2004

Black-Eyed Peas and Cornbread

Janet Lewien

BLACK-EYED PEAS AND CORNBREAD

Janet Lewien, B.S.

An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate
School of Lindenwood University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Written Communications

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ABSTRACT

Black-Eyed Peas and Cornbread is a collection of autobiographical stories covering the period of my childhood in the mid-1950's and into adulthood. The stories describe my recollections of growing up in different regions of the country and the formative experiences that shaped me. Its sub-title could read "Passages" because the stories recall pivotal events that influenced the directions of my life.

The idea for this story began forming when I was enrolled in the Literary Non-Fiction course for the Lindenwood College for Individualized Education. This cluster program contained a section on "Memoir and the Personal Essay", which was taught by a teacher with a passion for the written word. The design of the course was to instruct students on how to tell the stories of their lives in ways that made the ordinary appear extraordinary, using whatever dramatic or comedic style necessary to create a masterful work.

Another dimension to *Black-Eyed Peas and Cornbread* was achieved through the use of poetry. Poems introduce each story and are designed to set the tone for the message expressed in each memoir. The idea to merge the memoir pieces with poems followed soon after taking the Creative Writing cluster that included an emphasis in poetry and expressive writing. Blending the two genres enabled the stories to create a deeper richness and establish a stronger connection between the characters and the events.

Creating this particular written project required several processes: developing a plan that took the stories from their natural beginnings to a conclusion, analyzing how best to tell each story using description and dialogue while maintaining a consistent narrative voice throughout; merging imagination with factual reporting of real events, and telling each tale in a creative and engaging manner. Additional support for the development of the stories was achieved through interviews of persons described in the stories, thereby enabling added story dimension and depth.

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A Culminating Project Presented to the Faculty of the
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COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY:

Professor of Communications, Director of Communication Programs, Michael Castro, Ph.D., Chairperson and Advisor

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Dedication

For my mother,
Myra,
always believing.

For my husband, Jerry,
and Lisa and David,
for the journey.

Thank you,
Michael, Glenn, Harry
for inspiration.

Table of Contents

Introduction

I have always felt that there were two reasons why I like to read. One was that I was lucky growing up when and where I did. Both of my parents loved reading, particularly my dad. His eyes devoured anything he could lay his hands on, whether it was technical books related to his work as a radio man or the detective stories that he read voraciously.

The first book that I remember catching my attention was called *Little Robin Red Breast*. I was four years old and I was entranced with the story's book cover, which showed a little girl who had dark hair just like me. Before two days were up, my mother had gone through this book with me. Between my father's passion and my mother's patience, all three children in my family became connoisseurs of books at an early age.

The second influence on my reading habits was Miss Joanne Woodward. I walked into her World Literature class the first day of my junior year and stayed with her for the remaining two years of my high school. We studied a range of authors from the classics and romance periods to contemporary writers of the 1960's. We read stories or poems out loud in class to appreciate the rhythms of the words, in groups so that we could discuss symbolisms, or silently. Students would beg to get into her class and once chosen, would never leave.

Over the years I have continued to read at that same rate, grateful that my eyes only slightly get irritated from the strain of reading too fine print in some of my books. Favored writers who continue to get read and re-read over and over include Harper Lee, Alice Walker, and Laura Ingalls Wilder.

In To Kill A Mockingbird, Lee's development of her main characters, Atticus Finch, Scout and Jim float right out of the story's pages, and I feel like I have stepped foot in Macomb, Alabama in the 1930's.

Alice Walker's telling of her story, The Color Purple, holds rich descriptions of the characters in the book, and I like the way Walker continues to return to a strong theme of the story, the bonds of sisterhood. Laura Ingalls Wilder books and the simplicity of her stories tug at my heartstrings.

In the following story, Black-Eyed Peas and Cornbread, I relate an assortment of my personal memoirs using poetry and prose to lead into each story. The stories are separated into three major areas: Childhood, Adolescence, and Adulthood. Each section is prefaced with descriptions of these life episodes, and they use a blend of prose and essay to set the tone for the next assortment of stories.

Preface

Childhood

Some say it is the roughest time of their lives; for others it is the best.
It usually falls somewhere in-between.
Time spent exploring and discovering.
Boundaries established, friendships formed, hearts breaking.
On the way to becoming.

I have always considered myself a child of the South, even when it wasn't the most popular thing to acknowledge. A Southerner was what I had been born to be, and it started out in the southern regions of Texas.

Children from the South look at things differently than those born in northern regions. I learned early that it was all right to have lazy days when I could just sit for hours on the front porch with one leg dangling off the edge while looking at the cloud formations. That was just thinking things through. The trick was not to let on that I had nothing to do because then things would change in a hurry.

We eat different things down South, too. Fried anything has always been a favorite as long as it can be covered by gravy. And if we planned a family get-together, it was best to include a boiling pot of black-eyed peas, with bacon and onion floating on top. And that meant cornbread, too. If we were anything, then we were "black-eyed peas and cornbread folks" for the first part of me.

My childhood holds the memories of my most remarkable times. Whether or not they are wrapped up in black-eyed peas and cornbread stories, they are easy to recall. All it takes is the slightest taste, or scent, or noise, like the sound of a low-flying rock sailing past.

FIRST TO DRAW BLOOD

Never backing down,
dear brother
standing next to me
shoulder to shoulder.

Rock mortar all around,
hand heated stones
flying from our slings
to hit their marks,

until the first blood.

In the beginning, there were rock fights. Those are my earliest recollections of life. As I grow older; it feels like it should be the memories of someone else. But getting stung by a low-flying rock left more than just a mark; it tied me together to the two people in my life who are the same as me. The scar is just a tiny thing now, but growing up I wore it like it was the biggest battle scar ever won in the honor of sisterhood.

"The Rucker kids against the Taubert kids," was the battle cry we heard on one spring day in April. I was four years old and led by my older brother Louis, who was seven. Ginny, at eight years was the oldest of the Rucker brood. She had already entered the awkward stage that lingers between wanting to disassociate herself with her rough and tumble brother and grungy little sister and having to take up the call to arms in defense of her honored name.

We were growing up in the southern area of San Antonio, Texas, right off South Presta Avenue. Poor described my life then but everyone we knew was floating in that same boat. But did it matter? Not even one tiny bit. Our lives were full from sunrise to dusk, and if any one of us children voiced our concern to our parents about having nothing to do, then we all suffered. By suffering, I mean cleaning, dusting, sweeping, hoeing – anything that meant work was being assigned to us so we wouldn't be without "something to do," as our Dad would say.

Luck would have it that we were without chores on the day of our feud with our best friends, the Tauberts. Five blocks separated our families although at one time we had lived next door to them on Ada Street. Then Dad was hired on as a

civil servant at Lackland Air Force Base, and that only meant one thing. We would have more money, enough to move out of that cramped two-bedroom house and into something bigger. That's how we moved to the house on Regina Avenue. By moving, we had elevated our position in life one notch, and that frequently tested the bonds of our friendships. Sharon, the baby in the Taubert family, and I were best friends and Ginny spent her time with Judy and Edith, the older Taubert girls. The small squabbles we females usually had were usually settled quickly. However, Louis and Sonny, the only boys in each of the families, spent most of their time together, and were always singled out for the troubles they caused. Their arguments generally escalated into grander fights that took on bigger proportions. This day in April would be no different than any other.

The two boys had been playing cars on an old dirt pile we had all constructed, but a shoving match between the two escalated into name-calling that was topped off by a family challenge. "You started it," hollered Sonny, kicking up dirt with the tip of his boot and at the same time, pushing my brother with both hands. He was mad because my brother had taken one of his cars off of the highway they had constructed on the dirt and left it somewhere in the yard.

"And we're going to finish it," retorted Louis, his face turning red. "Be back here in an hour and we'll go against each other."

The line was drawn and there was no turning back. Friends may be friends, but blood is blood. And that meant it had to be settled the way fights had always been for the Rucker's and the Taubert's, through the old fashioned way, a rock fight.

The one thought that raced through my head was that I hoped somehow we could save the racetracks we had made because they were perfect. We spent hours digging out the roads and intersections and had fashioned twigs together so that they looked like stop signs. Our five-and-dime tin cars, painted fire engine red, school-bus yellow, and navy blue sailed right on through those roads with just the least little bit of dirt stirred up. Those roads were "smooth like silk" Louis boasted after we had finished them. Packed Texas dirt put together just right makes the best possible roads.

Once Louis agreed with Sonny on the time of the rock fight, our next job was to find the right rocks. Ginny couldn't be bothered at the time so she went off somewhere to sulk with her Taubert friends until it was time to do the deed. Loyal to my brother above all else, I tagged along behind him in my oversized jeans that were rolled up several times in each leg so I wouldn't drag them behind me. Many times Louis would have to stop whatever he was doing to squat down beside me to help me roll those pants' legs up several times over. That's one of the reasons why I adored my brother; he always saw after me. He might not have liked it, but he always did.

We grabbed an old rusty galvanized tub that was sitting by the wringer washer that our mother used every week on washday, figuring that it would carry a fair share of rocks for our fight. Like any war situation, we knew we needed to have plenty of ammunition in case we were caught by surprise. After all, the Tauberts had four kids and the Ruckers only numbered three.

Can it be that fifty years ago rocks were smoother to the touch and rounder in their shape than rocks of today? Louis used to say that the best stones were smooth and had a flatness to them, similar to the type our father would sail across the lake whenever we went fishing down at our uncle's ranch in Yancey, Texas. Dad's flat stones would skip once, twice, three times across Lake Medina. They were the best for every use we could think of and we knew they would be ideal for our war plans.

Two o'clock was our rock fight start time and by 1:45 p.m. we were prepared. Ginny made me change what used to be a white tee-shirt for a long sleeved hand-me-down (what else?) which, of course, had sleeves that had to be rolled up several times. Between my shirt and my pants, I must have looked like a rolled rubber band ready to unravel.

Louis wanted us to have the best defense possible so he included the steel garbage can lids that he had taken from our back yard. They looked like gladiator shields, despite their dents and odors of tossed out food scraps. So with rocks in one hand and his hand on the handle of the garbage can lid, he stood ready.

"Be sure and duck behind your lid when the rocks start to fly, and jump around so they don't hit you. Keep your legs moving," Louis hollered at me, peering around at me.

I was next to him, about a half-foot shorter, but with the heart of a lioness defending her den.

Sonny should have never shoved my brother.

I never found out who threw the first rock. I didn't see any stones flying because I was too scared to peer around the lid. Loud pings sounded out when the Tauberts' rocks hit the metal on the garbage lids but I kept mine up to my face as much as possible with my left hand and, with my right hand, tossed the smooth flat rocks as fast and as hard as my four-year old arm could. The fight only lasted a few minutes, with enough time for some small stones to hit their marks, causing the echoing "Ouch" to resound off the lids.

I wasn't the first one hit but I was the first one with blood. Somehow one of the Tauberts' rocks found its way to my right leg and, despite the layers of rolled-up clothing that I had on, a flat-edged stone sailed through the garbage can barriers and hit the calf of my leg like a bullet finding its mark. It stung like a doctor's needle.

Screaming at the top of my lungs brought Mother out the front door, charging past the screen door and looking right and left down the street. "What's going on," could be heard halfway down the block. By that time the Tauberts had thrown down their rocks and taken off for home. Ginny was crouched over me and was trying to pull up my pants leg to see the damage. Louis stood still, believing his day was going to end badly.

It turned out that Louis was wrong. After I got cleaned up, nose wiped, and clothes changed, I explained to our mother how Sonny Taubert had shoved Louis and, against our better wishes, we were forced to defend ourselves. I imagine that the Taubert kids were telling their parents the same.

"You have to learn to turn and walk away from people when they're mean," she said. She was angrier than I remembered seeing her before. Mother had never given us the silent treatment, and I didn't know how to react. I not only had the pain in my leg, but my heart felt wounded by her anger. We brooded around the house for the rest of the day, sure that we would all be in serious trouble when her father came in from work. When he finally reached home, she explained what had happened and, rather than finding ourselves at the receiving end of a swat on our backsides, we only heard the lecture about what could have happened once or twice at the dinner table.

Later that night, Dad found me out on the back steps of our house. I was sitting underneath the yellow porch light swatting at gnats flying over and around my head. The wooden steps squeaked as he sat next to me. He crossed his right leg over his left one and then lifted me up to his lap, settling me in on his right side. He gently rocked me. I sunk my head into the space between his chin and his shoulder. We sat there for a few minutes and then he began telling me about his life as a boy with his eight brothers and sisters.

"Janet Faye, your Uncle George and I used to go out in the fields late at night and swipe a watermelon from one of the nearby farms, close to Hondo," his low-pitched voice warmed me. "We shouldn't have done it and it was wrong," he reiterated, glaringly down at me to make his point, "but we always watched out for each other. Do you know what I'm talking about"?

I nodded my head, and then told him I'd do my best to keep Louis out of trouble. I thought Ginny had learned her lesson, and she would be ready to severe her ties with us anyway after the day's fiasco.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the last of our rock fights. The following week we had a doozie of a fight when Sonny deliberately trampled our racetrack and demolished it. But Louis had taught me a valuable lesson in our earlier rock fight, and it was something I hadn't forgotten. His words, "keep your legs moving," kept echoing in my ears. I knew if I danced around long enough, I wouldn't get hit by any low-flying rock.

LONG COOL DRINK OF WATER

Hers were the first eyes in my world;
they have always held my attention.
First arms to cradle me,
over and through and up.
I fell back into her and
let her point the way.

Mississippi summers wilted everything in sight during the summer of 1955. It was typical to take two baths during the days with such high humidity; a quick bath in the morning just to wipe off the sweat collected during the hot and sultry nights when sleep wasn't possible anyway. At night, I'd run the tub as full as I could with tepid water and relax in it until Louis would holler for me to get out and let him have his turn.

Central air conditioning didn't exist in those days, not for folks like my family. If some people managed to stay cool because they were lucky enough to have an air conditioner, they wouldn't be so trashy as to flaunt it. That would have been considered having bad and unbecoming manners.

"Just make a paper fan and fan yourself," said Ginny, who was four years my senior and, much to her chagrin, my roommate. She was not the complainer that I was, and I thought she portrayed exactly what a Southern lady must be. Being the oldest child in the family had given her some power, and Louis and I rarely challenged her.

I would have given anything on that early summer day to feel the slightest breeze come off the Gulf and into Biloxi. We were waiting for the parade to begin in a couple of hours. Time passes slowly as a child and each tick of the clock seemed to last a lifetime. On that particular morning, time just dragged.

"A watched pot never boils," Mother said when she noticed that I kept looking out the door and then back towards her, as though trying to make a point. Her remarks puzzled me because this old lady who lived next door to us in the Air

Force off-base housing kept a black cauldron with boiling water most of the time underneath the veranda in the family's backyard. Her husband and two boys were always bringing home lobsters from the Bay and tossing them into the pot. I knew that water boiled whether you looked at it or not.

Good Lord, but it was hot that day. If the wind didn't stir at all, I longed for my sweat to cool me. Louis and I lazed outside the door of the old house and used paper fans that Ginny made to help cool us. I played the Southern belle with an accent rich with "ya'lls and "Lordy's" while my brother rolled his eyes at me as he played with Ginny's jacks on the concrete steps of our duplex.

Tiring of the Southern belle routine, I decided I wanted to go barefoot when we left to go to the parade. It didn't matter if my feet sizzled like bacon in a frying pan when I walked on the sidewalk down to the beach. I tried to be careful and not let my mother know my intentions. Lectures about ringworms and other Mississippi parasites always made for long afternoons.

Just as I was planning my escape, my mother's words, "You are not leaving this house without shoes on your feet," rang through the house. I peered around the corner and her cornflower blue eyes nearly pinned me to the wall. "I don't want to worry about you picking up some disease or stepping on glass or getting blistered." Grabbing my sandals, I ran out the door and heard the screen door pop.

"Janet Faye, come back in this house and leave it correctly," Mother called, with just a hint of steel in her words.

I grumbled and returned inside. "Why do I have to wear these stupid shoes? I can't ever have any fun," I grumbled as I turned back to go in the back door. The only good shoes I had were saved for Sunday school so I was forced to wear Ginny's old hand-me down sandals, sandals that caused me to stumble if I walked too fast. Fastening the hook through the worn old leather buckle, I stood and took my mother's hand as we headed out of our house with Louis and Ginny leading the way.

Living in Mississippi had been an unexpected adventure when my father transferred from his job at Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas earlier that year. Ginny and I, along with our father, were native Texans while my brother had been born in my mother's home state of California. When we left Texas behind, we left behind everything I had ever known.

But I believed that as long as my mother was close at hand, then the world was as it should be. And on that walk to the parade with my sister and brother in my sights and the feel of my mother's hand on my skin, nothing could have been better, except perhaps if I had been barefooted.

It had all started out so well, but by the end of the day I would learn that the world I thought I knew would be changing in ways I couldn't imagine.

There were hundreds of people, mainly military families or government workers and their children, heading toward the park and the parade. Streets had been cordoned off for the festivities and children were running from one side to the next. Lobsters caught off shore in the Gulf of Mexico were hauled back to tubs of boiling water into which they were dropped live. Family matriarchs

watched over those boiling lobsters like they were melted gold. When they were cooked just right, families would pick up their lawn chairs to move them closer to the cauldron, looking like armies of ants that were on the move. Lobsters were placed on doubled-up paper plates and torn off pieces were dipped into melted margarine; fingers were licked to get that last bit. There was lemonade and watermelon and cotton candy. Everything I wanted to have at that parade was right there in front of me. The sounds of pipe music took my attention to the side of the road and there, coming right at me, were two hideous clowns.

Clowns with red frizzy hair and those stretched-out smiling lips that always raised the hair on the back of my neck; clowns that were supposed to be funny but only frightened me. One clown was on stilts and one was just fanning through the crowd, coming too close for my comfort. I hid my face in Mother's skirts until he passed by me.

Oh, it was hot. I'd been up all day and was excited from all the activity and playing in the street. All my money had been spent on lemonade and cotton candy and I needed a drink of water to flush the sweet taste of sugar out of my mouth.

The only thing I had to drink was water from the fountain in the middle of the park.

And I wanted a drink. The old, rusty fountain had no one around so I shook off my mother's hand and ran through the people milling about. That long cool drink of water coming out from the fountain would taste so good.

Racing over in my sandals, I bent and placed my hand on the nozzle for the water. I was catching the water stream on my tongue when I realized that it had gotten very still. I angled my head to see what the matter was and noticed that people were looking in my direction. They were staring. At me. I wouldn't have been surprised if the sun had fallen from the sky at that exact moment because time stood still for me then. The breath felt sucked out of my body.

I turned to look for my mother. A habit I had learned was to duck under her calf-length skirts whenever I wanted to hide. But I couldn't find her. Mortified with embarrassment, I thought, "Why are people looking at me"? I finally spotted her through the crowd. Standing there, she wore a cockeyed smile on her face.

At five years old, I couldn't read that the sign over the water fountain said "*COLORED ONLY*." Across the park stood another fountain that had a long line of people. But there had been nobody in line where I went and I just wanted a drink. Even if I knew how to read, I didn't know what *colored only* meant. That was something that Mother had never taught me. Nor would she have. I was only thirsty, and the water was there.

People looked away; some at my mother to see what would happen. They might have been disappointed when she turned and called for Ginny and Louis. "It's time to get home, kids," she said. I'm sure she looked over her shoulder at them, but not in anger for she was a patient woman. It had been a long day and we were going home.

We began our walk back to our home in Biloxi. And as my sister and brother walked ahead of us, Mother looked straight ahead. We walked side by side and I

never once stumbled in those old leather sandals nor did I grumble about having to leave the parade. I may have started that day out as a five-year old child, but that afternoon I instinctively knew that I had gained something. As we walked, Mother reached down for my hand and squeezed it sharply.

It was 1955 and the South was getting ready to see some mighty changes. But in that moment, there was just a little girl taking a long cool drink of water who was too busy with life to pay attention to the signs.

THE GIFT

Old Texas lean-to
called it first home
with whitewashing siding,
scrubbed Ajax clean.
We were waiting.

Two rooms long and
one room wide,
holding Mother, sister
brother, and me.
All of us waiting.

Hot, scorching summer,
wet and humid winter.
Dry dust blowing from a
western sky, neighbors calling
While we were waiting.

South-bound train
whistling five miles away,
a traveler bound for home
steps past our door,
his face unknown to his youngest child,
Waiting.

The first family I ever knew came from southern Texas, outside of Hondo. A sign outside of that dry, dusty town announced, "This is God's county. Don't drive like hell through it." Outsiders took those words to heart and watched their speedometers when they rode through Hondo while some kids living there all their lives shot straight out of town the moment they could leave.

Hondo was my father's home and for the first early years of my life, it was my only world. Just like most kids, I grew to learn that each family has members who are remembered for certain characteristics. Uncle George is a favored one, a Texan with a sharp wit who is always ready to tell a funny story. He likes life. It's easy being around him. Grandmother was a terrific cook, someone who was in constant motion, a busy woman. Of course, she had given birth to ten children, who tried their best to add onto the family numbers. And with all the family meeting every weekend at her and Papa's house, it only makes sense that her days were kept busy. Aunt Winnie was known for being the one who never left the state of Texas for anything, having said, "Why should I? Everything I need is right here."

Papa, a tall man, smoked a pipe that he filled with sweet smelling tobacco. He would pour out just the right amount into the pipe and then let one of the grandchildren tap-tap-tap the pipe against the front porch railing to pack it tight. Two or three grandchildren at a time would take turns sitting on his knees while he sat on the front porch swing. We would do this every evening in that time between daylight and dusk, when the encroaching nightfall would begin to feel like a warm blanket.

Aunt Anna Lee was the teacher, not only by trade but also by natural inclination. Uncle B.C. was the absent one, having left for Louisiana in his younger days and eventually marrying a Cajun woman from Louisiana. Everyone had their part and that included those members who married into this Texas clan. It especially included our very own cowboy.

The Marlboro man. That's just what my Uncle Wilbur looked like. Rugged and riding tall in the saddle, he'd pull on the reins of his horse like a character from a romance novel. He wasn't much for small talk and when he smiled at me, the pit of my stomach felt like a hundred fireflies had been released inside of me. My palms would start to sweat and I got tongue-tied. His dark eyes twinkled and it was just that sparkle and sweet-boy smile that caused me to lust after my own uncle, as much as any eight-year old girl can feel when she's at the threshold of some great changes in her life.

He was something, that young man of my childhood. He was the cowboy of my dreams.

All of the cousins I grew up with in Texas knew we could count on Uncle Wilbur. Married to my father's sister, Mona, his ranch set on acres of Texas tumbleweed land. It was raw country, with few roads and endless rolling hills and scorching heat in the summertime that blistered me from head to toe.

Aunt Mona is the sweet sister of nine surviving children from my father's family. She is the baby of the family, the gentlest soul and prettiest dark-haired beauty of my father's clan. She married Uncle Wilbur right out of high school, and she always made way for any niece or nephew who wanted to spend time out

in the country, even a scared little city kid who put her foot in the stirrups only once.

It was the custom in those days that if something happened to a family member, the children would get parceled out to the rest of the family until things were back to normal. The summer of 1956 was just one of those times.

My family had moved back to Texas from a year in Mississippi and Dad, though he was only in his mid-30's, suffered a heart attack. Mom needed to tend after him and so my sister, brother and I became the cause of family conversations.

It wasn't long before Aunt Mona and Uncle Wilbur opened their doors and instantly grew their own family by several members. My sister, Ginny, and brother Louis were the first to arrive at the Wilson ranch and I was to arrive later, after spending a few weeks with my Aunt Ruth. Although I loved my Aunt Ruth and was close to her daughter, Diane, it wasn't the same as being with Uncle Wilbur and Aunt Mona. It was the difference between being a city kid or being out at the ranch.

Living in the country meant there was work to do. Chores had to be done, and I was grateful that I didn't have to do anything with the cattle. Uncle Wilbur raised Brahma bulls, big ugly beasts with unsightly bumps where their shoulders should be. They are mean creatures and I believed they were that way because Mother Nature made them so sinfully ugly, ill tempered and dangerous. I was glad to stay away from them, and didn't even want to approach the gentle milk cows that they had. Some things were better left unlearned.

For a while that summer I got to help with gathering eggs from the henhouse. This was something I already had learned to do because my grandparents kept chickens in their back yard in town. It didn't take me long to learn how to travel faster than the old rooster when he charged at me whenever I picked up the eggs. The noisy ramblings of the red-crowned old man of the henhouse couldn't compare to the occasional pecks from the hens themselves in the moments when I least expected. Still it was an activity that didn't take a lot of time so I gathered the eggs into the basket and took them to my aunt.

That started what would be my free time. It was time to do whatever I wanted, to explore around the countryside or whatever else struck my fancy.

I spent hours by myself outside the barn where I dug up doodlebugs. "Doodle-bug, doodle-bug, come out quick. Your house is on fire," I would say and the little rollie-pollies scampered out of the mound of dirt. All I had to do was touch one and it would roll into a ball. I'd lie back in the dirt and look into that cornflower blue Texas sky and smell the heat of the day.

Louis and Ginny learned how to ride that summer. I was petrified of the horses whenever I sat on the saddle and looked down at the ground. So I stayed home with Aunt Mona and helped her after morning chores. I don't believe she minded that her young niece was so timid because that was the time of day when I would run and get her hairbrush from her bedroom dresser and ask if I could brush her hair.

I never had to wait long for an answer. In a family with a thousand idiosyncrasies, everyone knew which one belonged to Aunt Mona. She loved

having her hair brushed. Now with her it wasn't a laborious chore; it really was a labor of love. As I brushed through her long, thick dark hair, she would nod off for just a few minutes. While she dozed, I would gaze at her face and see me.

It was at Uncle Wilber and Aunt Mona's where I learned this love of the land that I have. Besides that, if it was important to Uncle Wilber, then it was to me also. His ranch still showed the scars of the marching troops under the direction of Santa Ana, who captured the Alamo in the 1830's. Standing at one particular spot on his ranch, I could spot a road that was made during their march from Mexico to San Antonio. I could almost hear the horses clomping on the road and men marching along, breathing heavy under the weight of their gear and anticipating battles to come.

Nighttime was my favorite time at the ranch. I felt like I could reach out and touch one of the stars in the heavens. Sitting in the screened-in back porch with Aunt Mona, my cousins, and Louis and Ginny, we would quietly talk about our day's adventures. No neon lights challenged the natural lighting; no sounds of cars racing or airplanes overhead. The sounds I remember belonged to the baleful cries of coyotes singing in the range. The soul of this land claimed me.

Passing years would take me away from Texas and on to other places. At a family reunion held 35 years later, I admitted to Ginny my shameful secret. "I once had a crush on Uncle Wilbur and wanted to marry him someday." She laughed and said that she, too, had felt the same way. When we talked with our other female cousins, they all admitted that had felt the same about our special family cowboy.

We finally told him at the end of the reunion, in front of our other aunts and uncles, about the girlhood crushes we had on him. We assured Aunt Mona, whose dark hair was turning to gray, that we never wanted anything to happen to her; we just all loved this cowboy. She laughed the hardest of any of us, while Uncle Wilbur blushed shades of red. Though retired from ranching now, he is still the most handsome cowboy I ever saw.

It was more than the girlhood crushes, though, those gifts that Uncle Wilbur gave to all of us who arrived at the gates of his ranch. He brought to us a sense of family, of uncompromising acceptance and unconditional welcome. The cowboy who talked so little spoke volumes by his actions.

And he can still make my heart flutter.

HOBO DAYS

Round the curve of
criss-crossed tracks,
in the distance
appears a conductor.
He waves his black iron lantern
signaling the all clear as

rail cars sway.
Unknown faces journey
past southern towns,
between light and dark.

Wednesdays were hobo days. Carl and Jermane, my best friends, said that was the day that the Union Pacific train headed west soon after school and if we got there early enough, we'd see plenty of hobos catching a ride. Maybe they were going all the way to California. Maybe they were going to find work. They just may well have been going home to their families.

It was 1959 and at the end of the Eisenhower-era, when people were supposed to have plenty and prosperity was right around the corner. Maybe these hobos were just around the corner from finding their prosperity. Maybe.

I was ten years old and although Carl and Jermane were my age, they were behind me one year in school. Carl and Jermane were my best friends; they followed closely behind me because my mother treated them like they were special kids. Carl's mom had left him with her mother the summer before, and she never came back for him. He made excuses about how she went north to Chicago to get a good job and make some money, but his grandmother never said anything about her.

Carl was a sad kid, small for his age, who wanted everybody to like him. He tried especially hard to make an impression on my mom. He used to sigh and then tell me that he loved her, a fact that irritated me a lot until I figured out why. He needed me to share her with him if only for a little while after school each week.

Jermane was the quiet one. He stayed with his grandmother and grandfather who were from the old country and didn't speak English very well. Even though Jermane had never been out of Texas once, he spoke with a heavy German accent

after having learned English from the only two people who were raising him. He compensated by not talking very much.

He was also cursed by having the biggest ears I ever saw on any human being, which caused him to be constantly teased and belittled by bullies at school. I was the only one who noticed that he had the softest brown eyes that twinkled when he smiled and his soft brown hair had the whisper of a curl at the ends when it got too long. But Jermane never complained about anything; he seemed happy. He was part of our trio, and we were fierce in our loyalties to each other. I was the only girl in our small group, fascinated by the oddities of these two boys who followed after my every step because I had a house filled with people.

After school we crossed the tracks and ran to Jermane's back field where we tore off stalks of sugar cane that his grandfather grew. The stalks grew high and we used them like sabers in sword fighting while we raced back into place by the tracks. Jermane's grandmother gave us three Strawberry Nehi's, in glass bottles with long skinny necks.

We did our best to imitate our friends, the hobos, by carrying knapsacks to the tracks. I used my brother's red handkerchief to tie at the end of my stick and Carl and Jermane's were faded blue and white. Once we tried putting cans of food in the kerchiefs – Pork'n Beans because that's what hobos ate - but they dropped out and rolled down into the culvert. That day we were delayed getting to the tracks on time, and the train was gone when we got there.

We then crossed back over the shallow culvert that was at the drop of my back yard, where our jars of tadpoles sat waiting for us to free them on Thursday. We

had our routines and Mondays were our days to catch tadpoles. Thursdays we released those lucky enough to have survived their captivity. There were still several tadpoles swimming in the jar's murky water.

Mother got home from work and she spotted us and waved. I could see her shade her eyes with her hand as she looked into the sun toward us to make sure we were okay. We returned her wave as we walked to the crest of the hill, which was about 20 yards away from the tracks. It was about 4:00 p.m. with plenty of daytime still left.

The train was due at any time.

We started ripping sugar cane stalks into strips, and then we licked the wet strands of the stalk that stored the sugar. We drank the Strawberry Nehi's quickly. Anticipation made us thirsty.

We sat down to wait. The first clue that the train was approaching was when the ground started to shake, just a little bit, like the way I felt if I stood on one foot too long. We looked at each other and started grinning just like we had some deep, dark secret we shared. Soon enough, the ground was shaking harder and the train was whistling fiercely, announcing its fast approach.

The first to go by was the conductor with a hat with a shiny black bill. We never noticed if it was the same conductor each week but he always looked happy – waving his hands and broadly smiling. I thought it was because he had a good paying job. Carl and Jermane said it was the fact that he got to leave home for a few days.

Once we waved at the conductor, we counted the cars on the train, some of them flatbeds with machinery piled high. Some held cattle that we knew were being taken into the city to be unloaded at the feedlot. We never discussed that very much. If we did, we all swore we would become vegetarians.

Finally, the empty cars filed past us. The motion of the cars echoed ker-thump, ker-thump, ker-thump and we looked up and waved at our friends, the hobos. Not one of them had a knapsack, or a stalk of sugar cane, or even a Strawberry Nehi.

One of the hobos then caught my eye. His black hair made him look younger than most of the other gray-haired men, but as the train slowed and I could see him more clearly, his unlined face looked old. I wondered about him and how far from home he was. While other hobos generally smiled, this one only slightly nodded at me. He looked worn out and ready for a bath and bed and most of all, food. But he had a long way to go.

We counted up to twenty men that day and even though three or four men would be in the same vacant car, they never appeared to be speaking to each other.

I used to think that the hobos were lucky to ride the rails and how come girls didn't get to go along? When I despaired about this inequality, Carl and Jermane sat silent. That particular day I realized that when they walked me to my house, it was to get a glimpse of my mom, whose soft voice was different than the voices they heard at home.

"It's time to go home now, boys," Mom said as she looked through the pantry and began pulling out jars of canned vegetables. She squinted as she looked in the back of the shelf, trying to spot the green beans. She glanced around past Carl and Jermane and smiled brilliantly at me. "Your grandparents will be wondering where you went off to."

"It'll be okay for a bit," said Carl, laying his tied-up knapsack on the back porch, alongside Jermane's. "We won't be missed for awhile."

It was the last Wednesday in April of 1959 and Carl and Jermane and I never counted hobos on rail cars again.

But we continued with our research on tadpoles.

TOMATO NIGHTS

Two souls
strong willed and clashing.
Red was the color
of the night.

Battle lines were drawn around dinnertime at my house when I was a child. Even as I look back and try to recollect moments that could resemble scenes from "Father Knows Best," I remember that we were our own unique family. As most children do, Ginny, Louis, and I tested the waters with our father and sometimes the war started over dinner. I tried to choose those times wisely.

The color red is a favorite of mine, particularly when it comes to food. Spaghetti sauce and strawberries top the list, closely followed by others in the "red" group. Rarely complaining about anything my mother set down in front of me at the dinner table, I always made sure I thanked her first every night for what she had prepared for us. The only change to my routine was on the nights she added tomatoes to the menu.

I don't know why I hated tomatoes. Family members bragged that they could pick them right off the vine, rinse them off with the hose, and pop them right in their mouths. While they gloated about their prowess with this food feat, my stomach would start to turn. Even worse than visualizing them in the tomato garden with the hose was the smell that emitted from the tomatoes, that musty odor that reeked of something between iron and earth.

Every night Mom would call out to me from the back porch, as I played with friends in the rain-filled culvert in back of my house, "Dinner's ready. Come and wash up."

Stomach rumbling, I raced back to our old wooden house that had a back porch bolstered by stilts, with about 20 steps leading up to our back door. The back yard brimmed with rows of green beans, peppers, and other vegetables, which

included tomatoes that Mom planted during her summers off from teaching school. I always tried to get to the bathroom first so I could quickly wash my hands and head for the table. I made sure that my hands were clean, palms up and palms down. Dad's eagle eye could discern if one of his brood was untidy.

Ginny, at 13 years, was the oldest. Because of her placement in our family's birth order, we held the highest expectations for her. She rarely disappointed us. Louis, on the other hand, was in the middle, one year younger than my sister, and the only boy. What we held for our brother was our breaths on most days as we wondered how much gray he was adding to our parents' hair. He was the usual suspect for discipline at our table. I, at 9 years, was the baby, the most sheltered and generally overlooked as the source of a problem.

The one exception was the tomato nights. I walked into the dining room, which led off from the kitchen by a swinging door. I glanced around the table and there they were, the tomatoes.

My dad walked in from the living room where he read the paper faithfully every night when he came home from work. His routine was predictable: come home, pop open a Falstaff, read the paper, eat, and then on his favorite nights, watch Red Skelton. I could have set any watch or clock according to his routine, except for the nights when my mother sliced tomatoes for our dinner table.

We both spotted them at the same time. He looked at me and I returned his stare. We knew that it would be a long night. Battle lines were drawn and the best man would prevail.

Ginny and Louis started passing around platters and bowls filled with fried chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans, and then, of course, tomatoes. All eyes glanced over to me, but I was only concerned with one set of eyes at that table. Depending on Dad's mood, I'd either get an immediate reprieve or we would both be there for some time.

"It's time to try those tomatoes, Janet Faye," he said. "Put a little sugar on them this time and you'll like them."

Oh Lord, I knew I was in for it then. He'd used my middle name. Resigned to it, I'd take one tomato wedge while Ginny and Louis placed several on their plates. They looked at me with grins that made me want to slap them. Hard.

Mom, I believed, always hoped that maybe I would try one and like it and I should have done that, even for her. Her favorite expression that best described her viewpoint was, "think of the starving Armenians."

I didn't know any Armenians or else I would have gladly shared my tomatoes with them. Instead, I tried minimizing the appearance of those seedy red things. I'd cut the wedge and hope that smaller pieces could be swallowed easily. I'd put the fork up to my lips and smell that tomato and start to gag. Down went the fork. No tomato tonight.

"You're going to stay at this table until you eat every bite on your plate," Dad admonished. "I can stay here as long as you."

I tried reasoning with him. "Indians never eat tomatoes; they think they're poisonous," which was true, having learned this in my fourth grade class.

Eyebrows would raise and Louis snickered. God, I wanted to kick him under the table but my legs wouldn't reach him.

Dad was an avid reader and after dinner, he retrieved a book from his bedroom and sat at the table with me. I didn't know it, but we were both playing a game and he knew how it would play out. While he read, I took the cut-up pieces of tomato and silently placed them on the shelf that was created underneath the table by the crossing support beams.

I took my time. If I tried going too fast, he'd catch on.

I made gagging noises, followed by deep sighs and then I moved my fork around. Dad glanced over and said, "You're almost done. Keep it up."

Finally, after what seemed forever, the tomatoes were under the table. Saying "they're all gone," Dad looked up and grinned, glanced at his watch and put down his book.

The next morning before I left for school, I got on my knees and crawled under the table and took those tomatoes and threw them as far in the back yard as I could, out by the clothesline. Good riddance to poison.

It took years before I discovered that my dad knew where those tomatoes were going. Everyone in our family did. Tomato skins took longer to rot in the backyard than I thought and his afternoon walks took him right by the evidence. I would spot him out in the backyard, standing still with his shoulders shaking from silent laughter. He told me years later than he knew I had a good right arm and would have made an excellent outfielder for the Yankees, if I had only been a boy.

Those weren't the only battles my father and I would have in our lives together, but I learned that Dad stuck to his word. And he discovered that his youngest could hold her own.

I still refuse to eat tomatoes, though.

Hill Country

Hot winds burned as sweat collected
and stained my white and red checked shirt.
A callused hand, reached higher,
then left hand, up and up.

Each step taking me
to the hillside crest
overlooking my white stone house.

Later That Day.....

A scorching sun sweetened
the anticipation of higher ground,
as twisted roots of decayed trees
offered sound footing.

Even the rattlesnakes hissed in
sonorous Texas melodies,
wooing in their welcome.

I turned to go back to Junction.

I waved good-bye to Mr. and Mrs. Dahlman from the back seat of my mother's 1951 black Studebacker when my family moved away from San Antonio in the summer of 1960. I was ten years old and we were going off to a small town in hill country, a place called Junction. Mrs. Dahlman was kneeling over and was patting her dog, Raunchy, who I considered to be one of my best friends, and the tears streamed from her face and mine. She was, I believed, a very old woman, probably in her late 60's, and I knew I would never see her and Raunchy again. Leaving them broke my heart.

We were following our father to a town that sat right at the convergence of the North Llano and South Llano Rivers. By the time we reached Junction, a trip that took three hours in a car that couldn't go faster than 40 miles per hour, I knew it was time for us to move ahead. We were a family of nomads and this would be a good next step. Nowhere did I believe that more than on the top of the hill overlooking the valley leading into Junction.

Dad had already moved ahead and started his new job and found a place to rent. So when we arrived in our mother's car, loaded with kids, clothes, and whatever else we could fit into the car, we stopped on the side of the two-lane road, up in the hills and about two miles or so from town, and got out of the car to stretch our legs. It was early August and the red-flowering cacti were everywhere. Mother noticed that the road going into town was on a dangerous curve and she could see that the road led across a rickety-old bridge into town, barely wide enough for two cars. The town was visible from the hill.

It didn't take long for everyone in Junction to learn about the new people who had come to town. Dad was working for the local Federal Aviation Administration in a job that would hold his attention for about one year. When we rented that small white stone house, which was about one-half mile from the school, neighbors began stopping in their cars and knocking on our front door.

They do things differently in the country than they do in the city.

Ladies in the town began introducing themselves to my mother, and bringing in cakes and pies. People going by our white stone house would honk their horns, a Texas tradition of welcome in small towns. Junction was turning out to be better than we had imagined.

Ginny and Louis were both busy making new friends. Because we were the newest additions to the town, we were on everyone's curiosity list. Louis soon applied for a job, at age 14, at the local gas station where he made a quarter an hour filling up peoples' cars, washing their windows, and checking oil gauges. It was there that he met what would be his best friend that year, Keith Blackburn, and Keith's brother, M.C., short for Melvin Campbell Blackburn Junior, the first serious love of my life.

From the first moment I met M.C., I knew he was the boy for whom I was destined. He was about as skinny a boy as I had ever seen and was no great shakes in the looks department. But I thought he was wonderful. He was nice to Louis' kid sister and frequently "frogged" my arm, leaving as many bruises as Louis did, and I rewarded him by singing the Poni Tails song "Born too Late" to

him every time he crossed our door. He took this embarrassment exceedingly well and allowed me my childish flirtations.

While Ginny and Louis were at the top of the popularity list within the first month of our moving to Junction, I was having a harder time acquainting myself with other kids my own age. I was lonely. To help alleviate this situation, I was allowed two kittens, both of which frequently headed out the back door for the back acre of land surrounding our white stone house.

By the time school started in September, my brother and sister had already established themselves within their own circle of friends. I entered into Miss Hannah's fifth-grade class with great trepidation, unsure of how I would fit in with the other kids in the class.

"Sit over by the window, Janet," Miss Hannah said as she introduced me to the class, all of whom she had known for years. "Janet and her family moved here last month from San Antonio, and she is living right across the street from Tina McKinley now." I didn't know how she knew all that she did about me, but having her explain about me was better than asking me to do the talking.

I walked over to where she had pointed and looked at the girl sitting across from the desk. I scooted into the seat and noticed a round hole in the wooden top. "That's an inkwell; it's for when Miss Hannah wants us to write," she whispered. "My name is Sharon." She smiled at me, and I had made my first friend.

Sharon hailed from a family of cedar-choppers, who were seasonal workers living in shanty-houses that had newspaper-covered windows and pressed tins on the roof that were used to help ward off the cool Texas hill country weather.

Sharon used any excuse to come over to my house; I think it was because hers was over-run with sisters and brothers who had continuous runny noses and coughs. Whenever I was allowed to visit her at her home, my father would drop me off at the bottom of the hill where she lived and looked at me from the car until I went inside the house. Her father would stand staring at Dad until he pulled away from the road and headed back home.

It was fun at Sharon's house. Cousins, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, grandmothers and grandparents were all coming in and out of the ramshackle house, some of them stopping by the kitchen to pick up a piece of home-made bread. A couple of her uncles brought in guitars and several family members would start singing country songs. They sounded like hill music, not much to my liking but it was fun to be included in all that noise. She had one uncle whose appearance scared me at first, though, and that was because he had cancer of the mouth. When the family would start singing and cutting up with each other, laughter rolling out of them at high speed, her uncle would roll his head back and join in. No one ever seemed to notice that his gums looked like blackened meat and he had no teeth.

It was Sharon who asked me to join the Girl Scouts during the fall 1960. Every girl in the fifth grade belonged to this particular troop and they were all waiting for me to join. Exclusion was not the theme of that town and all the girls– by now all friends – encouraged me to become one of them. The first meeting I attended was to be after school on a Thursday, at Tina McKinley's house, across the street from my own home. Mrs. "Patty" was our troop leader, a pretty blonde,

somewhere in her early 30's. She greeted us at Tina's door when we arrived there from school. She thrust her hand out to me as she introduced herself to me, stooping over to smile directly into my face.

The meeting began and Sharon paid particular attention to my learning the Girl Scout creed, word for word. *"On My Honor"* was something this small town troop was serious about and I was to learn that right away.

"We're so happy that Miss Janet is joining our troupe," said Mrs. Patty. "Let's make her feel real welcome."

Their way of helping me to feel included took on big dimensions before the afternoon was over. When it came time for the troop to hold its annual officers' election, Tina and Sharon both nominated me for president. No one else was even mentioned. I had to cover my eyes when it came time for everyone to hold up their hands if they agreed with the decision for me to become president, but Mrs. Patty told me everything I needed to know when she said, "That's good, girls. It's unanimous."

The feeling I had was overwhelming. I usually felt like a gypsy wandering from place to place. Joining the Girl Scouts was a great feeling just in itself; to be elected president was something I wasn't going to believe until I told my mother.

And that was exactly what I did the second I could run across the street from Tina's house after the meeting. Mrs. Patty told me later that she had wanted me to stay after the other girls had left in order to talk with me about how I should conduct future meetings and about our fall camp that she was planning. She realized by the look on my face when she stuck her hand out and called me

"Madam President" after the election that there was one person I wanted to share that moment with, and she was straight across the street and waiting for me to come home.

Adolescence

Too young to sit at the grown-up table; too old to sit with the children.
Adult bodies forming around juvenile minds.
Time to learn what can be done; what shouldn't, and with whom.
Testing everything to the limit, and
Still learning to become.

Moving away from Texas was a first step took toward looking at other states as "home." Oklahoma was a stepping stone toward that Hollywood mystique, Southern California, the wild West, a place that sent out its beacon and attracted these travelers from the Dust Bowl. But this time the Okies pulling across the state line were driving a 1959 Chevrolet Impala.

It was in the 1960's and, for the most part, the California skies were clear of smog. Beach Boys reigned supreme in the music world, but were soon joined by the English invasion. Mo Town was in full swing. The Kennedys, Nixon, Goldwater and Vietnam were household names, and were later joined with protests, psychedelics, strobe lights, and fast cars.

And yet the beat went on.

SOONER TEMPEST

Little sister,
Hardly noticed at all.

Except for when it mattered,
except for when it counted.

Cecil McMillan was a redheaded bully. The first time I got on the school bus in Putnam City School District, heading for Windsor Hills Elementary School in 1960 I knew this giant was someone to avoid. I spotted him sitting in the back seat of the bus, with heavy black-rimmed glasses and wearing about 200 pounds of fat and muscle.

"What are you looking at"? he boomed at me. The bus driver didn't say a word but just kept driving. He probably didn't want any trouble out of Cecil, either.

I ducked my head quickly and dived into the first seat I could find.

It was my first day at Windsor and in Mr. McClain's sixth grade class. Having left Texas for good that summer, my family had settled in the northwest section of Oklahoma City. I was trying my hardest to fit in and find new friends.

And then somehow I happened to get on the school bus and just turn my head toward the back, looking for a seat, and caught the attention of the school's bully. As it turned out, Cecil was in my class, having repeated the same class for a third time. The school wouldn't keep Cecil back another year; he was just too mean to handle. I could tell he scared Mr. McClain, too.

Cecil lived right off of 23rd Street and McArthur. His dad was an auto mechanic and the family had several children, all of whom were big Irish red-haired boys. The whole family fought, not only other boys in the neighborhood but between themselves. They wore those red and black plaid hunting shirts year-round and sometimes I felt they hardly took them off at all, even to wash. The McMillan kids were a nasty brood, mean to the core. I didn't care about whether

they were living under conditions we call domestic violence now; all I knew was that Cecil, the baby of that family, terrorized my class at school and on the bus.

For the most part of that year, Cecil's attention must have been turned elsewhere because save for that first day on the bus, he ignored me. I just learned to never look in his direction or walk by his chair in class.

Fate, if nothing else, probably dictated much of what Cecil would be. From the first day of his life in that family, a path was laid out for him that would almost be impossible to alter. He was never to be the class favorite, the class hero, the class clown. Not the smart one, the gifted one, the most likely to succeed. He was labeled right from the first and it was something that carried him through to the day I met him and beyond. He was the hated bully.

Somehow I escaped any further confrontations with Cecil. The next year I was to attend Putnam City Junior High School and I looked forward to it as though it was the beginning of some type of liberation. Call it the baby of the family syndrome but I just knew that going into junior high would bring the best changes. And that included no classes with Cecil McMillan.

By the time school started, I had enjoyed another great summer vacation. Every-day walks down to the soda shop and weekends spent at the amusement park and skating rink completely erased my memories about school bullies. So on my first day at junior high, I thought it was all going to be a breeze. Until the 3:10 bell rang and I rushed down to where I was to catch the bus.

I never realized that I had bumped into Cecil's back until it was too late. With my books balanced over my right hip, I was jostled by someone in back and

accidentally fell against Cecil's left side. I had to put my hand out to catch myself and grabbed into flesh, his flesh. He turned and looked down at me. I swore that he had grown six inches over summer. I said, "Oh, Cecil, sorry about that. Somebody pushed me." He just smiled real slow at me and nodded just slightly.

"Oh, shit," I thought. "Shit, shit, shit." I knew I was going to die. It didn't matter with Cecil if you were a girl or a boy; he was going to find a way to get back.

All week long I was looking over my shoulder at school and on the way home from the bus stop to my home. If somebody dropped a book on the floor and it popped, I'd jump in the air. During my lunch break, I made sure that Kathy and Gerry, twin friends of mine, were close by me. I finally told my best friend, Mary, that I wished Cecil would just do what he was going to do and get over with it.

By Friday I had begun to imagine that Cecil had reformed and probably forgotten all about it. So after the last bell rang I went to wait for the bus to pull up, I pushed out of the side door and there stood Cecil. No one was outside waiting except for him, and now me.

I walked hesitantly toward where the line would form and Cecil just took a step toward me. It was at that moment that I knew this was it. I turned to run but he grabbed my arm and said, "Now you pay." He swung my arm around, and with me still thankfully attached to it, slung me against the waist-high iron rails that surrounded the school sidewalk.

It knocked the wind right out of me. I fell to the ground and was gasping for breath, all the while Cecil was bent over laughing. I couldn't stand up. And I was afraid to for I didn't know what was coming next.

About that time the doors opened and the rest of the students came out of the building, getting into lines for the buses. Kathy and Gerry saw me struggling to get up, crying, and gasping and came to help. Both of my knees were bleeding.

"Let her get up by herself, stupid bitch," Cecil hollered at them.

They ignored him that one time and picked up both me and my books, which by that time were all over the ground and sidewalk.

Cecil got on the bus and went to the back of it while I sat up front. He sat there snickering. When I got off the bus at my stop, not a word was spoken by anyone on that bus. But I knew where I would get some help. Nobody but nobody was going to do that to me without having a well-thought out plan about how they would survive it.

Walking up the street, I spotted Louis and his friend, Joe, just getting home from high school. He was standing next to Joe's old sky-blue Impala Chevrolet. The moment his eyes saw me and rounded in surprise, my eyes welled up and spilled over. He didn't know what was going on but the fuse had been lit. He tapped his foot just like an old bull out in the pasture when he sees the color red. Louis was seeing red all right, but it was my blood.

I became more afraid of my brother than of any old Cecil McMillan. It wasn't that he got loud or hollered at me; it was the look in his eyes that startled me. Cecil was mean through and through but his eyes never took on that look that

Louis's did on that day. He asked me what had happened and after I calmed down I told him the truth. "Cecil McMillan threw me up against the rails by the bus stop at school," I said.

"And where does this Cecil live?" both Louis and Joe chimed at the same time. I was reluctant to tell them any more because retribution by Cecil could be fatal and I wasn't sure if the McMillan boys would start something up with my brother. This could have turned into a Hatfield and McCoy thing, I was certain.

"Don't bother with Cecil, Louis. It wasn't that bad." I went past him and climbed the three steps to the porch, my knees already scabbing over but still stinging.

Just a few minutes later, I heard Joe's car start up. Now that Impala was Joe's pride and joy. It really was the only thing he had. He and his dad lived up over the hill and down the same street we lived on, N.W. 32nd Street. But where they lived was unlike anything I had ever seen. Joe's dad had decided to build that house from scratch and had big plans for Joe, himself, and his wife, Joe's mother. But it was taking a lot longer than anyone had anticipated and they were living in an underground area – the basement – that had a trap door to the outside. Patience had worn thin at that household and Joe's mom had split. Just left one morning never to be seen again. She was hardly missed at all by those two men.

Joe was turning out to be a real ladies' man. Girls and woman found him attractive. He knew it and took advantage as much as he could. But I was Louis' sister, and a kid, and when he spotted me hobbling up the street, crying when I saw my brother, the die was cast. Someone had to pay.

And it was going to be Cecil.

Even though they asked me where Cecil lived, they already knew. Both of them knew the McMillan clan and decided to drive over to 23rd Street and call on Cecil. When they got there, they spotted Cecil's brothers outside tinkering on his car. "Where's Cecil," my brother hollered.

"Why do you want to know"?

"He slammed my sister around, if you have to know, and I want to talk to him," Louis answered.

"Dumb shit's down at the Y." Louis didn't know what surprised him more: that Cecil's own brothers would rat out on him and tell where he was or that fat Cecil was at the gym. He just guessed that even Cecil's brothers had a code against hurting girls and that he deserved whatever he got.

When Louis got home that night, he didn't say a word to me. We sat down and ate dinner together, as we always did, and helped our mother clean up afterwards. The evening was uneventful and I was grateful no one noticed that I was quieter than usual.

The next day when I got on the bus Cecil was nowhere around. When I got to school and saw Gerry and Kathy, they said they hadn't seen Cecil anywhere around school. My stomach started to feel sick because I just knew somehow I hadn't heard the last from him.

When the 3:10 bell rang that day, I was again one of the first out the door and heading toward the buses. Cecil was half turned and when the door started to close, he turned toward me. My heart was pounding so hard I could hear every

beat, and I was bracing myself to turn and run back into the building. That was when I noticed Cecil.

He had a shiner, a real beauty. It wasn't just a little bruise; it was a killer of a black eye, deep purple in the crease of the eye and red all around. My heart swelled with pride just as his eye was swelled with pain.

I knew better to taunt that bully and I think he was relieved when I didn't say a word. He looked at me and just nodded, real slow, almost as if this would be our permanent truce. He never spoke a word to me again or even looked in my direction.

Later on I asked my brother about what happened. He laughed and said Joe and he waited until Cecil left the "Y" building on his bike and then drove up next to him and forced him to the side of the road. He and Joe talked to him about what happened to boys when they start hurting girls and by that time, Cecil was sweating profusely and babbling. But they never laid a hand on him at all.

What we speculated was that Cecil's own brothers might have had a few things to say about the incident. From the accounts I later heard, he started changing his ways after that confrontation with me. Sometimes family justice is all it takes, especially when there are just too many fists in a family to dodge.

PENNY LOAFERS

Sleeping in the same room
with lines drawn between
yours and mine.

First born rights and
hand- me down threads
wove the pattern of

sisterhood until it stretched
the limit of patience
and challenged chartered boundaries

winding up on
this side of friendship.

Money was always tight in our family. I used to wonder how people ever managed to get even the simple things in life. We were in the same boat as everyone else, yet it seemed like everyone else had just a little bit more.

The year was 1963 and I was 13, going on 14. It was important to be a member of the Pep Squad at Putnam City Junior High. Being one of the Pirates was what everyone wanted. What made it even better was that I had been invited to join the squad by some of the most popular girls in school.

"Janet, we'd like you to join the Pep Squad and be on the field with us for the first football game," I was told Tuesday night on the phone by Becky Chanders, head cheerleader for the Pirates.

This was a big deal, the biggest to happen to me up to that point in my life. I had been asked to be a part of the school's most prestigious group. Unbelievable.

Football to Okies means the same as it does to Texans. It rules the whole fall season every year and in some cases, rules the entire community, not to say families. Parents have been known to kill opposing football players, if they happen to be standing in the way of their children's chances of being scouted by a big league school; kids themselves plot terrible revenges against teams with which they are competing. Football is serious business in the Southwest and I couldn't believe my good fortune to be included.

"The only thing you have to do is buy the skirt, shirt, sweater, socks and penny loafers by this Friday night and then meet us on the field by 6:30. That won't be a problem, will it"?

"No, I'll be there. See you tomorrow," I said, hanging up the phone.

I had three days before the game, three days to get all the things I needed. And I had no money. I couldn't bother my mother about it because she worked full time at the school and spent every night either attending Central State College or working on her homework for hours at a time. I went to bed that night worried to death about what to do.

On Wednesday after school, I waited for what seemed to be hours for my dad to get home from work. When he walked through the door, I put my hands behind my back and crossed my fingers while I asked him about money for my Pep Squad uniform.

I was crushed when he told me that we couldn't afford for me to belong to it. "No, we've got too many bills for something like that," he said. He was getting ready to head out for a couple of hours down at the local tavern.

I could hardly catch my breath; I was devastated. It was just then when Ginny walked in from her job at the local truck stop. She was a waitress after school for the owner, Raymond Tripp, and between school and her job she was exhausted. She only made 50 cents an hour but it included all her tip money, so on the good weeks she made up to $40. And like most 17-year old kids, Ginny was saving her money to get a car because she was tired of asking to borrow Dad's 1959 cream-colored Chevrolet.

Ginny just looked between our dad and me and walked back to our bedroom to change her clothes. I could tell she was dead tired. She was more quiet than usual for the rest of the evening.

The next day after school Ginny came straight home from school. Our mother had just arrived home from work and we were talking about our day when Ginny said she had some errands to do and would I like to go? Not needing any more urging than that, I donned my lightweight sweater and went out and got in our mother's old car. I had no intention of talking to her about this latest disappointment. We didn't even speak during the few short blocks that she drove.

We rode past the old Route 66 sign, and crossed over to the sports discount center, a place that carried a line of school clothes. I looked at her when we stopped the car and she just smiled and said, "Let's go look at a few things."

I walked away from that sports shop with $45 worth of Pep Squad clothes, including the sweater, shirt, skirt, and three pairs of socks. The only thing I couldn't get that night were the penny loafers because they were out of stock in my size. The clerk said it would be one week before the new loafers were shipped. We never said a word to Dad. It was our own sister secret.

That Friday night, I stepped out on the Putnam City football field in my new squad clothes and with my sister's shined-up black penny loafers. She wasn't going to allow her little sister to go on that field without the proper attire. Later on I told her I would work off what I owed her for those Pep Squad clothes by cleaning her side of the room or taking her turn with the dishes, but she said that was a gift she wanted me to have, no strings attached.

It was one of the best nights I ever had.

WITNESS

Spaces between
past and present
filled with
memories and
hopeful dreams.

Waiting patiently
for the breath of another
to give courage
for the journey ahead.

I was fourteen years old when I saw a ghost. It had never happened before to me nor has it since, and for a long time I rarely spoke about it. The looks I got from people whenever I repeated the story prompted me to keep the whole thing a secret. But it wasn't a dream and it wasn't a teenage girl's dramatics. I wish I knew why I saw what I did, and perhaps I'll never know. Still, every now and then I remember that day as clearly as if it were today.

It happened on a summer day when Mary Beth Milner and I had driven over to Yukon, Oklahoma for our regular Sunday afternoon softball game at our friend's Susie's house. It was early August in 1964. Susie lived with her mother and two sisters in an old, run-down house on the outskirts of town, past the divided road that was separated by the feed mill. Yukon was about a 20-minute ride from our homes in the Warr Acres district of northwest Oklahoma City, and to get to Susie's house we went past Bethany and the country fields leading into Yukon.

We rode by the old Oklahoma State Hospital for the Mentally Ill on our way to Yukon. We always stared at that old hospital; we thought it resembled a state penitentiary because of the high wrought iron gates that surrounded the property. Between the rows of bars, sunflowers and iris grew abundantly and provided the only color visible on the hospital grounds. Behind those gates dozens of people could be seen sitting quietly on benches. Those who were walking around shuffled like the zombies we would see on late night fright shows. I hoped that the hospital didn't prescribe to the methods used in an old Olivia DeHaviland movie, *Snake Pit*, which I had seen. I turned away from the hospital to look at the fields of recently harvested corn, scorched by the hot Oklahoma sun.

Living nearby to Susie was her cousin, Candice, who lived alone with their grandmother. I thought it was strange, this family with only female members, but we never talked about our family situations. There was too much to do in the summer to spend any part of it analyzing why families are the way they are.

That hot day in August found us pulling into the backyard of Susie's house where our other friends were already gathered. We had left church immediately after Sunday school and went home for our usual family dinner, leaving for our afternoon game about 2:00.

David Montoya and his girlfriend, Pat, were tossing the softball between them when we drove up in and we immediately started into who was on whose team. I usually played the catcher's position and dreaded this responsibility only when Candice stepped up to the plate. She had a habit that threatened my very life and limb, and all because she had no sense about where to throw the bat whenever she hit the damned ball.

"Candice, don't throw the bat back at me if you hit the ball. Just toss it to the side," I said at every game, right before she would sling the bat back across my shins.

We divided ourselves into our positions on the teams and played for a couple of innings until, as though right on cue, Candice stepped up to the plate, swung the bat and hit a high fly ball into the center of the back yard. Standing in back of her, I tried to automatically jump up but wasn't as fast as her right arm was in releasing the bat.

"Shit, Candice, that hurt!" I was jumping around in both pain and plain anger at all of us letting her play ball.

David Montoya trotted over and said he would take the catcher's place for a while. It was hot; I was mad, and thirsty, too. So, I passed by Susie and asked her if I could go in her house and get a drink.

"Yeah, Mom and the kids are gone so that's okay. Nobody's home."

I raced up the back stairs leading through their old mudroom and into the kitchen. Standing over the counter and leaning into one of the cabinets, I felt a wisp of air on my back and turned. To my right and leaning up against the refrigerator was a tall, blonde-haired man. Good looking didn't even adequately describe this man; he was gorgeous. He looked to be over 6' tall, medium build, but I thought it strange that he had on a long-sleeved red plaid hunter's jacket that was worn thin.

Shyness overwhelmed and I just nodded at him and said, "Sorry, I thought nobody was in the house," and closed the cabinet door. He smiled faintly and nodded, and I hustled out of the kitchen, through the mudroom and out of the back door. He was not in sight when I glanced back.

"Find everything okay"? Susie asked, as I got off the last step.

I told her that I was embarrassed because someone was in the house while I was standing by the counter, and when I told her this the color left her face. Candice had been listening to our conversation, and then suddenly everybody stopped talking.

Candice took my arm and starting going back up the stairs. All the time I kept asking what was wrong with everyone, noticing that Susie was deadly quiet. Marching through the kitchen, we walked over the plastic runner that was placed on the light beige carpeting leading into the living room and we stopped by a group of photos. Candice reached over and picked one up and handed it to me.

"That's him," I said. It was the same man I saw standing by the refrigerator and he was wearing the same jacket. When all of my friends started talking, Candice explained that Susie's stepfather was the man in the photo, and he had died the previous fall in a hunting accident.

For a few minutes, we all stood there, stunned. Then I looked for Mary Beth and saw that she was standing over by the door to the kitchen. Looking directly at her and said, "I need to go home now."

Not a word was spoken by anyone in that room as we walked out of the house. I got into her car and waited for her. I was shaking like a leaf. Mary Beth kept trying to ask me questions but I told her I didn't want to talk about it. We drove home in complete silence. When Mary Beth dropped me off in front of my house, I just walked inside and never said anything about it to anyone in my house. Dad was in California scouting out a new job, and Mom was busy with her studies for her college courses. Ginny was busy working, and Louis would have never stopped pestering me about it. It was best just to leave it alone.

Though I continued going over to Yukon with Mary Beth for the next couple of weekends, I never again went to Susie's house. She and Candice visited my

house, but our visits became strained. They tried to ask me questions about that Sunday visit, but I couldn't talk about it.

Within a month, we received word that my dad had gotten a new job at Norton Air Force Base in San Bernardino, California, and my mother and I left to join him there. When I returned for a visit to my sister the following summer, Mary Beth did tell me later that Candice's grandmother had whispered to her that no one in Susie's family had seen their step-father's ghost or heard or saw anything like I had.

Over the years, I've often wondered if Susie or Candice ever thought about that day forty years ago, and why I was singled out as a witness to this phenomenon. All I had come in for was a drink of water, and then just happened to walk past a hunter with worn threads.

WALKING THE "T"

A breeze catches sounds
of flirtatious fantasies
and captures familiar scents.

Flickering sparks
provoke attention
from hopeless romantics
clutching at moments.

Tuesday and Thursday mornings I looked my killer best. It was on those days that I would walk the T in the quad area of San Bernardino High School between 7:30 and 8:00 in the morning. I was a sophomore in high school and had lived in San "Berdoo," California for two years. It was the first year of high school for Pat, my closest friend who had also moved from out of state the previous year, and me.

Pat's looks turned heads. She had long, skinny legs that went on for what seemed miles, with blonde hair that looked like white silk when the sun hit it just right. Whenever she walked up the steps into school, the boys would always turn their heads in her direction, or else in the direction of those legs. They were model quality.

I, on the other hand, inherited my mother's German legs. Short and squat. I couldn't even complain about them because that would have hurt her feelings. So I suffered in silence with legs that I felt only slightly served their purpose.

Pat and I arrived at school at nearly the same time every morning. On Tuesdays and Thursdays some of the boys in the football team didn't have early practice so they would line up in the halls all the way from the Administration building, into the T-shaped concrete connectors to the science hall and down the steps to "G" Street.

Pat and I knew that was where Eddie Mercer and Danny Contreras would be situated to watch the girls walk the T.

And it was the time for strutting girls to show how good they looked. It wasn't meant to be something obvious. The girls brave enough to walk through those

particular halls knew they would be eye-balled from head to toe, but the trick was to act like you were just walking to class. Forget that your hips had a fuller swing to them as you pranced by the boys, or that you walked just a little bit slower and laughed just a tiny bit louder. Not shrill, but with a throaty giggle. The boys would be acting out among themselves and scuffling around, but when we girls started our parade, it all became serious business. And if raging hormones could be detected through airwaves, the school itself would have instantly vaporized from the electricity vibrating between the two sexes.

Eddie Mercer was my heartthrob. The first moment my eyes spotted him during the first week of school, I thought there could never been any finer looking male specimen. He was fair-haired with the bluest eyes I had ever seen on a boy. It was his skin, though, that first caught my attention. Though we lived inland, about 60 miles from the beach, he was a surfer boy and his skin was dark copper, which only served to highlight his fairness. He had this lazy way of looking at girls and I would watch his method of observation as they walked down the T, without him ever knowing that I did.

What really caught my attention was the smile that would start from his eyes and then reach his mouth as his head followed a girl passing by him. I could almost feel this tension that surrounded him whenever girls would glide by.

His best friend, Danny, was his counterpart. Danny was Mexican, short and powerfully built. But his hair was his crowning glory. It was black, thick, and wavy and he had these brown eyes that looked soft despite his obvious tough-man routine.

They were both seniors the year that Pat and I started going to school there. We knew the likelihood of getting to know these boys was non-existent but that didn't stop us taking the walk down the T.

It was an early November morning – cool for that time of the year in San Bernardino when I usually could get by without long sleeves – when one chilly morning I decided to wear my best outfit on a Tuesday morning.

Green – it was Irish green – not the dark forest green, nor the hideous brilliance of lime green. It was the color of grass in early spring. And I wore that color in a sweater and skirt combination that turned eyes in my direction on that morning. When I exited my mom's 1964 white Ford Falcon and crossed E Street, I began getting attention. I was ready to find Pat and walk that T.

On the way there, I ran into Ted Mercer, a student in my homeroom class who just happened to be Eddie's kid brother. Ted and I got along but he had never introduced me to Eddie, and truth be told, I would have swallowed my tongue before I would have talked to him. "Hey, Jan, going to class"? he asked, and began walking right next to me.

"Not yet, Ted, I've got to find Pat Martin. See you in class!" I spoke rapidly and walked even faster; I had to get away quickly or else he would ruin my jaunt down the T.

I finally saw Pat, and praise God. She must have had a bad night because she looked awful. "Thank you, God," I whispered. I thought that this may be the only day in my life that I would look better than anybody else around and for this one morning, I was going to milk it for all it was worth.

"I feel like shit," Pat said. That was her favorite word and she used it frequently and when she wanted, with several different intonations. I glanced at her and said, "No, you don't. Let's go down the T."

Pat was the one person I knew who would never turn down walking down the hall past the long line of boys. And for her to say the next thing she said meant she must be dying: "You go on. I'm too sick. I don't think I'll make it through school today."

Never before had I gone down the T by myself. I was so mad I could have thrown her sick body down the stairs and then trampled on it. But keeping my temper in check I said, "You're not that sick; come on."

One look from her green eyes and I knew I'd lost any chance of her company. She just shook her head and turned and started walking to her home class.

Glancing at my reflection in the hall window, I knew I'd never have another chance like this and shy or not, it was now or never.

So I shook my head and mussed up the curls, threw my purse over my shoulder and starting walking.

The only time I faltered was when I got close to where Eddie and Danny were leaning against the concrete pillars in the open-air hall. I happened to glance over at Eddie and he was looking full face at me, with a smile that went ear to ear.

I stopped dead in my tracks. My heart pounded so hard that I could hear the rush in my ears, and if he had been saying anything to me I wouldn't have been able to understand him anyway. But smile he did and I returned that smile. His blue eyes looked straight into my hazel ones and in that split second, I felt that I

knew every secret that any woman had every felt. The air felt heavy and it was just Eddie Mercer and I looking at each other. We didn't speak one word, and I just kept on walking. My pace grew slower. I felt that I had no place else to be.

The next thing I knew I was in first period at my desk, but I didn't even know how I got there.

I never did formally meet Eddie face to face, although I did get introduced to Danny three years later when I was too cool to admit my sophomore crushes to him. But Eddie's glance in my direction did more for me than anyone else could have.

I never felt better about me taking the plunge down the T and walking that line all by myself. And if I could do that, then what was next?

UNINVITED GUESTS

Devils appear in
shapes that resemble
humanity and

then slink down
to worship fire-engulfed
crosses while

singing in baritone
whispers about
ancient rites until

daylight shines
on ashes and
demons turn into men.

The acrid smell of smoke tingled in my nose. The scent came from the north, somewhere in the direction of the El Cajon Pass. It was just a faint smell; not overwhelming. Like the first whiff of sulphur after striking a match.

There was fire somewhere.

It was just before dusk and I was at Pat's house, smoking cigarettes in her back yard, by the clothesline and the oleander bushes. Pat dashed inside to ask Crabtree, her stepfather, if he'd heard anything about a fire. I heard the back screen door slam hard and Gus, the 25-pound, shorthair red dachshund, howled with annoyance at her noisy departure.

His bark sounded more like a shrill scream that went on for several long seconds. She probably woke him from a sound canine sleep when she slammed the door. My nerves jumped at the noise.

"The Klan came into town," Pat said. "It's on television and Crabtree said for us to stay away from there cause there'll be trouble. They got permission to have a rally over by El Cajon and the FBI is going to be crawling all over the place."

What greater call to action then a parent saying not to do something? Pat and I were up to the challenge.

Fast phone calls to friends cinched the deal. We were going to meet and drive to Linda's, a real beauty with eyes that resembled the color of aquamarines, who lived in Muscoy, which was about three miles to the north of San Bernardino, California and across from the Pass. Our plan wasn't thought through completely but we prided ourselves on our ability to survive by, what our moms called, "the seat of our pants." We would meet at 8:00 p.m. and go from there.

Pat and I were in her bedroom, whispering about our plans. I couldn't believe this meeting was happening here in California. In 1968.

Ralph Junior peered around the corner and grinned. "I know what you guys are thinking. Maybe I should tell Dad." He was Pat's stepbrother, a real sleaze. He was a big kid, around 6'7", weighing about 325 lbs.

And he was a jerk. He thought he was a lover boy, some smooth operator. His deep voice had a rich sound to it but underneath he was nothing more than a bully and a tattletale. But he was the darling one of Crabtree's family and Pat and her little sister, Hallie, the evil stepchildren, were their trials and tribulations.

But Pat was honest about who she was and Ralph was a liar.

His threat didn't scare us. If we ignored him, he would usually go away. The same applied that night. We didn't catch his particular bait and he soon left us just as we knew he would.

At 7:30 we announced that we were going to cruise E Street and would meet Deena down at McDonald's. It was in the opposite direction of the Pass and Pat's parents didn't pay any attention when we raced down the hall and headed for the back door.

I was spending the night at Pat's – one of a thousand sleepovers that were common between us – and didn't have to worry about telling my mother.

That was always the difficult part. Pat would lie to her parents; I couldn't lie to my mother. Pat could spin a story like none other I knew. I stuttered if I lied. She was a natural, and I had much to learn.

Her sun-streaked blonde hair turned the boys' heads and those long legs kept us running into more trouble than I care to recall. But she was the kind of friend everyone wants and few find, a girl tireless in her pursuits of life and fearless in her loyalties.

We met Deena and headed north on E Street, past my apartment building at 36th Street and around the long S curve in the road, heading out of San Berdoo and toward Muscoy. This little hamlet had a cluster of houses along the road, populated by people who lived "across the tracks," where wild parties were held by Hell's Angels in the foothills of the San Bernardino mountains. Many mothers and fathers turned a blind eye in Muscoy; it was a rough part of town.

When we arrived there, Linda piled in the back of Pat's old lime-green Rambler. It was a tight squeeze but we were all going in together. I took the shotgun position in the front seat, with the window down and radio going full blast.

We thought we were going to see something shocking.

We thought we might witness history in the making.

We thought wrong.

When we pulled off the main road to the Pass, I noticed a barricade ahead with FBI men standing in groups of two or three, looking mainly bored and tired.

Pat pulled up to the barricade and one young agent ambled over, taking long, but unrushed strides to the car.

"What are you young ladies doing coming up here?" asked the agent. He was at Pat's window and I waited, spellbound, to hear whatever tale this natural storyteller would concoct.

"We couldn't believe that the Klan was allowed in our backyard," she said. "We wanted to see for ourselves. Our parents said we should just get a quick look and then come home fast." Oh, but I was glad she was the one talking; I would have blabbed everything and then dramatically offered my wrists for the handcuffs.

The agent looked at us for a long moment and then sighed and shook his head. He said for us girls to turn the car around and head back home. "This is a closed meeting. Nothing for you girls to see so go on home."

Pat stared at the agent for a few seconds, and I sensed she was weighing whether or not she should try and change his mind just so we could get a glimpse of what went on. But when the agent didn't return her coy and flirty smile, she knew she couldn't get past this one.

She started turning the car around; first going across the road and then putting the Rambler in reverse until she could turn the wheels in the right direction.

That very moment – and it was dark as any night could get with no streetlights around and no city lights – a part of the mountain seemed to go up in flames. We heard the noise before we actually saw the fire. It was a WHOOSH that seemed to suck the air right out of the sky.

Over to the right on my side of the car, we saw the outline of a burning cross. We stopped, our mouths gaping open, and stared in the direction of the fire, just

like deer caught in headlights with no chance of changing directions. Then almost in slow motion, everyone started to slide over to the right side of the car, our necks craning to look up the mountainside.

Pat whispered that the FBI were standing and looking at the spectacle, too. We watched them and then noticed a few figures dimly outlined by the flickering flames. They were hooded figures, only a few of them from where we could see, standing close to the fire and looking like giant children dressed in Halloween costumes. But they weren't the kind of costumes that I would want to see on any child.

We got out of the Rambler and stood, looking up at this awful fire. Pat and I looked across the length of the car at each other and started laughing; at first just giggles that quickly escalated into loud guffaws. We couldn't catch our breath.

Deena and Linda started chuckling and soon were bent over in laughter just like Pat and me.

It was the stupidest thing we had ever witnessed together. And we had seen some mighty stupid stunts and imbecilic antics in our time – not only seen them but led the way on many occasions. But the idea of grown men, coming into our hometown, wearing bed sheets with slits cut for eyes and hats that resembled dunce caps overwhelmed us, and laughter was our first response.

Followed by blinding rage.

We looked up that hill and expressed our disbelief that these men came to our town to do their dirty business.

We dis-invited them.

We bade them to leave.

We sank to one notch above their level by screaming, "You bastards get the hell out of our Dodge." No one from the Klan could hear us because of the distance between their camp and where we were, down the hill and far away from them.

"All right, girls. Go on home now," a stern voice brought us back from our anger and riveted us to attention.

Four pairs of legs scrambled back into Pat's car and off we went into the pitch-blackness of the night, heading for Muscoy and Linda's house. We rolled up the windows and continued our ranting about the Klu Klux Klan coming to our hometown. We tore up the gravel road leading away from the Pass where the FBI stood guard.

Why hadn't I noticed that no other cars drove into the Pass while we were there? Deena noticed this from the back seat, which left me puzzled by the indifference and apathy demonstrated by the town.

But out of Pat's mouth came a thought that was expressed that I never would have attributed to her: "Maybe everyone is giving that rally the attention that those Klansmen deserve"?

So my three good friends, one of them my best, and I weaved down a gravel road and tried to outmaneuver treacherous potholes that threatened to jar our teeth loose. We were racing to get Linda home and then drop off Deena by her car at McDonald's on E Street.

It was a quiet ride home, even with Wolfman Jack on the radio. We listened to Johnny Rivers singing "Poor Side of Town", thinking about our visit to the Pass. I felt an overwhelming sense of disappointment gnawing away at some spot in my body that remained undefined.

Crabtree knew when Pat and I got home where we had gone. We didn't hear any lectures but were invited to stay up for awhile with him and Gert, Pat's mom, to watch the Joe Pyne show. We promised we would return.

We rounded the corner and walked into Pat's bedroom, a large room that she shared with Hallie and now me, the frequent overnighter. Pat turned on the radio so our voices couldn't be heard, a trick we played on Gert who liked to listen to our conversations and then tease us.

I felt safe, being in Pat's room, with all of her comfortable things surrounding us. Everyday noises I took for granted without thinking became a comfort. In my haste to learn about my world and others in it, once I had been bitten I eagerly retreated into a familiar cocoon. Her room wrapped around me and I was soothed. We sat there and didn't talk nor did we sing along with the radio. We just kept still.

The *San Bernardino Sun* carried very little coverage on the Klan meeting in the Sunday paper. Crabtree mentioned this fact as he ate a fork full of Gert's homemade German-style blintzes, with sour cream and fresh fruit filling, rolled up with powdered-sugar sprinkled on the top. He knew by our silence that we were troubled; he also believed that we would find our way through this.

Being in a place where hate takes the form of a fire-engulfed cross shook my world at its very core. I imagine those men at the rally simply folded up their Halloween costumes and packed them into suitcases, and then quietly slipped away. But we were left reminders for days afterward of what happens when hatred rides into your backyard. The stench of dampened-down wood wafted through the air, curling its way through the Pass and down the road leading to E Street.

The devil had come to town and four girls had seen its face. But up close, the demon wasn't frightening at all. It was just a tired and pathetic old skeleton. Soon to be gone, I hoped, soon to be gone.

GONE IN FOUR DAYS

Around the mountain-top
we could see
The best that we
could hope to be.

Through the wheat fields
we could hear
Voices of brothers,
memories to bear.

Over the deserts
we could speak
To the gathering storms,
our fragile hearts weak.

Across the rivers
A country in wait
Gone forever,
Camelot's fate.

"So this is Bobby Kennedy," I thought. He wasn't at all what I had expected. Did I think that he would ride up to the platform on a white horse? This man was a brother to John Kennedy, our president who was assassinated less than five years earlier. He had walked with the greatest of men and women in our world, including Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. who had just been violently killed less than two months previously. I didn't know what I thought he would be like.

But I was surprised by his small stature.

I hadn't been sure that I wanted to spend my time at a political rally, but I did want to see Bobby Kennedy. Besides, it was only one afternoon in the course of my lifetime. When he was elected as our next president, then I would probably never see him again. Not if he was elected, but when.

Senator Robert Kennedy stepped onto the small outdoor stage in downtown San Bernardino, California with his big toothsome smile. He strolled across the platform with a confidence that only a man with all the answers might assume. I was relieved that my best friend, Pat, and I had decided at the last minute to attend. We were both seniors in high school, 18 years old, and looking forward to graduating within the next two weeks. Times were unsettling to us, though, and we wanted to hear from the man from Massachusetts who had a message about hope.

It was a beautiful late Saturday afternoon in Southern California. I caught the scent of the orange blossoms from the small grove of orange trees one block away, behind the old Harding School for the Disabled. Aroma from the groves

was common in those days; now they seem only memories cemented over by parking lots.

A crowd of about 50 people arrived in the City Park that first day of June in 1968. Pat and I carefully maneuvered through them to stand next to the stage. The park was located in downtown San Bernardino's old town square, which looked like someone had taken a picture from a history book and just dropped it into the middle of a bustling city. It dated back to the late 1800's and cobblestone sidewalks led up to the stage from all four sides of the park. The smell of those orange blossoms coupled with wild roses, and the red-leafed mimosa trees loomed around the stage.

Local Democrats walked around the streets next to the park. They were persuading people who were leaving work from the downtown stores to come and listen to the Senator, who was already warming up to the crowd.

Despite all the rally organizers' efforts, few people wandered over to where we were gathered. I wasn't surprised. His arrival in our community hadn't made front page and I thought most people were tired from working all day. It was easier to just go home and pop open a beer, and turn on the tube. Only thirty minutes of news reports, even if it was just the endless coverage of Vietnam, the war casualties and the racial unrest across the country.

I felt uneasy all day long. Not a day went by that I didn't worry if Terry or Mike or Miguel, friends of mine who were in the Air Force and the Navy, had survived another day in Southeast Asia. Attending this rally with Senator Kennedy would, I hoped, help me battle this uneasiness I felt.

Pat attended for other reasons. She was my alter ego. While I was quiet and looked inward, Pat was the star who liked to be admired. I was like salt and pepper and she was like wild spices.

That night Pat was with me because she wanted to see if any cute boys would be there and then figure out a way for us to stay out as late as we could. We drove her old lime green Rambler to the rally and parked it right on Main Street, and her plans included cruising "E" Street after, as she said, "the Senator gets on his white horse and rides off in the sunset."

She was close to being right. The afternoon sun was fading into the horizon by the time Senator Kennedy was motioned over to the microphone. One of the local old Democrat boys stepped in to make a lengthy introduction about how we enticed Bobby Kennedy to stop by our fair town. My toes began to tap from impatience.

Smiling, the Senator proceeded to talk to us about his campaign and how well things were going. His Massachusetts accent made him hard to understand at first, so the crowd stilled and listened as he talked about the bitterness that was infecting the whole nation. He believed he could make a difference.

He talked about Vietnam. He talked about poor people. His voice resonated with his passion about his beliefs. The noises of the traffic surrounded us but we heard every word he said.

He spoke for only a few minutes and when finished, he thanked the small crowd for turning out to see him. He turned to his left and then motioned to the back of the platform. His wife, Ethel, emerged from among the crowd of party

members and stepped up on the stage. Even though she smiled, I sensed she was weary. She was heavy in her pregnancy and looked tired. As she waved, I swore that her eye caught mine.

We were clapping and then Bobby leaned over right in front of me and stuck out his hand. My 18-year old heart somersaulted. He smiled and asked me if I was going to vote for him. With the finesse of a sophisticated city girl, I blurted out, "No, I'm not old enough to vote." He laughed and then turned to take his wife's elbow and help her off the stage. The crowd dispersed.

I was humiliated by my stupid remark, but Pat wanted to cruise and cruise we did, right down "E" Street and into the local McDonald's where I displayed the hand that shook Bobby Kennedy's. Someone from the royal family of Camelot had touched my hand and in doing so, he touched my heart.

Four days later, Senator Robert Kennedy was shot in the head soon after midnight as he celebrated his victory in the California primary. He died the next afternoon.

My world shattered. I believed he had forever in front of him just like I did. He dreamed big as if he would live forever and lived fully as if he would die tomorrow. But, for the nation and for me, tomorrow just came too soon.

Adulthood

Being. Ever changing and moving.
First chapters as Teacher, Instructor, Counselor, Mentor.
And the road ahead becomes shorter than the path behind;
I race to keep up.

Who knew adulthood would go on so long? Childhood and adolescence zipped by except for, of course, when I was that age. It seemed to take an insufferably long time to reach the next stage. Then wham - marriage, children, jobs, voting, college, becoming an in-law, and surviving losses, the ever increasing numbers of losses, colliding together with maddening speed.

As I entered the adult state of mind, the Western influence dissipated and I became a Midwesterner, stacking up miles of time in Nebraska and Missouri. But my thoughts always bring me back to the South. Visions of blooming bluebonnets fill my eyes in early Spring and I can smell the black dirt that held my squirming feet when I was a child. I may be elsewhere, but I am influenced by my strongest teacher of them all, the home of my heart.

ABSENTEE

warm, slow and rhythmic
a flicker that catches,
then struggles for each second

in a cushion that holds
an early something

and then the first breath
forms us apart
and dark becomes light.

"Where are the kids"? Jerry was walking through the front door having gotten out of National Guard duty early that weekend in the summer of 1981. It wasn't a very hot day; it was surprisingly pleasant for that time of the year with some low clouds providing cover from the sun.

Standing directly in front of me, he repeated the question: "Where are Lisa and David"?

With a paintbrush in one hand and a rag for touching up mistakes on the canvas, his question startled me. What kids?

I thought motherhood would suit me. It was something I had always wanted and believed would be magical. I was probably influenced by too many episodes of *Leave It to Beaver*, with June Cleaver wearing her apron, standing in front of the stove handing out lunch boxes to Wally and Beaver and kissing Ward as she sent him off to work.

So, almost six years after marrying Jerry, the Cornhusker who moved me from sunny southern California to the southeast corner of Nebraska, I gave birth to Lisa Marie in March 1976 just as that state was beginning to thaw out from a long, freezing winter. When we left the hospital and rode home in our '73 Dodge, I thought I had finally met my calling. It was only when we reached home that the taste of motherhood finally reached first base and I realized the most awful truth: I had no idea how to change a diaper or give a bath to this tiny thing that was clutching unmercifully at me.

At that moment I knew why Nebraskan women from frontier days would, without any clue, go stark raving mad, and end up slaughtering their entire families.

Jerry assured me that I would survive it all. Of course he could say that having had years of experience with numerous nephews and nieces. It was different with me. The only diaper I had ever changed in my life fell off two-year old Danny when he stood up. His mother, one of my dearest friends, never trusted me with that simple chore ever again.

I knew then that I had bitten off much more than I could chew. The horror of it all, I realized, was that it was just beginning.

Lisa turned out to be my test case. Somehow between her, the doctor, my mother who lived half a country away, and me, we muddled through that first year without too many panic attacks. Then in early winter 1978, I found myself fighting off morning nausea and trying to stay awake at work.

A visit to the doctor following a snowstorm informed me that the rabbit had died. I was pregnant again. Despite the dread of the morning sickness and the 50-pound gain, I was looking forward to completing this female ritual. Then I could really focus on fulfilling that June Cleaver lifestyle. I could become that perfect maternal role model. Could I have foreseen episodes that would cause me to question my capability in this overwhelming role?

Good mothers always know where their children are every second of their lives until they reach that magical age – say 18 – when they go off to college. Up

until that age, it's implied that only bad parents don't know and don't care where their kids are while the good parents have this radar thing down pat.

And every parent dreads the day when their radar goes off course and they get caught in the bad-parent trap. It's especially hell when that parent gets caught by the "good" parent.

It finally hit me. "Good Lord, Jerry. Help me find the kids!" I screamed at him, knowing that my face was turning red from the panic I was feeling.

I called myself every bad name I could think of during the next few seconds. Sure that Jerry would divorce me at the earliest opportunity and take my children away from me for being so neglectful, my mind raced with the fear of what had become of my small children.

The culprit behind this fiasco was my love of painting scenes of Nebraska farmland or memories of my life by the beaches of California. Spread out within the walls of our kitchen were canvasses of varied sizes, some completed, others still beginning to take form. The one canvas that held my attention on that day stood in its holder; it was a scene from a California bay I once used to visit, with rocky formations rising from the ocean and gulls flying up in the clouds. I must have gotten lost up in those clouds with those gulls, but for how long?

"Here they are, Janet," Jerry hollered from the back yard. Flying down the steps from the enclosed back porch, I saw big sister Lisa holding David's hand down by the tractor-trailer tire that held buckets of sand. At five years old, Lisa was having a grand time holding court over her three-year old brother. Good natured David never took umbrage at his sister's insistence to lead him in

different directions. He just stood there in his wet diapers and dirty tee shirt staring at me through those brilliant blue eyes.

The consequences of what might have happened washed over me and took my breath away.

"How long were they out here"? Jerry asked calmly, looking at me like I was the spawn from Hell.

"Honestly, I don't know, Jerry. I started painting and I lost time."

He held the hands of his dirt and sand encrusted children and walked past me and into the house to wash off the evidence of my crime. Later that night I fixed a special dinner for all of them, hoping to wipe away the guilt that played through my mind all afternoon. I feasted on a well-deserved plate of crow.

My paints were put away for about a month. One Saturday Jerry walked in to find me painting again and asked where the two kids were, with a look that reminded me of that scene the previous August. But I had learned my lesson.

Sitting on the counter, next to my acrylic paints and brushes, was a note that read,

10:00 - in the back yard
10:30 - downstairs

PASSAGE

Great grandmother rocked all day long
in a cane chair nestled in the dark parlor

Braided black hair revealed
brilliant black eyes and
cheekbones so high up
you could follow
the line of her face
into the distance.

Age showed in her hands,
gnarled and twisted;
one look could quiet
a restless child.

She waited for death,
a long time coming.

I couldn't breathe. I kept repeating, "Breathe in, breathe out" over and over in my head. My knees knocked together and my heart hummed in my ears. The sound coming from inside me was the beginning of a high-pitched keel, which I tried to dampen by repeatedly clearing my throat.

All I had to do was look down. Minutes passed before I found the courage to do that one simple thing. My father's face swam before me. I blinked hard and fast. He was gone. Gone from me, gone from my sister and gone from my brother.

He wasn't playing hide and seek. He wasn't out buying a pack of cigarettes. He wasn't going ahead to start a new job.

It was the stillest moment of my life.

It was over 10 years ago when I received the call that all adult children know will one day come. "Janet," my brother Louis said softly to me. The way he spoke my name gave it all away. "Dad died a couple of hours ago. We just got the call from the hospital."

Dad had always been an independent and proud man. He was haunted by memories of World War II and in his younger days he was far too handsome for his own good. Women would smile at him and he smiled back too frequently. He married my mother at the end of World War II and three children were born within four years.

But he was a complicated man. His own particular demons chased him out of a marriage to the one woman who loved him without limits. She loved him past

the days when his once vibrant dark hair started receding and his lanky frame filled out with middle-age thickening.

It must have been a shock to him, this growing older thing that started in his 30's when he began to notice the signs of aging. The responsibilities of raising a family overwhelmed him at times, and his bitterness would overflow into angry outbursts, which left us quaking in fear sometimes. It grew worse with passing years, and the closeness I felt in childhood changed during my teenage years. By the time he left my mother, I was the only child left in the house. Ginny and Louis had graduated from high school in Oklahoma and were back in the Midwest. Mother and I had followed him out to California, and then he left our home when I was fifteen years old. The one emotion I remember feeling when Mother told me that he was divorcing her and moving to Los Angeles was relief.

He left my mother after twenty years and only looked back occasionally. So I thought.

All those years later and now my brother was telling me that our dad was dead. He waited patiently for the storm to pass through me. "Ginny and I are flying out today. Why don't you just meet us in Oklahoma City when we bring Dad back," he asked.

It would have been easy to let them go and take care of our father's things. They knew the life that Mother and I faced after they had left differed from when we were all together. In later years my father and I would try to find our ways back to a closer relationship, but my memories revealed moments they did not want to know.

"No," I said to Louis. "I'm flying out from St. Louis tomorrow. I'll meet you in Long Beach at Dad's apartment."

I broke the news to my husband and our two children. They had only seen Grandpa twice in their 15 and 13 years; he was a far better letter writer than visitor to our household. Letters were easier for Dad, easier than face-to-face conversations. Yet my children loved him as most children love their grandfathers. It was harder on them to see me grieve. I couldn't let my husband touch me that night to offer his sympathy. Even a touch felt like a mortal wound. I wanted to go into this particular battle in full armament.

"Just let me get through this one thing," I prayed.

I arrived at Dad's apartment the next day and was surprised when I looked at the building. The houses I shared with my dad had character and a charm about them, even if they were standing on termite infested legs. This building was cold stone and elevators. A chill rushed through me.

Louis and Ginny were waiting for me. I exited the elevator and they were standing there.

They told me about the people they had met when they got to Dad's apartment. His friends filed in, one by one, to meet me. As a child, my dad had always been aloof and the only friends that came into our house were my friends or those coming to see Ginny or Louis. Now I saw another side of my father. It was the person he had become after he left the home of my girlhood. This exodus had caused him grief but it also relieved him of the anger and bitterness that hung around his neck like a stone. I was comforted knowing he had friends he cared

for at the end of his life. I was saddened because he had always chosen other people over his children.

Late in the afternoon, we traveled to the funeral home. I walked first through the door, into the foyer and stopped. I saw his name on the sign next to a small room. I had never seen my dad's name in print anywhere and I never expected that the first time I did, it would be like this. I told Louis and Ginny I wanted to go in alone, first.

I crept past the door. Standing next to the coffin that cradled him, I finally looked at him. I passed my hand over his face. No breath came out of his body.

The breath that caressed my mother's face when he lay with her and created me was gone. The breath that spewed like fire coming from him when he was angry was gone. The breath that rolled out of him in laughter when my brother and I play-acted for him as children was gone. I touched him and held his hand for the first time in my adult life. My childhood was gone.

I grieved like an orphan who had found home again only to lose it.

We left Long Beach the next day, driving his car back to Oklahoma so we could give it to our mother. He had never been completely out of her life. Ginny, Louis and I were weary when we arrived at our mother's home but we clung possessively to her. The next day was to be the last of this difficult time.

His children and grandchildren buried him at Ft. Gibson, Oklahoma, a national cemetery for veterans. Aunt Mona, Aunt Anna Lee, Uncle George, and Uncle Wilber joined us at the gravesite. They would be there to see the earth receive their brother while we let go of our father. The sun came out from behind a group

of rain clouds that had just wetted down the red Okie sod. A rainbow was faintly outlined in the sky. It was going to be a cool September day.

As we drove to the gravesite, I re-read the note that had been given to my sister in Long Beach by the hospital staff. Scribbled on a sheet of V.A. hospital notepaper in my father's handwriting were the words "I want to go home."

As the bugler played "Taps" and the honor guard's volley rang 21 times, I hoped that Dad had at long last found home. Good-byes couldn't be said. They sat like dry sand in my throat. I'm still trying to say them today.

OLD FRIEND

We sit by the door
watching the rain pound the pavement,
his tail thumping steadily beside me.
as southwestern storms approach.

Curtains spike and gusts of air breathe
through the house .
We catch the storm scent,
like wet wheat after harvest.

A roll of thunder, then a flash
signals a storm overhead.
Moving backwards
he lifts his paw to my knee.

As rain lightens its fury,
clouds shift northward
taking with it heavy drops,
leaving behind light mists.

Then nothing, except winding
water currents heading
toward street drains,
rolling past branches and leaves.

One important policy in the neighborhood where we raised our children is our strict adherence to the presence of dogs over cats. It didn't stem from our own personal views, but was grounded in everyone's preference. In this group, the dog is king.

Jerry and I have always been dog-lovers. The first two that we shared were two copper-colored longhaired dachshunds, Sherry and Ginger. We inherited these two old maid sisters from Mary Barqua, who owned the Barqua Kennels in DeWitt, Nebraska. Sherry was the beauty of the two, a top winning show dog that had soft curls throughout her coat. Ginger, the thinner of the two, had been the breeding dog who threw the best litter in their dachshund family. By the time these two girls came into our lives, they were ready for retirement. We assured Mary that we would welcome them into our lives and let them live out their years with little expectations.

While the girls were into their senior years, we inherited Nickel, a white terrier mix. Dorothy, a friend of the family, saved this little puppy from a walk down death row when he was featured on an early morning talk show in Lincoln, Nebraska. Because she lived in an apartment that had a clause against pets, we took him into our home in the expectation that it would be for only a few weeks.

He lived for 19 years in our home, a companion to Lisa and David, and beloved to all of us, especially Jerry.

This little guy started out a ball of white fur that was hardly capable of jumping onto anything. His legs felt like rubber when he was a puppy, before his muscles started to firm, and he had a black-patched eye, which made him look

like a bandit. Jerry named him Nickel because he said he wasn't worth much more than that, but we all knew that our former Marine was a softie when it concerned this new addition to our pet family. By the time Lisa and then David were born, Nickel's place in our lives was cinched.

We moved to Missouri when Lisa began elementary school. Sherry had died the previous year and Ginger, grieving terribly, would only last a few months after moving away from the old house where Sherry's scent still prevailed. Nickel didn't like being alone after Ginger died, but he waited patiently for Lisa and David to arrive home every day after I picked them up from the sitter and school. When we arrived home and opened our front door each day, Nickel would charge out like he was escaping prison. He had his rituals, first embraces for Lisa and David and then off to check on the rest of the neighborhood. His final destination was always our backyard; a place he seemed to believe was his own private realm.

It was right after one of those St. Louis ice storms in February. Jerry was not home having gone to a weekend National Army drill. It was my responsibility to watch over the household, the two kids and Nickel, who at twelve years old was whining to go out the back door. Using reflex and not thought, I opened the door and allowed him to scamper off down the hill. Not scamper – slide. It wasn't just a little icy patch but rather the whole back yard, which lies on a steep incline, was covered in thick ice.

Uh oh.

He couldn't make it up the hill. So, I said to eight-year old David, "Go down the hill and get Nickel quick, before he freezes." David complained about this task as he put on his coat using a different kind of whine than Nickel had emitted, and took off down the hill.

Uh oh.

That was when I started to panic. I tried throwing the only rope I could find, my daughter's old jump rope with a handle on each end. My next brilliant idea was to try and get David to hand Nickel up to me and then I could pull them both up. By that time, the rest of the neighborhood kids were standing in my back yard and laying odds about whether or not I could save both David and Nickel. I asked them politely to keep their betting voices down so I could concentrate.

David was able to pass Nickel up to me and as I grabbed for his sleeve, he slid down the ice to the bottom of the yard again. He was starting to shiver as I began to boil. *Damned ice!* By that time, I'd sent our neighbor kids over to their house to get George, their dad. Help was on the way! Barely able to keep a straight face, George tied another rope around me so I could get David and he would pull us both up. That didn't work because the rope pulled up tight against my ribs and I thought they would break. Finally after hearing all the commotion at our house, another neighbor, Dave, passed George a pair of his own good golfing shoes (with attached cleats) and I was told to venture down the hill and push David up the hill. That's exactly what I did and I was able to grab David's arm and push him up to the neighborhood kids who helped him get his footing. Then I, on all fours, began to struggle to get up the icy hill. A little fight ensued when George reached for

whatever he could grab to haul me up and happened to grab my backside, which was pointed toward heaven as I tried crawling up the ice. The kids howled with laughter.

When I finally reached the top of my back yard hill, I looked at Nickel and just shook my head as I tried standing up. Nickel was suddenly there beside me, licking my face in great appreciation.

It was a small favor in return for the years we had spent together. And for the grand receptions I received every night when I walked into our home from work. And for the early morning welcomes that weren't based upon how I looked or even smelled for that matter. And for his soft breath upon my face when I was feeling down.

SHE-ROE

my sister's sorrow swells on spring mornings
for gold-cast chairs
lined up in solemn rows,
silhouettes in the sun,
protected by a lone oak tree,
thriving and up from the dead.

oh you sons and daughters of Oklahoma,
what sorrows now know your names.
one April morning hastened by hate,
ripped you into eternity.
memories etched in stone as
strangers placed gifts on steel fences.

half-block away she stood working
when the blast stopped clocks and
innocence took a turn down long, dusty roads.
flames, smoke and shattered church glass
paved an unfamiliar route to safety;
she solemnly walked past a bleeding building corpse.

The traffic was standstill as I entered the on-ramp at Grand and I-44 in St. Louis. The ever-constant road crews had found another problem to fix on the freeway system in this metropolitan city and I was late coming from an early morning meeting and traveling back to work in Wentzville. As traffic was stalled, I used my cell phone to dial the receptionist and check on any messages that might have come in to her.

"Hi, Fran. I'm just leaving the Mental Health Association and should be at work in about 40 minutes. Anything going on?" I asked.

"Don't you have your radio on?" she asked. Before she allowed me to answer, she added. "Your mom called and she wanted you to know that your sister is okay and everything is fine."

My mind raced as I was trying to figure out what that message meant. Why would my mother call from Blanchard, Oklahoma to tell me my sister was okay when she was working at Southwestern Bell Company in Oklahoma City?

"There's been a bombing in Oklahoma City, Jan. Turn on your radio," Fran continued to say as my mind went blank, completely blank.

I switched on the car radio and every station I listened to was talking about the Alfred Murrah Federal Building blast that had occurred just slightly before I left the MHA building off Grand Street. It was about 10:00 and it was 58 minutes past the time that would change the history of Oklahoma City. Memories of my adolescence in Oklahoma City rushed through me along with all of the time spent during my visits to my mother, sister and brother and their families. Though born a Texan, the Sooner state has become an adopted land to me. The rest of the

country was voicing the same thought that went through my mind: why Oklahoma?

I called my mother when I reached work, and from our conversation, I learned she had talked with my sister's two sons. They had heard from Ginny; she was safe. Her husband, Jim, retired from the telephone company, was out of town on business and after hearing about the bombing was traveling back from Arkansas. It turned out to be a long day, longer than what Ginny had anticipated when she pulled her car into the back parking lot of the Southwestern Telephone building at 8:00 a.m. that morning. Little did she know that in about one hour, the 11-story building that housed her office would soon sway from a terrifying blast.

She later remembered standing and talking with friends when a tremendous roar caused the building to tremble. A couple of nearby windows popped and glass flew away from the building. Because she was on the backside and away from the blast, when she looked out toward the Murrah Building, she could just barely see the face of the building located across the street and down one block. Dust loomed everywhere and vision was limited. The people working on her floor all remained calm, waiting for word about what they were to do.

Word soon reached them that the Murrah Building had exploded, though no one was sure what had happened. Fire trucks and police cars raced to the location; fires were everywhere and no one was sure if it was safe to move out of the building. Or even if it was safe in the building.

It was chaotic for only a short amount of time. Even in the worst of situations, cool heads will prevail and plans have to be put in action. And soon word was

received that the Southwestern Bell office personnel would be evacuated – at least all "non-essential" workers. As it would turn out, Ginny was considered essential and would need to stay. It was imperative that lines of communication should be at their best and without interruption. And so she stayed and worked through a day that would test anyone's stability.

She later told me that those days were far worse than anyone could imagine. When she left the building that night, she was escorted back to her car. Daylight was beginning to fade and she still wasn't able to see the full force of the bomb's impact, but that was to come soon enough. She was to report back to work the following day.

The next morning she drove down to her work not knowing what to expect. Others in her department were re-routed to other offices throughout Oklahoma City or else advised to stay home until notified further. As she drove into the area, police officers were there to look at her identification badge and point her to the right parking area. It was several blocks away from her office and in order to get there safely, she would be escorted.

She walked through shattered glass and papers and the stench of burning plastic overwhelmed her. She passed by the bombed-out Murrah Building and couldn't believe the sights she saw. They were unspeakable. Within a 24-hour period, what had been an everyday sight for over 15 years was unfamiliar to her.

Ginny said that the back of the building was like a great yawning hole that once held offices now spliced into pieces with chairs teetering close to the edges of shattered walls. She averted her eyes from the lower floors, knowing full well

that was where the children had been. Her emotions choked her just as much as the charred smell from a burned-out hulk that was once a pointed-out sight to visitors in the City.

Rescue workers surrounded her and she heard their business-like tones as they were making plans for their search and rescue missions. Later they would rename these missions as recovery. Family members of those still lost were asking to come as close to the structure as possible but were politely escorted to a nearby church.

My sister worked long into the night, that second day following the blast. And when it was time to go home, Ginny was again escorted to her car.

This pattern remained for the rest of the week. She would drive into work, show her badge, park her car, and then be escorted through the shambles of a bleeding city. This girlhood roommate of mine, never unruffled during the years we spent together growing up, faced this particular horror with a thousand questions forming in her mind. Why?

Over the next couple of years, during my annual summer journeys home to spend time under the hot Oklahoma sun, I learned about the recovery period for this favored city of mine. Slowly at first and then with resounding speed, volunteers and professionals pieced back together this scene of horrendous brutality. If blood could be wiped away, then wiped away it was. If stone and concrete needed to be removed, then removed it was. If glass needed to be swept away, then swept away it was. Within a short period of time, plans to provide a memorial to the site would be put into form.

The second year after the bombing I finally went with my mother and sister to the City to see the memorial. My sister drove us down to her work site where we parked. When we entered through the gates of the memorial, she pointed out one exterior wall that had been salvaged as part of the dedication. Names of those who had died were stamped into marble stones on the pathways. Two tall columns, with clocks set at 9:01 and 9:03 were positioned at opposite ends of the park, and gold-cast chairs representing those lost on each floor of the Murrah Building and even those killed on the street and in surrounding areas, were located between the two structures. A brightly colored patio allowed children from across the state and country to write notes to those who had died and was placed next to the high gates that surround the memorial, laden with gifts from strangers. Across from the blast site I saw a sculpture of Christ weeping into his hands, his back turned away from the site.

Inside the memorial, a city reflected on that April morning when 168 people walked confidently into their lives and were left with their fate. The silence threatened to suffocate me.

And while I walked through the memorial, I looked at my sister, who was standing next to the displays of photographs and reading each caption. People around her were talking about where they had been when they heard about the blast. She didn't utter a word but only faintly smiled. I wondered if she was remembering every step she had taken over shards of glass down the roads surrounding the blast site, and the long days she had spent at the telephone company doing the work that had to be done. Ginny must have thought about

those families waiting in the buildings nearby to her, waiting for some kind of word about their husbands and wives, sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers. It would take someone with the patience of my sister to endure those days of noise and confusion.

Her silence was my comfort, and she never knew that I was marveling at her – this she-roe – whom I have known all my life.

AND THE BEAT GOES ON

he left rows of trophies
packed up and put away

basketball rosters turned yellow with age
now stuck inside old albums
rolled up pictures of Einstein
just waiting
dresser drawers holding memories
of first everythings

it took us two days before
we realized how really quiet
quiet is.

How did the time get away from us so quickly and lead us to deliver David at the doors of Southwest Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri in the fall of 1997? While driving to the school, I would turn and look at him, dozing beside me in his father's pick-up, loaded with necessities to see him through his first year away from home.

At times I would reach my own hand over and cover his much larger hand, not wanting to wake him but only just to lightly feel his skin. After today, it would never be quite the same again and I knew it. It was his youth that couldn't understand the significance that I was seeing in today's trip.

I tried to ignore that clog that was forming in the middle of my throat and so I fiddled with the radio channel. Jerry's patience was wearing thin between the bursts of music and static. "Jan, find a channel and leave it there, please," he loudly whispered trying not to waken our son.

I glared hard at him for a full two minutes. My guts felt like they were being ripped out of my body and he was concerned about the damned radio station. When Lisa had left for school three years previously, we comforted ourselves with this last child in the nest, and now it appeared that even he was ready to fly off from us.

Settling back into the seat, I hoped we would see other parents at the school that we would know. I wanted safety in numbers. I especially wanted not to think about the ride home.

Years of living with a man have taught me to tell the difference between slight irritation and real anger, especially when it comes to asking for directions or

helping to park a vehicle. Male testosterone dictates that females know nothing about either of these predicaments, and I am more than happy to stand aside until pleading eyes are turned in my direction. So when we reached Springfield and took the Gladstone Avenue exit, heading for the university and Freddie Hall, I had a feeling that this afternoon would be a culmination of sadness, anger, impatience, and re-acquaintance. It would be similar to family vacations, but without the five-pound gain or cameras dangling from the neck.

David began to awaken from his nap. As we drove toward the university, a similarity between taking David to his first day at kindergarten and bringing him to college rushed through me. When I mentioned this, he ducked further down in his seat, squirming and then glancing toward his father.

There was a big difference that I soon began to see as I realized that back in the fall of 1983, David had clung to my hand as I delivered him to Mrs. Forest's class. He now looked ready to bolt from the car.

As far as I was concerned, I was the wronged one, the already forgotten mom who could be left out standing in the cold. The word "sacrifices" entered my mind, and I tried desperately to recall them. I was lost in thought as we drove past the university's main gates.

The fifth time we had circled the campus I began my heavy sighing. One more time around and both of the men in my life were red in the face while I looked expectantly at them for the first break in their armor.

"All right, Jan. How come I can't find Freddie Hall"? asked Jerry, who sounded like he had placed a bag of marbles in his mouth.

I breathed heavy, making sure my shoulders raised at least two inches. With a cool hand, I pointed toward the next side road that would take us around the side of Freddie Hall where we could hopefully find a parking place close to the doors and near his room. Luck would have it that we found a space on the street next to David's dormitory.

We walked through the doors of the hall and I realized why mothers are reluctant to leave their sons behind at college. Years before, when Lisa had been delivered to her door, we could actually see the room inside with the dressers and beds and closets. Floors looked polished. There was order. In contrast, even on this moving day into college, the boys who had gotten to school early and unpacked had forgotten why there were things called garbage cans – or Pledge – or Ajax – or hangers.

I glanced at David, who squinted as he glimpsed around the room. His poor roommate didn't know that he had signed on with the original neat freak, whose bedding has always looked like he took lessons from a drill sergeant. It appears that his dresser drawers holds items alphabetically and his desk is arranged so that he knows where everything else, not a hair out of place. I shook my head in admiration for the young man fated to be David's roommate who undoubtedly be facing some immediate challenges.

David's best friend from high school, Chris, stuck his head in the door as we began unloading boxes of David's things. While David is a known neat maniac, Chris has taken the other high road. He could get lost in his room for days and no

one could find him. Wisely, he opted to move into another hall for that first school year, a fact that I believe to this day has helped preserve that friendship.

Hours later and Jerry and I knew we had put the finishing touches on our assignments for the day: installing the television, the computer, paid for the telephone line, helped him get his books, and then headed off to the bank to establish his account. We had seen other parents from David's high school friends and spent a long day walking from one end of the campus to the other.

Wishing to avoid embarrassing him to any degree at all, I leaned over and quickly pecked his cheek and told him we'd see him at Thanksgiving. He was sitting at his college desk and just smiled and said those profound words that teens always use, "later." I almost ran to the truck, which was sitting within view of David's window and opened the passenger door and got in to put on my seatbelt. Jerry was dawdling behind, having stopped to talk with one of the parents. I just wanted to get on the road and head back to St. Louis.

Jerry stepped in and did the rituals that some men do when they start their vehicle. He adjusted the seat belt, glanced at the rear view mirror, and checked his water glass. Meanwhile, my mind was screaming silently for him to move, to just move.

We pulled away from the curb and I looked at David's window, never expecting him to be there. But he was looking at me with the mere whisper of a smile on his face, a look that he gave me every year when I drove him to his elementary and middle schools. His eye caught mine, and I knew he was going to be all right. It carried me all the way through to home.

MOTIONS OF BREATHING

I am standing here
breathing early morning air.
I'm glad.
We've come past the icy twilights.

I am standing here
breathing lukewarm dark.
I don't want to sleep just yet.
Waiting for the night sounds of summer.

I am standing here
breathing in synchronic rhythm
with a favored friend.
Speaking without talking.

I am standing here
thinking I'm lucky.
If life revolves around the tick-tock challenge of time,
I'm embracing the daylight,
running toward moonbeams
in the company of friends.