that life might weave its way through paradoxes,
mixing the bitter with the sweet
I wouldn't have believed them anyway, but
no one ever told me

**Soaring Dreams**
**A Pantoum**

An icon of purple and red
Gyrates across the sky
A dragon with fifty-foot tail
Undulates in the wind

Gyrates across the sky
Pulling his heart by its strings
Undulates in the wind
Whipping his hope into frenzy

Pulling his heart by its strings
His legs strain to keep up
Whipping his hope into frenzy
The dragon dips and dives

His legs strain to kep up
His arms pulled taut by the string
The dragon dips and dives
Crashing his dreams on the field

His arms pulled taut by the string
An icon of purple and red
Crashing his dreams on the field
A dragon with fifty-foot tail

**The Unraveling**
**To Tom at 16**

The apron string is unraveling
Tie a knot in the end
so it won't come undone
Perhaps a knot will keep it from shredding
No--
Despite the knot--
You continue to unravel the apron string
pulling out each strand
one by one
Carefully you examine the strength of each fiber
Some you casually toss aside
Some you angrily fling to the floor
Some you leave hanging in tatters

Had I known the pain of the unraveling
of all that ties us together
I would have cut the apron string
while it was still whole
and given it to you with love
But--
what could you do with an apron string?

No--
Untie the knot
Come
Unravel it slowly
One strand at a time
It is the only way

Perhaps in time
you will gather a few of the strands
you've cast aside
put them with other threads
you've collected
and weave a beautiful cloth
all your own
to wrap around you
to keep you warm at night

A strong cloth might be better for you
than an apron string
anyway

**Playing the Part**

Last year you wanted to be a model
preening before the mirror
coordinated in trendy colors
Today clad in someone's castoffs
proudly wearing your own mark
You peer at me with steely-blue eyes
red indignation burns from the end
of your low-tar Camel
"Jesus was a Utopian communist,"
you throw at me,
"And you reduce his message to just being nice"
I look away from you
uncertain how to turn human suffering
or the experience of faith
into a political agenda
Angry smoke circles your face
as you wait for an answer that is not coming
I remember you at three, insisting
I play Cinderella to your Prince Charming
dancing in the kitchen
until the clock struck the dinner hour
and the glass slipper broke
along with the magic spell
You tore your construction paper crown
tearfully glaring at me
Even then
I couldn't quite get the role right

**May 4, 1970**

Maybe somehow this all started on the day you were born.
I know you were due on Friday, May 1, 1970.
While you were refusing to make your entrance
until the timing was right,
Students from Kent State gathered
in protest to the Cambodian bombings,
vandalized downtown Kent,
smashing windows.
Saturday night, as I sat in your nursery,
rocking with longing to hold you in my arms,
the students were burning the ROTC building to the ground.
Sunday I played nine games of croquet,
belly swollen in the hot May sun,
trying to coax you to come out,
and the National Guard file into Kent State
carrying rifles and bayonets.
Monday at 2 A.M. when you abruptly woke me
to start my vigil,
young National Guardsmen sat bleary-eyed with anxiety
on campus lawns.
After we watched the sun rise in anticipation,
your dad and I--full of you--left for the hospital,
laughing with nervous joy.
At Kent State, students began to drift to class,
eyeing the worn-down Guardsmen,
tossing caustic words at them.
All morning Dad and I played cards between contractions,
joked and talked with the labor room nurses,
Not believing that this could be so easy,

Not knowing what lay ahead, unseen.
At 11:30 A.M. my water broke,
and you became painfully insistent about being born.
At the same time that your demands engulfed me,
sending wave after wave flooding over me,
the noon bell at Kent State was tolling,
and students were marching up the hill
towards the Guardsmen,
pelting them with their angry sneers,
taunting them with rocks,
calling for them to leave their campus.
In St. Louis the nurses wheeled me into the delivery room.
Dad mopped my head, held my shoulders,
so I could push
as you overwhelmed me with your desire
to break free from me.
At Kent State, as the crowd approached the top of the hill,
the Guardsmen turned towards the students,
and without warning,
opened fire, killing four.
In angry response, you burst into this broken world,
wailing loudly before we even knew
if you were a boy or a girl.
Maybe this is how it began. Perhaps
It was in the stars that you would struggle
with these paradoxes.
I am certain of one thing--
Later that day when I heard the news,
I cried for the students of Kent State
and for you.