BOLLI Journal

Selected works of poetry, prose, photography and art by members of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Brandeis University

Palm Fronds Dominican Republic by Arthur Sharenow
Volume Seven
2013-2014

Editorial Committee

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Steve Klionsky
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Peter Schmidt
Carol White

Cover Photo: *Purple Gate* by Richard Glantz
From the Director

BOLLI is fortunate to have a cornucopia of talent, ambition, and creativity in its membership, a fact to which our eagerly awaited biennial BOLLI Journal is testimony.

As I write this on the eve of 2014, I am aware how privileged we, the BOLLI Community, are to live at this hour – a time which, for many, offers the blessings of longevity, of plenty, and of peace.

The BOLLI Journal brings to my mind an additional appreciation as well, the impressive nature of what some of us do with our time, our talents, and our capacities for observation, insight, and self-expression. It strikes me that the BOLLI Journal speaks to us, then, not only in the form of each precious submission, but also eloquently as a call to each of us to use our time to create, interpret, and understand.

An additional point: the fiction, poetry, memoir, photographs, and art that await a BOLLI Journal reader represent more than just another fortunate opportunity to enjoy the creativity of our remarkable community. For me – and I hope for you as well – this work offers a delightful chance to become familiar with the perception and sensibility of some of our partners in the BOLLI way of life: their zest for learning, their quest for new and challenging perspectives, and their enthusiastic efforts to make art out of experience.

Congratulations to Editor Joan Kleinman, the contributors, and the handful of hard-working BOLLI Journal Committee members without whom we would not have reached this milestone.

With heartfelt appreciation,

Avi Bernstein
From the Editor

The BOLLI Journal debuted in 2002. Volume One was a slender, spiral-bound, all-text, black-and-white compendium. Over the ensuing editions, the Journal evolved into the handsome publication that is exemplified by Volume Seven.

What has remained consistent over the span of time is the excellent quality of the Journal’s contents – contributions which reflect the outstanding sensibilities of BOLLI members and their varied experiences and rich imaginings.

With pleasure and appreciation, I thank the members of the BOLLI Journal Committee for their thoughtful and careful work in preparing this edition. I extend a special thank-you to Peter Schmidt for his patience and technical expertise in formatting the Journal’s pages.

Joan Kleinman
Contributors

**Nancy Alimansky**
In 1979 a friend encouraged me to start drawing after hearing a story about an elementary school project. That conversation changed my life, and now art plays a central role. I especially love painting “outside.” I look to capture the essence of a place and convey my emotions, especially through color.

**Bonnie Alpert**
Two months before my recent Bat Mitzvah, I was awakened at 4 a.m. by a poem that insisted on being written. In writing it, I felt infused with the spiritual connectedness I’d sought while preparing for this delayed rite of passage. God bless the instrument of poetry!

**Sam Ansell**
I was educated at Newton High School and Harvard where I wrote and drew silly pictures for the Harvard Lampoon. I was a copy-writer in N.Y. for 15 years, then returned to Boston to take over the family business. My hobby is being married to Na'ama.

**Ruth Kramer Baden**
I like to read words hear words play with words string them in rows stroke them until they sing or cry put them in poems put them in a book teach poems at BOLLI about how they gather together freely or in sonnets or sestinas and tell us secrets O the joy of words.

**Laurel Ann Brody**
I have been an English and journalism teacher, reading specialist, literacy coach and Director of In-Service Training in inner city schools, and an instructor in Departments of Education at the graduate and undergraduate levels. At BOLLI I taught a course on Steinbeck and have led two affiliates – The Writing Clinic and The Sunday New York Times. I paint and create large scale mosaics.

**Linda Brooks**
Careers of professional writing, but not a single personal word since my pink plastic teenage diary. Study group leader Marlyn Levenson gave me the courage and confidence to bring my memories to life. Writing The Last Lesson helped me to grieve her tragic passing last spring. With bitterness and conflict filling our political scene, Americans the Beautiful reminds me with gratitude of who we really are.

**Susan Coppock**
I am a retired school teacher, mother of three girls, and grandmother of one. I enjoy writing and published my coming-of-age memoir last year. It is an ebook entitled Fly Away Home and
is available to be read on a Kindle, or Nook, or on your computer screen.

**Elizabeth David**
I am a longtime member of BOLLI, lover of learning, and an occasional study group leader of courses on the human condition as we age.

**Frank Davis**
My education was in engineering, and professionally I owned a manufacturing company, neither of which afforded me much time to pursue other interests. Retiring and taking several short story classes and a writing class at BOLLI motivated me to create my own short stories.

**Renee Fine**
Words, words, beautiful words! My life is a narrative poem still being written.

**Joel Freedman**
I have been an avid photographer for fifty years, now concentrating mainly on landscape photography. I regularly participate in photographic workshops held at different scenic areas in North America. I am active in a local camera club where I compete and mentor members, and I show my work in local libraries.

**Sophie Freud**
I was born in Vienna, Austria and emigrated to the United States at age eighteen. Books have been my cherished companions as an avid reader, book reviewer, and author of *My Three Mothers and Other Passions* and *Living in the Shadow of the Freud Family*. I was a clinical social worker and a professor at Simmons College School of Social Work before joining BOLLI. Inventing and teaching courses has become my old age pass-time.

**Ellen Friedlander**
My musical fingers were mostly idle while bringing up a large family and working as a clinical social worker. While all of us were living for several years in Israel, a stubborn sabra convinced me to try playing two-piano music with her. Back in the States, kids grew up, I found a wonderful musical partner, and we make good music together.

**Richard Glantz**
After receiving degrees from M.I.T. and Harvard, I spent most of my career as a senior engineering manager at Digital Equipment. For my fiftieth birthday, my brother gave me a fancy camera. I really owe him thanks for encouraging me to unleash the underutilized right hemisphere of my brain. Now my Kodak moments focus on reflections, shadows, patterns, and silhouettes.
Jane Kays
I came to BOLLI to write more, and that I did. This piece is one of many I've written for my daughters so that they may better know who we all are.

Allan Kleinman
I retired as an engineer and am now able to read and learn about things I never had the time for, travel, and go for long walks – usually with a camera in my pocket. I like taking pictures of interesting scenery, events, and patterns in nature.

Robert Pill
I have taken many courses as a member of BOLLI since 2004 and am presently a study group leader. My wife Cynthia and I have been fortunate to travel the world, taking photographs of many fascinating and unique events and scenes. Photography has been part of my life since I received an Argus C3 35mm camera for my Bar Mitzvah.

Phillip L. Radoff
After receiving a Ph.D. in physics, I worked for the Naval Research Laboratory and attended law school at night. As a lawyer I held successive positions in private practice, as US Air Force deputy general counsel, and as inside corporate counsel. Shortly after retiring in 2004 as vice president and group general counsel with Raytheon, I joined BOLLI and began offering courses in Mozart and Wagner operas. I have contributed to each volume of the Journal since 2008.

Pete Reider
I retired from the practice of psychiatry in 2003. By now I feel I’m well along the journey from work to play. I have the good fortune to be exploring my role as husband, father, and grandfather. And I’m lucky to have the good company of the BOLLI community.

Marjorie Roemer
I am a sometime poet. Now, as a retired professor of English, I hope to be a more-time poet.

Kenneth Rosenfield
Writing poetry has become a great source of pleasure. It teaches me to be observant of all aspects of life. Since I turned 91, I have spent far more time reading poetry than writing my own poems, but I am planning to correct this!

Claire Rourke
BOLLI has been my salvation since I retired. I learn something I never knew each semester. My grandson told someone “My grandmother has been going to Brandeis for over 12 years, and she hasn’t got a diploma yet!” That’s what he thinks. Long live BOLLI.
Peter Schmidt
By profession I've been a physicist and engineer but also developed a fascination for short literary forms, especially as a basis for setting to music. Retirement then presented me with the time both for reflection and for exploring the mysteries of the written word on my own.

Arthur Sharenow
I spent most of my working life as the Camp Director at Camps Kenwood and Evergreen in New Hampshire. My wife Judy and I have two wonderful children and four even more wonderful grandchildren. Since retiring, I have been fortunate to find a major interest in photography and have spent an enormous amount of time improving my image-making ability.

Verne Vance
I am a retired Boston attorney and have been a study group leader at BOLLI since 2011. I was the winner of the 2012 T.F. Evans Award of the Shaw Society of the United Kingdom for its annual “Could you write like Bernard Shaw?” competition.

Karen Wagner
I am a Ph.D. physicist, professor, and technical author. I recently left a high-tech firm and now think of myself as on sabbatical and free to pursue the gentler things in life—writing, reading, music, and of course, teaching.

Barbara Webber
Genealogy, particularly the detective portion, has been a passion for years; writing it all down has not. However, as I approach becoming a genealogy statistic myself, I increasingly wish to share some of this information. To my surprise, a story format rather than traditional ancestral charts works best for this.

Carol White
I am a former editor, who now works managing commercial real estate. In my free time, I cook, garden, read, play with grandchildren, and take BOLLI courses. I wrote On Limoges China and Love to help me come to terms with an inheritance that arrived almost fifty years too late.
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Art and Photographs
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Richard Glantz
It was one of those glorious summer days on the Cape, perfect beach weather. As he looked out at the cloudless sky, he heard the excited squeals of his three grandchildren anticipating a trip to the beach.

“And where might you be going?” he asked four year-old Jenny as she burst into the room in her new bathing suit, sandals, and floppy hat, struggling to prevent a pair of too-large sunglasses from slipping down her nose, while clutching a plastic bucket and shovel in one hand and her favorite Raggedy Ann doll in the other.

“Me and Max and Ben are going to the beach. Mommy’s taking us.”

“Max and Ben and I,” he corrected.

“Yeah, Max and Ben and I,” she said complacently. “You can come too, Grandpa.”

“Thank you for the invitation,” he replied. “It’s a tempting offer, but I have things to do here today. Another time.”

“What does tempting mean?” she asked, but before he could reply, his oldest grandchild entered the room and spoke up. He was fashionably dressed in Batman bathing trunks and Big Papi T-shirt, with contrasting Patriots cap. “What things do you have to do?” asked Max.

“Oh, you know, important grandfatherly things,” replied his grandfather. Max looked at him skeptically, increasingly aware at the age of twelve that the remarks of elders could not always be taken at face value.

“I’m going too,” said the new arrival, nine year-old Ben, a cross between his older brother and a disheveled Peanuts cartoon character. Somehow, Ben’s clothes never seemed to fit quite right. Shirts thought to be securely buttoned somehow came unbuttoned when no one was looking, and shoelaces regularly untied themselves.

“Well then,” said their grandfather, “I hope you all have a splendid time. Are you going to drive to the beach?”

“No,” they responded in chorus. “We’re going to walk,” said Max. “Mom’s taking all the stuff we need in Jenny’s old baby buggy.”

“It’s not my buggy anymore,” exclaimed Jenny indignantly. “I’m not a baby. Why do we still have that old buggy anyway? There aren’t any babies around.”

“Of course not,” her grandfather soothed, “but, you know, baby buggies
can be very useful for carrying blankets and umbrellas and... and other things.” He paused for a moment as a distant memory crossed his mind.

“Well, I do hope you have a good time,” he continued, “but I also hope you remember the most important thing not to do when you get to the beach. Do you know what it is?”

The boys exchanged blank looks, but Jenny spoke up: “Don’t go into the water until Mommy says so.”

“Oh, that,” scoffed Max, the worldly-wise. “That’s for little kids. Anyway they have plenty of lifeguards.”

“You know,” mused their grandfather, “you can’t always depend on lifeguards. Still, I’m really glad we have them at the beach. I can still remember the time when I was rescued by lifeguards. Did I ever tell you about that?”

“No!” they responded in chorus, attentive to the prospect of an interesting revelation from an unexpected quarter.

“Well I know you’re in a hurry to leave, so maybe we’ll save the story for another time. How would that be?”

“No, now!” they shouted again.

“Well, okay,” he replied, “if you’re sure you’re not in too much of a hurry.

“I guess I must have been about Ben’s age or maybe a little older. My mother and my brother and I were staying at a cottage in Atlantic City. That’s in New Jersey, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah, we know,” said Max, who knew everything important there was to know.

“My father was working except on the weekends when he came to visit, but he had to leave on Sunday night so he could get up in time to go to work on Monday morning. What I’m going to tell you happened on a weekday when my father wasn’t there.

“We used to walk to the beach every day, the three of us, my mother, my little brother, who was about Jenny’s age, and I, taking turns pushing the baby buggy with all our stuff. Every day my mother would pick a spot near one of the lifeguard stands, spread the blanket, plant the umbrella, and hunt through her bag for the suntan lotion, but before she did all those things, she always said, ‘Don’t go into the water until I finish here and can watch you.’

“Well, you know what happens when you hear the same thing every day:
after a while you don’t pay much attention; it just becomes part of the background noise. You get to the beach, take off your sandals, look around to see if any other kids are nearby, and in the background someone says, ‘Don’t go in the water.’ Sure, sure.

“On this particular day, the waves were pretty high because there had been a storm the day before, and we had had to stay at home. In other words, it was a great day for body surfing. When I looked around, there was just one kid nearby that I knew. He was a couple of years older. I walked over to him, and he said, ‘Hey, let’s go out and body surf.’ Well, what was I supposed to tell him? ‘Sorry, I can’t go. I have to wait for my mommy.’ Not a chance. So we ran to the water and jumped in. It was pretty cold, but we got used to it and started swimming.”

As the grandfather was speaking, he noticed his daughter in the doorway, also dressed for the beach and carrying a blanket and several towels. She opened her mouth to speak but thought better of it, curious to learn what was keeping her three children uncharacteristically absorbed, silent, and motionless, hardly an everyday occurrence. Unnoticed by the children, she moved quickly to a corner of the room, deposited her bundles, and sat quietly, not wishing to break the mood. Her father glanced briefly at her and continued his narrative.

“I noticed right away that there was a strong undertow.” Seeing the puzzled look on his granddaughter’s face, he added, “An undertow, Jenny, is a current of water that pulls you away from the shore. Anyway, I swam out a short distance – at least it seemed like just a short distance – but the water was suddenly up to my shoulders, and I thought, ‘That’s far enough.’ Earlier that summer my father had decided that I needed to learn the Australian crawl stroke, and I had learned it well enough – or so I thought. I don’t suppose you kids know what that is,” he said innocently.

“Sure we do,” responded Ben. “We learned it in swimming class. You do it like this,” and he proceeded to demonstrate with an impressive arm-over-arm movement. “And you kick your feet at the same time.”

“Very good,” replied his grandfather. “Well, you never knew my father, but he was an excellent swimmer and used to swim for miles every day when he was younger. So, naturally I began to do the crawl and head for shore. At least, that was my intention, but I wasn’t getting very far because of the undertow. I looked around for the
other kid and saw that he was a lot closer to the shore than I was and swimming as hard as he could. Since my crawl wasn’t working, I tried some other strokes, but they weren’t any better, and I wasn’t getting any closer to the shore.”

He glanced up and saw that there were now four pairs of eyes staring back at him, his daughter just as absorbed in the adventure as her children.

“I wasn’t frightened,” he continued, “not really – but I began to realize that it was going to be pretty hard to get back to shore on my own. Then I remembered the lifeguards and spotted them sitting on their high chairs and peering out over the ocean. I didn’t want to make a fuss, but I thought it might be a good idea to get their help, so I began to wave. Then I called out to them – not a panicky shout, but calmly: ‘Hey, there. Can you guys help me? I’m having some trouble.’ At least, that’s the way I remember it.

“I couldn’t tell whether the lifeguards heard me or just saw some kid floundering in the waves in need of help. Anyway, before I realized what had happened, there they were, two lifeguards in a rowboat moving quickly toward me. One of them was holding a life preserver and calling out to me. ‘Here, kid, grab this,’ he said as he tossed me the big doughnut. I felt proud of myself for catching it on the first try. He pulled me quickly to the boat and lifted me in. I remember feeling kind of embarrassed and saying, ‘Thank you,’ as the lifeguards expertly maneuvered the boat around and headed for shore.

“When we arrived at the shore, a large crowd had gathered to see what was going on. After all, you don’t get to see lifeguards rescuing people everyday, and I’m sure it was all very exciting. When I climbed out of the boat, everyone cheered – except my mother, who was screaming and crying and waving her arms, all at the same time. She didn’t know whether to smack me for disobeying her or hug me for being safe. I think she did both. My brother just stood silently at her side, taking it all in and filing away the experience for possible future use, because you never knew what might happen to you.”

Ben spoke up: “What happened to that other kid? Did the lifeguards get him, too?”

“I don’t think they had to. I saw him in the crowd, watching what was going on, but he didn’t say anything. He probably thought he’d get into trouble if he told his mother he had been out with me.”
“I was fine. I kept telling everyone that I was fine–my mother, the spectators, and the lifeguards. I wanted them all to go away and leave me alone. After all, when you stop to think about it, I had just gone for a little swim, had a little trouble, waved to the lifeguards for help, and they rowed out and pulled me in. All in a day’s work. What was the big deal? But for some reason, the lifeguards and my mother didn’t see it that way.”

“Is he all right, is he really all right?” my mother kept asking. ‘He looks all right, but I think you ought to get him home and make him rest for a while,’ said one of the lifeguards. ‘Do you have some way to take him so he doesn’t have to walk?’ At that, my brother spoke up–and I’ve never for-given him for it. ‘The baby buggy,’ he said. ‘We have a baby buggy.’

“The lifeguard nodded. ‘Good idea. If you can manage it, put him in the buggy, take him home, and get him to bed–and keep an eye on him for the next twenty-four hours.’

“I’m not getting into any baby buggy,” I growled, glaring at my big-mouthed little brother. ‘I can walk just fine.’ But my mother was not to be denied. ‘Shut up and get in,’ she said, and I could see that I wasn’t going to win that argument, so I got in.

“With my brother alongside and the beach stuff piled in around me, my mother began the trip back to our rental house, pushing the buggy along the boardwalk and then along the sidewalk. The return trip seemed a lot longer than the trip to the beach. I had my hat pulled down over my face so that no one would recognize me, but every now and again I heard a passerby snickering at the sight of a ten-year-old kid in a buggy. The girls, with their giggling, were the worst. I hated those girls. I hated my brother and my mother. I hated the lifeguards. I hated everyone. I began to wish I had drowned. At least I wouldn’t have had the shame of riding in a baby buggy.

“At some point our little parade passed a store with a large display window, and I got a look at my reflection, scowling and miserable in the buggy. ‘That’s it,’ I said. ‘I’m getting out.’ ‘Oh, no, you’re not,’ said my mother, but by now I was angrier than she was and simply climbed over the side of the buggy, got out, and started walking quickly away, while my mother and my brother and the buggy followed. I wanted to get as far away as I could from that buggy and the awful embarrassment it represented. And so we arrived home. I refused to speak to my mother, threatened to kill my brother if he told anyone about my ride back in the buggy, rejected the
glass of warm milk that the lifeguard had advised for reasons best known to him, and sulked for the rest of the day.

“The next day we went back to the beach with all our stuff piled in the buggy. No one spoke about what had happened the previous day. The water was calmer by then, and I went swimming, but not until my mother had finished spreading out the beach stuff and had come to the water’s edge to watch as my brother and I splashed in the waves.”

The three children had listened in fascination to their grandfather’s account, trying to visualize the scene and imagining themselves in similar circumstances. What would they have done?

Their mother stepped forward and looked quizzically at her father. “I don’t think you’ve ever told me that story,” she said. “I think I’d remember it.”

“Oh, sure I have,” he replied. “When you were a youngster. You’ve just forgotten.”

Then he turned to the children and asked, “What do you think about that story?”

“Did it really happen or did you just make it up?” asked Max, ever the skeptic.

“I assure you, it’s true,” said his grandfather. “You can ask my brother the next time you see him. He’ll tell you.”

“Did he ever tell anyone else that you were riding in a baby buggy?” asked Ben.

“I don’t think so. If he had, I’m sure I would have heard about it,” replied his grandfather. “I think he really believed I would kill him if he told.”

“I guess you should have waited before you went into the water,” reflected Max.

“Yeah,” said Ben, “but that other kid was going in.”

“You could have made up an excuse and waited,” said Max. “That’s what I would have done – and I wouldn’t have gone out so far if there was an undertow. Didn’t they have flags to tell you it was dangerous?”

“I don’t think there were warning flags back in the old days. It was a long time ago. The lifeguards all wore long bathing suits and had handlebar
mustaches and rode on unicycles,” replied their grandfather.

“Now I know you’re making that up,” said Max.

“Yes, it wasn’t that long ago. But the rest of it is true,” he said and nodded solemnly. “Now I have a question for you three. You’ve heard what happened to me, so tell me what you are going to do when you get to the beach. Let me rephrase that: What are you three not going to do when you get to the beach?”

His daughter stepped closer, not wanting to miss a word of her children’s responses.

“Be careful when we go swimming so the lifeguards don’t have to come and rescue us,” said Ben, “and not go in before Mom says it’s okay.”

“Make sure Mom is watching before we go in the water,” said Max, “and don’t swim where the lifeguards can’t see us,” he added, practical as always.

“Those are all very good ideas,” said their grandfather approvingly, glancing again at his daughter. She smiled and nodded at him. True or not, it was a great story to tell the kids.

Her father continued, “Because I’m sure you can see what might happen if you aren’t careful.”

“The lifeguards might not see you,” said Ben, “or maybe they wouldn’t get to you in time.”

“You could drown,” said Max, and Ben nodded in agreement. Both boys fell silent as they contemplated the possibilities.

Just then, Jenny, who had been listening attentively to the exchange between her grandfather and her brothers, nodded vigorously, catching her grandfather’s eye. Turning to her, he asked gently, “Jenny, you haven’t said very much. What do you think about all this?”

With great solemnity the little girl replied, “I think we have to wait for Mommy, because… because if we don’t… then we might have to go home in a baby buggy!”

“Yes, indeed,” replied her grandfather. “That’s exactly right, and that, Jenny, is why we still keep that old buggy, even though there aren’t any babies around.”
Drawing by Sam Ansell
The S Word

Jane Kays

I had taken one bite of my half of the cranberry walnut muffin. The muffin was part of our coffee ritual. For four years we’d been meeting at the coffee shop, sitting in a corner, welcoming sun through the glass, and sharing woman talk – family, best book or movie, and ourselves. Passover had begun on Friday, and it was Monday.

With a few walnut pieces, cranberry residue, and muffin crumbs in a holding pattern, I swallowed, and the “s” word crept in.

“This weighs heavily on me. I have never not observed Passover.”

I watched my grandmother every Friday at dusk from a corner of the dining room table, specially cleared and cloth-clad in reverence. She’d cover her head, cover her eyes with hard-worked fingers, cover the challah she’d baked, and pray over the three lighted candles that stood pillar-like with wicks that had waited for the exact moment. As wax dripped into the brassy candlestick saucer, it tempted me as would a toy on display. The soupy liquid warmed my finger, then changed into a solid around the tiny nub, a child’s size.

I became the herald of sundown times, running into the pantry lit by a pull string bulb, to read the times on the Jewish calendar that indicated when sun set each night. From Sabbath to Sabbath and holy day to holy day, those calendar times guided my grandmother to do what was right according to Jewish law.

My ritual was playing with candle drippings before they hardened, catching a ball of wax along its way, and detouring it around my hand.

My grandmother spoke many languages, few of them well, except her own, Yiddish. However, she communicated a reprimand that I easily understood.

When I played with the sacred lights, she’d shake her head causing gray strands to sway around her forehead and the long, braided bun to shake loose its black hairpins.

I understood the universal shake, but until I heard more, it did not curb my desire to play with the wax.

“Why not?” came my seven year-old repetitious reply.

“It’s a sin.”
Final and heavy, it fell like a cape lined with sin, upon my small shoulders.

There are many opportunities to sin in an orthodox household, particularly when playmates are neither observant nor Jewish. We were not sometimes Jews, only praying on high holy days in the fall. We were every day religious Jews.

And, as punctual as our observances were, my “whys” matched the times on the calendar.

“Why can’t I play today? Everyone else is playing.”

“It’s Shabbos.”

“So why can’t I play?”

“It’s a sin.”

The three letter “s” word loomed dark and frightened me. While it meant everything scary a child might imagine, it also meant nothing. It was a waxy, shapeless mass, hardening into something bleak and opaque, yet impossible to define.

In a recent conversation with a pastor friend, I asked about the meaning of sin.

“It is missing the mark in our personal beliefs, an archery term that came to be translated by the Greeks, as “sin.” It is not necessarily evil, just unfortunate acts, despite our best intentions.”

My grandmother died when I was thirteen and our orthodox traditions also departed. My mother and aunts became three day a year Jews and, when we drifted from any orthodox rituals, no one said the s word.

I played on Saturdays, went out on Friday nights, and ate bacon (although not in the house.) Yet, I carry a legacy from my grandmother.

In my own way, I am observant, fasting on Yom Kippur, and keeping Passover as we did when I was young.

That tiny bite of the cranberry walnut muffin threw the sin cape around me, recalling vivid memories. It was a harsh reaction to a simple, unfortunate miss of the mark, a misguided legacy from my well-intentioned grandmother.
Gymnastic Fishing by Arthur Sharenow
On Becoming an Adult Bat Mitzvah

Bonnie Alpert

When I was thirteen

God, the rabbi, the cantor were He,
Hebrew was my people’s Latin.
God chose,
And God conducted the humankind symphony.
Our Law had yet to cross the threshold into my heart and spirit.
The Torah didn’t call me to read it or even to see its lettered parchment;
I couldn’t feel the weight of Torah in my arms
And the Friday night bat mitzvah was the Jewish coming-of-age bronze.

I am now five times older and wiser

And the Jewish feminine thrives,
And the gates to Hebrew are open.
It is I who choose – to be Jewish;
With mature strength, it is I who take responsibility for my goodness.
A spiritual sense envelopes my core.
I hear the Torah’s call and I hold the pointer to its words;
I carry our tradition with arms, heart, and spirit strong and loving
and my bat mitzvah ceremony is golden.
Pa’s Hat

Kenneth Rosenfield

Into the room he strode, that boy,
placing one foot casually afore the other
as though he had just left the O.K. Corral.
Precisely sitting atop his head – my hat!

In an instant of truth, that hat I knew
would no longer be happy on this gray head.
It had been with me in snow and rain,
in gusts of wind that violently blew.

Should you be mounted upon a horse, that
hat would be mounted on you, of course.
You’ll be so debonair,
so devil may care,
out in the cow country air.

Do not suppose this was an easy transition,
as I sincerely proffered he keep it.
He equally reasoned he could not.
It was after all my hat!

We ping poned the thought back and forth
until I scored a point and he won!
That night as I left leaving my hat behind,
    I thought,
as long as that hat is on his head
how far from his mind am I?
.
On June 15, 2005, I recited the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States flag for the first time. I was fifty-eight years old, and the last time I voted was for Pierre Elliot Trudeau, the future Prime Minister of Canada, when I was twenty-one.

It was a long journey in my head to get to this place. Living here as a “green card” for thirty-six years, I was often asked why I didn’t become a citizen. I believed that no one but another ex-patriot could understand. My citizenship felt like part of my genetic code. I would be a traitor to my family, my heritage, my relatives and friends still living in Montreal. Most of all, I felt it would be a terrible betrayal to my deceased Canadian parents.

Then, in 2004, I read the book *John Adams* by David McCullough. I was mesmerized by the author’s depiction of Adams’ life. From his early twenties until his death, Adams devoted his life to the realization of his vision – the first country in the history of civilization to be governed by the people for the people. For me, the book put a fresh and exciting lens on the concept of democracy. True, Canada was a democracy, but still a part of the British Empire. Good, I thought, but not quite as good. At least conceptually, this was, indeed, the greatest country in the world. I decided I was ready to belong.

This decision began an eight-month journey that included a very long application, an interview at the JFK Federal Building, and a hundred-question civics test.

At last, on June 15, 2005, on a sparkling, spring day, we drove to the Kennedy Museum for my naturalization ceremony. It took place in a grand room with seats facing a glass wall where we looked out at the sky and the entrance to Boston Harbor. We were so close to the water, I felt like I was on a boat. The guests of honor, we soon-to-be citizens, were directed to the front rows, each proudly clutching and waving a miniature American flag. The men wore their finest suits and the women were in lovely dresses. Some wore their native costumes, an Indian sari, an African turban, a Muslim burka. I wore a white and blue dress and accessorized with a red bracelet and a silk, flag scarf. Our families were seated behind us. My husband Sam and daughter Sarah were seated a few rows behind, smiling and waving proudly. Our son Adam, racing from the subway, came a few minutes late and was locked out. No one could enter. Security was on high alert that day. Adam pressed his irritated face to the glass door and watched from the hall.

The presiding judge was a New Yorker, a Jewish woman who told the
inspiring story of her parents arriving at Ellis Island. Only in America, she exclaimed, could her parents be Polish immigrants, and here she was, one generation later, a Federal judge. Her speech was brilliant – my pulse was racing. The family audience was noisy, with lots of children and movement, but, in the front, we were flushed with excitement and quiet anticipation. After her story, the judge announced that sixty-two countries were represented in the room, and asked each of us to stand when our country was named. Alphabetically, Canada came quickly, and I stood up and watched as the melting pot from all over the world, with faces of every color and ethnicity rose, one at a time. When we were all standing, the audience burst into wild applause. The experience was electrifying and deeply moving. I held back tears, but if allowed, I would have wept openly. The judge asked us to place our right hand on our heart, face the flag, and repeat the Pledge of Allegiance.

In spite of the madness of everyday, modern American life, I can say to you from my heart... for that moment, I was in John Adams’ America. In 2008, I voted for the second time in my life - for the first African-American US President.
Colombia Fishing Village by Arthur Sharenow
Intimacies of Autumn
Marjorie Roemer

They’ve shrugged their negligees to the floor
Great splashes of brilliance.
Now they stand before us, almost bare.
With the cunning of Victoria’s Secret models
They flash a scarlet petticoat hem,
A vivid orange bustier,
A provocative glimpse of the flimsily clad
Bare bones now exposed.
Long-legged beauties, the oaks and maples
Entice us into the intimacies of autumn.
My dentist practices his art of painless repair
in a building near a bank of the Charles that
has thoughtfully left space for things
rightfully belonging there:

marshland where reeds may refresh,
lily pads from which frogs may lecture,
berries for birds, long grasses for geese, a
magical place to ease the pain of apprehension.

On the way to my endurance drill,
a sight to give me pause: crossing
the road before me, a family of geese.

Mother came first, three goslings followed;
tending the rear, the watchful gander.

Absorbed in this vision I was rudely returned to
reality by the sound of three hundred horses
mounted on rubber, rolling towards
the family.

Brow furrowed in angry frustration
the driver reluctantly reigned the horses,
leaned heavily on his horn to panic the flock
into fright and flight.

They, with calm step, in regal dignity
waddled slowly with unbroken stride.
I peered intently at each of them for
a sign of reaction, but it is hard
to see emotion on the face of a goose.
Mirror Lake by Joel Freedman
Carol White

My grandmother was demented in her later years. She didn’t know for certain her family’s names, or often even her own. But she loved her grandchildren fiercely nonetheless. And we loved her fiercely in return. “I am Grandma,” she would proudly exclaim. It was good enough.

And then she died. That should have been that, but for me it was not. I had no one and nothing to remind me of what I had meant to her and what she had meant to me. And finally I approached my uncle, who had cared for her for much of his life. “I’d love something of Grandma’s,” I said. I should not have needed to ask. He gave me her candlesticks and wedding ring. I cherished them greatly, hid them at once, and couldn’t find them again for many years. I wondered if, along with the gifts, I inherited my grandmother’s mind.

Time passed, and I had a home of my own. One day I remembered something and asked my uncle, “Whatever happened to Grandma’s china? I really loved her, and as the oldest grandchild, I should probably have gotten it.” “I’ll ask my wife,” he replied, returning with the information that it was missing – no one knew where it was. I wondered if, along with the gifts, I inherited my grandmother’s mind.

More years passed, and I visited my uncle and aunt. My aunt opened a closet to show me the crystals she had just bought, and there was my grandmother’s china on a shelf. Again I approached my uncle: “You know, I really loved Grandma, and, as the oldest grandchild, I should probably have some of this china.” Again he said, “I’ll ask my wife.” This time, the story was a different one. This wasn’t my grandmother’s china, which was still mysteriously gone. My aunt (who had not loved her mother-in-law) loved her china so much that she bought an identical set for herself. How could they think I was dumb enough to swallow this? But again I let it go from my speech, if not from my mind.

Many more years passed, and my uncle died. Not long ago, I prepared to travel to my aunt’s house for her 90th birthday. And then she called: “Do you still want your grandmother’s china?” “What made you change your mind?” I asked. “When you get older, you have to give up some things, and you are the only one who asked for this china. Don’t tell anyone I’m giving it to you.” She hid it in her son’s garage for me to smuggle into my car. And smuggle it I did.

And so, almost fifty years after my grandmother’s death, her dishes are in my house. They are gold French
Limoges, and too fragile to use. I expect that no one has ever used them since the barely remembered days when my grandmother was well. Soon I will pass them on to her great-grandchildren, for them to pass down as well. They know nothing of my grandmother, other than her name and perhaps a story or two. Will they cherish her dishes? Will they even care? I think I’m asking myself a bigger question: How will my grandchildren remember me?

What in life matters and what does not? What must we remember and what will we forget? There’s a lesson here for me, but I’m not sure what it is. I know, though, that like my grandmother, I love my grandchildren fiercely, and I misplace things. I also know that gold dishes from France are beside the point.
Telephone Calls

Ruth Kramer Baden

It is Sunday. I am alone.
The day has crouched in the walls all morning
patiently waiting until I have done the laundry,
the Sunday Times crossword puzzle.
Now it leaps. I smell blood on its muzzle.
I lift the receiver and the beast
slinks back into the woodwork.

I call: “Hello, Chicago; Hello, San Francisco.”
The children are long distance now.
Wires stretch to the tip of Lake Michigan,
then swivel over the frets of the Oakland bridge.
I think I have reached the place
where no one is home to answer my call,
when my son hellos me: Ma, I can't talk now,
I'm off to Australia.
“Good,” I say. “It’s good to get out on Sunday,”
Talk to you later, Ma.

I dial my father. Wires bundled
in cables thrum underwater.
A voice answers, nibbled by angelfish:
Hello?
“Is that you, Daddy?”
Yes, yes.
It is my father's voice. Sea fans open
from the holes in my receiver.
How are the children?
“The children have children.”
That's nice.
“John Kennedy was shot two months
after you died. They've walked on the moon.”
Daughter, How are you?
“I am free–falling through noon and midnight.”
Give my love to anyone.
“Daddy, tell me what to do.”
Take Latin. You’ll never be sorry.
I have to hang up now.

I call my grandmother.
You, she says. Her wooden rolling pin
thumps the dough. I hear you made trouble,
you weren’t a good girl. You talked back
to your father, then to your husband,
you argued with rabbis.

“Grandma, remember on Sundays you took me
in the wing chair and sang to me in Yiddish?”
I hum the tune. “What were the words to that song?”
Who can remember words? There were eight children.
The first died at birth, her eyelashes were golden.
I sing, “Schoen ve de la vuna,
   You are lovely like the moon.”
They say you stopped obeying.
What have you done with your life?
I am silent. Then I say,
“I have become an empty ladle.”

My grandmother sighs.
She cuts a crescent from the dough,
sprinkles it with sugar. It is still
warm in my hand, glistening like the half moon.
I hold tightly to its horns, climb into its crook,
my legs begin to pump
I am swinging over the telephone poles
my skirts balloon over Chicago
I’m dipping low over San Francisco and then
easily I swing east of the moon
my Grandma and I are singing together.
I remember all the words.
Summer Heat

Frank Davis

The windows and doors were open that night in the vain attempt to gather into the steamy, close, and musty bedroom any breeze that might be coaxed from the nearby ocean.

From the bar next door the incessant words of the song from the jukebox did not just drift into the bedroom. They came in uninvited, not to be ignored, nor, for that matter, to be enjoyed.

Peg of my heart
I love you
We’ll never part
I love you

The words were heard over the high-pitched laughter of women enjoying a night out and of men enjoying the women. They were sweating in the grueling August heat of 1947. The beer was doing its job, releasing the tensions of a nation two years past the end of World War II. The words and music repeated and repeated.

In the bedroom, the ten-year-old boy and his younger brother were lying awake with the music, noise, heat – all keeping them from getting the sleep needed so they might enjoy another early morning on the beach. The words and music repeated and repeated.

Dear little girl
Sweet little girl
Sweeter than the Rose of Erin
Are your winning smiles endearin’

One other thing kept the older brother from dozing off. Earlier in the day, after spending a morning and afternoon on the beach, he came home with the worst sunburn of his young life. His legs were burnt, his face and chest were burnt, but by far the worst was his back. Bright red, hot to the touch, with only minimum relief from the smelly white salve his mother had gingerly applied to his back. This night, he had no choice but to sleep on his stomach, an uncomfortable position, at best. And then there was the music and he thought, won’t it ever stop!!

Peg of my heart
Your glances
With Irish Art entrance us
Come be my own
Come make your home in my heart.

“Fine, make a home in my heart,” the ten-year-old thought angrily. But slowly, despite the words, despite the music, despite the heat and the pain, sleep finally came.

The following morning, sunburn and all, the ten-year-old boy and his
brother went back to the beach. They ran into the surf and threw a ball. When, after an hour, the younger brother left, the older boy stayed a bit longer. As he started to walk toward his parents’ rented rooms, he approached a group of young adults. He noticed with envy as he passed that they were all well tanned, but with his terminally white skin, he felt he would never achieve that simple goal.

As he passed the group, a woman called to him, “Hey, kid, quite a burn you have there.” He turned to see a beautiful, tall woman, maybe twenty years old, smiling at him. The boy swallowed, turned, and, with his shyness, could only offer a weak smile back. As he continued past, she started to walk toward him and, pointing to a purple and white blanket, said, “I might have something that would help: come over here for a second.”

She motioned to the blanket with stuffed beach bags and shoes keeping it from moving in the wind. “Lie down,” she said. “Let me put some of this on your back.” She rummaged through one of the brightly colored bags and pulled out a small container and, as she opened it, the boy caught a whiff of an exotic aroma. He hesitated. The woman sensed his reluctance. “Please, don’t worry; I think this will really help. It works for me and all my friends. It won’t hurt. I promise.” He couldn’t refuse. Maybe this would give him the tan he coveted.

Slowly, the boy went first to his knees and then stretched himself out on the blanket, exposing his burnt back. She bent over him, dipped two fingers into the container and slowly, carefully dabbed some goop on his sunburned back. He winced. But as she slowly worked her fingers gently over his back, he felt a cool soothing where just moments ago there was pain. Her fingers were like silk and she took her time as she slowly stroked his back. She again dipped her fingers in the jar and started to apply a new round of this healing balm. But then, as his back cooled, he started feeling a strange sensation. He was feeling heat again. But this time the heat was not on his back. He was enjoying her application of this wonder material in a way he had not experienced before. He did not want her to stop. He savored every stroke as he closed his eyes silently praying she would never stop. But moments later, she did.

As she rose, she asked him if he was feeling any better. “Mmm,” was all he could utter through smiling lips. She smiled back and said, “Yeah, this stuff always does the trick. Look, maybe you
should stay out of the sun for a while, but if you want to come back for some more just look for me.”

“Thanks,” was all the young, red-faced, boy managed. “What’s your name?” she asked. The boy hesitated and before he could answer she said, “Mine’s Margaret, but everyone calls me Peg.”
Harbor Reflections: en plain air painting by Nancy Alimansky
The Bounty: en plain air painting by Nancy Alimansky
Last night’s rain clouds sent away
by a firm no nonsense wind, leaving
me with that great egret across the road,
stANDING in marsh water
    cold, still and hunting.

Here I am trying on my new birth day.
One might ask, what’s new or different?
To which one might answer, everything!
To each person born today a brand new

undiscovered world, shining, unused,
just waiting for your footprint.
Here comes eleven year old Caroline.
    We are alone.
“Happy Birthday Grandpa!”

Right there my ninety-first voyage
    took its first step.
With that beginning I’ll be walking
    in cool, green clover all year.
My Complaint

Kenneth Rosenfield

So I complain to the lady who serves me in my favorite food store known as the Russian market.

“What happened to the pickled herring that came in a 32 oz. jar filled generously to the top?”

She answers me with a sweet, condescending voice and says “This is much better.”

There never was anything better and don’t think that I haven’t noticed that the size has shrunk and the price has grown a bit.

I am a couple of digits short but I can still count!
“But Mom, I’m still hungry,” says Bill.

“I could use a second cup of hot chocolate,” Gigi adds.

Bill and Gigi are not enthusiastic about going to see the Shroud of Turin exhibit and are turning breakfast into a deliberately leisurely meal which just has to include another croissant and more hot chocolate. Just as we start on our way Gigi decides she has to change her clothes before we leave.

“I can’t go out in these ugly things. Look at those lovely women on their way to work.” A group of young women, in high heels and beautifully tailored suits or dresses with exquisite silk scarves draped and floating over their shoulders, pass by, leaving what I imagine to be a pleasant bouquet of perfumes in their wake.

I am relaxed, in a good mood, and the day lies ahead, full of unexpected treasures, so I laugh and say, “Go ahead, but be quick about it. You two think your mother doesn’t know what’s going on here. We’re still going to the Cathedral of San Giovanni. No more delaying tactics.”

“What did I do?” Bill asks. “Don’t blame me. I’m not changing my clothes!” At fifteen, he lives in blue jeans and NATO jacket, the uniform of his group of friends and classmates in Bremen.

Under the mid-morning sun the side streets of Turin, devoid of office workers, are now the domain of old men. Old men straddle chairs set against warm apartment building walls and rest drinks on small sidewalk tables. Old men converse or argue, depending on one’s point of view, while their arms conduct a symphony of colorful words we cannot understand. Old men smoke and spit for emphasis. Old men stare at us as we go by. There are no women on the street at this hour of the morning. We pass a newsstand and, although I can’t read the headlines, I recognize a picture of Aldo Moro. I start to feel alien and uncomfortable as I remember the police are still hunting for the kidnappers of Aldo Moro, Chairman of the Christian Democratic Party.

The trial of the Red Brigade terrorists who murdered a policeman ten days ago is now in progress. Last year, they murdered the head of the Turin Bar Association, and, before that, the chief public prosecutor in Genoa. The stated aim of the Red Brigade is to strike terror into the hearts of the public by kidnappings, murder, shooting of kneecaps and burning cars. My over-
active imagination starts to work and I see terrorists on every street corner between our hotel and the church. The Turin police are on the streets, but, in uniforms with multicolored feathers in their hats, they look like extras in an Italian opera. I am not reassured by their presence.

We arrive safely and go up to the delicately carved church entrance door. Little Berlitz book in hand, we translate (I think) a poster announcing that a tour is required to see the shroud. The tour is in Italian.

“No way!” Gigi and Bill proclaim in unison as they start to turn away.

A man and woman brush past us, dragging two young children with tear-streaked faces through the door. The woman looks at me and shrugs her shoulders. I hear the father say something that sounds like gelato. He must be bribing them. Would that I could do the same.

Instead, I say, “How about a picnic down by the river?” The sun is shining, a light breeze is blowing, and we are having our long sought-after vacation in Italy.

“What will we do for food?”

“I think we passed a market on one of those side streets.”

We walk down the main boulevard, and then we fearlessly plunge into the side streets to again walk the gauntlet between staring old men. We see two playing dominoes and watch them surreptitiously as we go by. Others openly stare at us. Where are all the women? The sun is high in the sky. Surely they can’t still be cleaning and cooking.

We wander through the small market and choose sandwich fixings and some drinks and fruit. The checkout counters are covered with worn, metal-edged, gray Formica. Behind the counter, a gray-haired, rotund, middle-aged woman with John L. Lewis eyebrows wipes her hands on her apron before totaling our purchase. She shows me the adding machine tape. It comes to 5965 lira. I hand her a 10,000 lira note. She gives me 4000 lira and some broken sticks of chewing gum.

“No, no,” I say, as I shake my head. She tries to get me to take some caramels.

“Gigi, check the Berlitz book. How do you say I don’t want any?” I gesture with my hand to push the caramels away. She is getting angry now and
flings two tea bags on the counter. What is wrong with her? I don’t want tea.

“I can’t find it,” sputters Gigi, who, trying hard to keep her composure, can barely get the words out.

Again I say “No!” The clerk, with a look of disgust, throws my change, consisting of two wrinkled plastic bags, onto the counter and turns to help the next customer.

Later in the day, we understand that peculiar transaction. After he returns from work, my husband laughingly explains the temporary dearth of small coins in Italy and the ingenious ways merchants make change for their customers. Had I known, I would have taken the caramels.

Note: Aldo Moro was later found dead in the trunk of a car.
Rocks Under Water by Allan Kleinman
The Last Lesson

Linda Brooks

A tragic lesson,
Marilyn Levenson.
You kept an important secret.
You of all people
to instruct “silence.”

You stayed with us
through the summer.
No longer our teacher.
Now our friend.

I was obedient.
I didn’t call,
pen a note, a poem
a message, a memoir.

Each week, we journeyed
from house to house.
And wrote our stories.
And read our stories.

Then suddenly,
no word of warning
in a BOLLI email,
distant and untold.
shocking and cold.

In August we gathered
at your kitchen table
with apple cake and tea.
Three real writers and me.

Your obituary.

“Write, write, just write.”
you chanted, “Don’t think.”
“Take four minutes
and script your memories
of taste, sound, smell, and sight.
Don’t think. Just write.”

I loved your face, Marlyn.
Azure blue eyes
under a cloud of white curls.
A smile that could break glass.

So our lesson ends here,
with anger and angst.
I can’t forgive yet.
I need to say thank you.
I need to say good-bye.

But your last lesson
was to withdraw
and be silent
forever.

I panicked. I froze.
But my pen danced
across the page.
Four minutes wasn’t enough.

Ten memoirs written,
so intimate, so brave,
and read aloud
to trusted strangers.
Some of us couldn’t part
at the end.
Disappearing Dutch

Barbara Webber

Come out of Schenectady, cross the Mohawk River, leave the Interstate at Rotterdam, and roll onto secondary roads. Drive up that big hill to the old, cobblestone church whose sloping, peaked roof is covered in new, red shingles. Next door is the cemetery. It’s maintained, but not crisply; little sprouts of grass, brown in the summer, appear haphazardly around the headstones. The gravel roads are more dust than gravel, and the early headstones lurch a bit in the softening soil, but it’s peaceful and pleasant. You can hear the birds sing and, sometimes on a Sunday, the congregation too.

In the summer, the smell is intoxicating. I asked my father once about the gorgeous smell and he irritably snapped, “It’s oregano. They,” pointing to the surrounding houses in the distance, “put it here; it has spread everywhere and can’t be removed because it’s too expensive to eradicate.” I was startled, discomforted by his not so hidden prejudice, and vastly amused envisioning him thinking about interloping neighbors heedlessly continuing to grow the little marauders whose invasive seeds show no respect for the early residents of Rotterdam. On reflection, though, a blurted-out, unguarded statement coming from a man who infrequently mentioned feelings indicated the strong proprietary emotions Dad held for this place, this cemetery – his place.

I buried him and my mother here. He buried his parents here. And his father buried his grandparents here. At some point, I discovered his great grandparents are buried here as well. They are in the old part of the cemetery up near the fence and the road, standing with the other thin, faded, white stones whose eroded names are hard to read. These are all Hams.

I always thought we were Dutch and other things too, but the heritage consistently mentioned, if mentioned at all, was that Ham, my father’s name, was Dutch. And, of course, Dutch family backgrounds were common in Schenectady. My father, every once in a while was jokingly, and not so jokingly, called a stubborn Dutchman.

In the late 1970’s, Dad asked if I would mind researching some family history so he could qualify for the Dutch Early Settlers Society by showing that he had Dutch ancestors living in the Albany area prior to the Revolution. “Sure,” I said in spectacular ignorance, and, eight years later, I finally found the information. Crawling on my hands and knees on a painted, cement floor of a tight, little room that was only four feet high, in a basement archive in the Hudson County Courthouse, I opened a yellowing will. Written in now brown handwriting, it proved the link between the Columbia County Hams and the Rotterdam Hams. In
fact, Wendell Teal Ham of Columbia County was the father of John Wendell Ham of Rotterdam, Schenectady County, New York. A significant find. But even more significant is that Dad does not qualify for the Dutch Albany Settlers Society because Ham is not Dutch. It is German, Palatine German, to be exact.
At Night

Peter Schmidt

Corrosive gray phantoms
gnaw at emotion,
searing, abrading;
the mind in a whirlpool
of bleak revolution
imprisoned in dread.

Around and again,
not farther nor nearer,
chaotic dark eddies,
a nightmare awake
that ravages peace
and banishes rest.

An eon of time
drips second by second;
each minute unending
too long and too short;
each hour eternal
yet added, too few.

When will we see
the faintest of glimmers
dissolving the shadows,
turbulence calmed,
when the mercy of dawn
lets infinity end?
My Grandpa Osher spoke only Yiddish to me, and my Grandma Rose knew only a few English words. When I was seven I asked her where they came from.

“Horodenka.”

“Where's that?”

“Austria.”

“Austria?”

“I don't know. Hungary. There were big birds.” She extended her arms, like wings.

Her answer satisfied me until forty years later. Middle age does that, pokes us: “Who am I? Where did I come from? What was it like?”

I surmised that she had meant her town was in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Those big birds might have been storks; I had read that in certain parts of Europe they roosted on roofs (leading, perhaps to the story that the stork brought babies?) When I visited my library, I tried to locate Horodenka, hauling down the heavy atlases one by one, poring through indexes and maps of Europe without success. Finally persistence paid off. In the last remaining atlas I found it, a black dot hidden between a maze of red and blue lines, near Romania and the Black Sea. It had, indeed, once been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in an area once called Galicia and now the Ukraine, one of those towns where horses and cows and people remained fixed in the same place, while their boundaries moved between Poland and Russia.

It was real, or had been. After that I would ask every Russian I met, “Have you ever heard of a town called Horodenka?” After some years, a taxi-driver said, “Horodenka? I know Horodenka. I lived in the next town. Once it was farmland, but after the war the Russians built those big concrete buildings on it.”

At the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., not far from the beginning of its slow death march into history, there is a tall, long, black granite wall. Carved into it are the names of all the towns, villages, and shtetls the Nazis destroyed. I thought, “I'll never find Horodenka on it,” but I searched anyway. And then I froze. It was there, “Horodenka,” its letters chiseled deep into the dark. I pressed my fingers into them.

Since that time, having advanced into the Internet Age, I googled the word.
Many sites popped up. Through the magic of Wikipedia I read the history of this town, beginning with the seventeenth century. Yet even after all these years of disclosures and knowledge, I was not prepared for the terrible revelations: centuries of anti-Semitism and barbarism wreaked upon this little dot, and I wept for Horodenka.
*Nighthawks in Prague* by Richard Glantz
He turns
snuggles closer
whispers softly
in my ear
do you ever think about
our life expectancies?
startled
instantly alert
heart pounding
I think
have I ever wondered
how much longer
we might have?

in the enveloping blackness
I grope for my glasses
slide into my slippers
silently open the office door
trembling, I google
Actuarial Tables
dark numbers jump
into sharp focus
unexpectedly show
such a short time remaining
did I really think
we would live forever
what to do?
return to bed
snuggle closer
answer his question
no I haven’t thought about
our life expectancies
he snores softly

in the morning
we start planning
our long-postponed
canal boat trip
Side Effects

Kenneth Rosenfield

Big, bold, in gold, the letters shouted
AUDIOLIGIST.
Happily I entered, greeted by the receptionist,
my appointment confirmed, was asked to be seated
in the comfortable waiting area.
She came to tell me the doctor would soon be out.
As this information was being communicated she
kept patting my knee, a simple
gesture with several possible interpretations.
I waited the long moment as she patted.
Then I reached a reasonable conclusion.
Either I still have it and
it shows or,
I have lost it, and
it shows.
I know I have lied sometimes – everyone has. But, as nearly as possible, I have tried not to. These are the ones I’m sure of.

As a child of twelve or so, I would lie to the priest in confession. The whole setting encouraged it - the dark church, the carved wood so inviting to run my fingers over and feel the pleasure of it as I thought of sin, the candles flickering on the altar winking “lie, don’t lie, lie, don’t lie,” the faceless man on the other side of the screen as I knelt in the two-person stall, the awful anticipation, when will the screen open, what will I say. Then too, the remembered words of my father, talking about social occasions, but I feared that all occasions were social occasions – “Now, Susan, don’t be dull.”

I resolved not to be dull and tried to think of interesting sins to confess to, as best I could. In truth, they were dull, just exaggerations of the truth: I got angry at my mother ten times this week, I lied to my teachers three times. I always made up a number to make it official. After all, the priest would say back to me, in a weary voice, “Say five Hail Marys and three Our Fathers,” so it was clear that numbers were important.

The other reason for lying was to liven up the priest’s undoubtedly boring life. I felt that I owed it to him to be interesting. Even then I was a pleaser. But the weary voice let me know that as a sinner I had a long way to go.

That was my first lie. My second came much later. In my mid-twenties, living in Manhattan, still half in the confessional, still torn between rebellion and compliance, I would give a false name to men I met at parties who frightened me or who bored me. I was Beverly Lipton. I remember talking to another young woman who, like me, lived in a walk-up and who felt marginal too. Her apartment was furnished, like mine, in cast-offs. When I told her about my party name, she said admiringly, “Oh, I could never think up a name quickly enough.” “Why, use mine,” I offered grandly.

Those are my lies. I suppose telling the truth was important to me because there was so little of it in my home, mainly because my mother was an actress. She specialized in being what she was not. Did she pick this work because she did not want to tell the truth or did the work make her unable to see the difference between truth and falsehood? I don’t know. What I do
know is that this was a woman who lived for the posed moment – the head held to one side, the feet placed one in front of the other, the hand curving back on the hip holding open the jacket to reveal that the lining and the blouse matched. What words came out of that Windsor Pink mouth were platitudes like “The greatest plays were written by Shakespeare.”

She said things like that so that people would think she was an intellectual. It was a sensitive point, since I don’t think that she finished high school. She joined the Ziegfeld Follies at fifteen and married my father at twenty-seven. By that time she was probably glad to take off those tap shoes.

She became an authority on how things should be done – you know, always trying to get it right, just like me, but about different concerns. “Say poem, Susan, not pome, and it’s never tuxedo or, God forbid, tux; it’s dinner jacket.” My mind reeled trying to remember it all. “Don’t say drapes, say draperies, don’t say couch, it’s sofa. And, before you go out, do you have your white gloves? You don’t wear them. You carry them.” In my mother’s mind it was Ginger and Fred time forever.

When I came home from school and said the wrong thing, which I invariably did, she would put her hand to her forehead, palm outward, sink back onto the tropical print sofa and say, in a low voice, “God knows I’ve tried.” My mother among the palm fronds.

I did marvel at the dramatic touch – it was everywhere and about everything. My own attempts at grandeur and anger, in front of the mirror, practicing with intensity and a stern face, were pale in comparison. I was pale in comparison. Pale and mute.

She, however, infused every encounter, every detail with meaning. It was important that people say the right thing, using the right words, while holding their gloves, behind the draperies.
I Use Tide for a Much Whiter White by Robert Pill
I Think You’d Look Better in the One on the Right by Robert Pill
Run for Fun in the Hot, Hot Sun
(with only mild apologies to Dr. Seuss)

Peter Schmidt

And we’re off! No more training runs; no more preparation. On a hot and sunny Sunday morning, as #114 in your program, it’s now time for me to try to just enjoy this Newton 10K road race. No, the low number doesn’t mean that I’m that good – I registered early.

It’s only minutes into the race, and the faster runners are already far ahead. I’m not competing with them anyway, but I am looking around for those who might be seventy and older. That’s one of the pleasures of reaching this age bracket; a reduced field and the chance to actually finish as one of the top three. Just a few steps ahead there’s a white-haired older man, so let’s be sure to keep him in sight.

Run within yourself to settle into a reasonably comfortable pace – think of Alan Greenspan’s irrational exuberance – try to have a little something left at the end of the race. Keep your veteran runner’s wits about you, and be aware of today’s draining heat.

Which is what those wearing the black tee-shirts haven’t done. They didn’t recall their high school physics, where they might have learned that black is a terrific heat absorber. Score one for this old-timer who chose to run shirtless today.

There’s a light breeze – pleasant now, but in the wrong direction on the way back. Try to remember that this means that there will not be a cooling breeze for the hot treeless stretch after mile five. Meanwhile stay to the shady side of the street to keep out of the debilitating sun. Practice some personal energy conservation – every bit helps.

Here’s that first real hill – never that much fun, and certainly not today. It has already affected my white-haired competitor; he’s settled into a pattern of interspersing his running with a few walking steps, and it’s not even mile two yet! I’m especially glad that the race organizers changed the course recently and took the tough Austin Street hill out of it.

Approaching the first water station, and time to grab a cup and hydrate. No one drinks anymore, everyone hydrates. I never could figure out how to drink on the run, so it’s good to take a few walking steps along with some deep breaths before continuing on. Those precious lost seconds not running are an investment for the rest of the race.

It’s not far after mile two and here are the lead runners already coming back
and looking great. Are they that fast, or am I that slow? Probably both, I think.

A flat stretch, but be careful not to push too hard; it’s too easy to go over the aerobic threshold, and then it’s really hard to recover. Keep that serious hill at mile three-point-five in mind; after that, there will be only a few little ones left on Prince Street, and then it’s flat to the finish. All those training runs over the race course are really helping with the race strategy.

Another water station – take a few swallows; the rest goes over the head and feels so refreshing. I’m buoyed by passing a few walkers now; others are breaking up their run with some walking. I’m not feeling too drained yet, but will I be able to pick up the pace during the last mile and a half? Better not – the heat can take a toll pretty quickly. And there are no runners close enough to pick off with a faster pace. Settle into maintenance mode again.

Finally there are only a few tenths of a mile to go, on a slight downhill, and there’s the finish line in sight. Nothing left to lose with a little extra speed (if that’s the right word.) I pass no one, but no one passes me either. I hear a voice announcing each finisher, but as I cross the line he either misreads my number or my name and congratulates someone from Cambridge instead. Too bad, but the electronics in the number bib and the finish mat should get it right.

Not a sterling time today, but it was a hot day and now the race is done and over. Time to hydrate seriously. So how did I do compared to the other seventy-and-overs? One benefit of slower running is that one doesn’t have to wait so long for the awards ceremony. This time they even read off the older age-bracket awards first. And yes, there’s my name among the top three!

As I sometimes like to say: not bad for an old man.
Drinks For Two

Frank Davis

As she walked down the city street at three o’clock on a bright, sunny day, she saw what she was looking for identified by the signs in the window. One sign blinked COORS on and off in blue circled letters, and the other blinked BUD LITE on and off in red circled letters. She pushed the brass plate attached to the highly polished wooden door and entered the cool, dark tavern interior. She stopped to allow her eyes to adapt to the darker environment. Yes, Gail thought, this was what she wanted, a place to get a drink. People probably wouldn’t come here to order a Reuben sandwich or a chicken Caesar salad. People came here for booze, to talk, to laugh, to cry, or just sit with a frosted stein or highball glass or some other container with an alcoholic liquid.

She looked about the room, glancing at the ten or so tables to her right that were sparsely filled and then to her left where there were about a dozen stools at a semi-circular bar. She walked to the bar and opted for a stool in the middle, allowing for two empty stools either side of her. This day she was not seeking company. She was here only for alcohol.

She sat down facing a huge mirror. In front of the mirror were bottles of all shapes and sizes containing top-shelf and low-shelf liquors. As Gail looked into the mirror, she could see the tables at the other end of the room and the door she had entered through. “What will it be, miss?” asked the bartender as he placed a cocktail napkin and a small bowl of nuts before her. “What’s your house red?” Gail replied. “We have a merlot or a cab.” “I’ll have the cab.”

In a minute the glass of red wine was placed in front of her, and Gail replied yes when asked if she would like to start a tab; she immediately took a big gulp from her glass and swallowed. With that she took in a large breath of air, held it for a moment, and slowly let it blow out through her mouth in an attempt to relax her body that had been so tense since she got the news a few hours ago.

She looked into the mirror again and could see that she did not look her best, not that it mattered. Her best features, her eyes, were not bright and luminous as they normally were, but rather slightly puffy and red. Her usual smile was not there. Her lipstick had not been refreshed in a while, and her hair had wisps going this way and that. She didn’t care. She was not in a mood to be pretty, attractive, or even kind. She pondered a while, finished her drink, and gave the sign to the bartender to bring another as she sat and stared into the mirror.
After a while some people at the end of the bar left; others replaced them, but the two stools on either side of her remained empty, providing the privacy she sought. Then a man, about her age, early thirties, came in and sat down two stools to her right. Gail did not look at him directly but couldn’t help see him in the mirror. He was a large man with a firm, set jaw. The bartender came over to the man and asked what he wanted as he placed a cocktail napkin and a bowl of nuts in front of him. “Let me have a shot of seven and a Coors on tap.” replied the man. As the bartender drifted away to get the drinks, the newcomer looked straight ahead, and, if he saw Gail, he didn’t acknowledge her. He sat impassively, thoughts all consuming. The bartender brought the boilermaker and set it down in front of the man. The man said yes to the tab, picked up the shot glass, bent his elbow and, with one gulp, emptied the glass. The beer was at his lips within seconds, and he took a big draw on it, swallowed, then took in a big breath, which he slowly let out.

The man named Rob and Gail both sat quietly, without moving, for several minutes, just looking at the mirror and not even hearing the laughter from the tables behind them or the chatter from those on the other stools at the corners of the bar. They just sat and thought. Gail broke the reverie when she signaled to the bartender for a refill. As he brought her the drink, he asked Rob if he wanted another. His thoughts interrupted, he turned to his left and, for the first time, noticed the woman sitting two stools away and said “Sure, bring me the same.” At the same time, Gail looked to her right and nodded hello. “Not too busy in here now, I guess we’re a bit early.” said Rob. “I guess,” said Gail, taking a sip of her wine. “I haven’t been in this joint for, I guess a year or more,” he said, looking around. “Hasn’t changed a bit. Good place to get a drink. But don’t eat here.” He leaned closer, and in a quiet voice so the bartender wouldn’t hear said, “You don’t want to eat here, never, that’s for sure.” Gail smiled slightly, and also in a whisper replied. “Never ate here, so I wouldn’t know. But, I get your point. Thanks for the warning. I’ll never eat here.”

Rob’s drinks arrived, and he repeated his drinking ritual, swallowing the liquor in one gulp and then a big draw on the beer. “That’s serious drinking” said Gail, “I could never do that,” at which point she picked up her wine for another sip. “Well, it’s not something I do every day,” said Rob. “Just on days when the only relief I can find is contained in glasses like these.” And he dropped his eyes to the bar. Gail’s eyes
followed his to the bar and she said, “I’m sorry to hear that. You sound like you’re in pain.” Rob nodded, and Gail requested another drink. “How many is that for you? You seem to be going through the wine at a pretty good clip, yourself.” said Rob looking into Gail’s eyes for the first time. She met his gaze and replied, “Pain is a cheap commodity in this place today. It’s going around like the plague.”

Rob stood, looked at Gail, and without asking, slid his two glasses in front of the stool adjacent to her, and sat down. She didn’t say anything. They introduced themselves and Gail shook the hand that Rob offered. They sipped their drinks, then Rob turned to Gail and said, “You know, some people think it’s better to discuss a problem with strangers. Not friends. Just to verbalize the problem out loud, you know. Do you think they’re right? I mean, sometimes a problem just keeps rolling around in your head and never stops. No solution. No end to the aggravation and the pain. You’re just stymied. No matter what you think of doing, there are losses. It’s like you’re just incapable of deciding what to do. You know what I mean?”

“Yah, I know what you mean.” Gail said. “You think of what to do. Will you have regrets if you do one thing? Will you have pain if you do another? Sometimes you just have to choose the least bad solution.” Rob looked at Gail. “That’s exactly where I am,” he said. “Me too,” she answered. They finished their drinks and ordered another round.

“I hope you don’t mind my saying this, but you look like you’ve been crying. Am I right?” Rob asked. “Does it show?” she responded. “Well, you have these great looking eyes and I can tell they’re a little puffy and red around the edges, but you can only tell if you look very closely,” said Rob. He continued, “Look, I don’t know you, but it seems we are both here trying to deal with … ,” he paused, “some difficulties. Tell me. Do you want to share problems? You tell me your story, and I’ll tell you mine. It doesn’t go any further. Just two strangers in a bar exchanging woes. Getting some satisfaction in being a witness to someone else who is having a difficult time and maybe helping another human being through a tough period.” She looked down, took a big swallow from her glass, leaned in close to him, so close that she smelled the alcohol on his breath, and said slowly and softly, “Sure. That might help.” Their heads were now inches away from one another when she said in almost a whisper. “You know, I don’t think I can get through my story without breaking down, okay. If you can deal
with that, I’m game.” Rob nodded okay.

She took another sip from her glass and began. “Well, I came in here this afternoon just after leaving my doctor’s office. She told me,” Gail took a deep breath, “that I need a hysterectomy and that I…..” She stopped, put her hands over her face, and wept for a few seconds before she continued, “and that I’ll never be able to have children.” She breathed in deeply. “There is nothing, nothing in the whole world that I want more than having my own child. Nothing. And now this will never happen. That’s bad enough, but then I think, what man would want to marry me now, now that I can’t have kids.” Her hands went to her face once again with deeper sobs than before. Rob gently placed a hand on her shoulder. She took her hands from her face, and, as she reached for the damp cocktail napkin to wipe her tears, she said, “I am so, so sad.” More tears came to her eyes. They sat this way for a moment, Gail quietly sobbed with Rob’s hand lightly on her shoulder. With a deep breath, she turned to him and said, “I’m sorry I broke down. But I warned you it would happen. So, that’s my story.” A few moments went by in silence when she said, “Want to tell me your story?”

Rob ordered still another round of drinks. He waited for the bartender to deliver, picked up the shot glass, raised it in a silent toast to Gail, and gulped it down. “Well,” he began “as you can imagine, my story is somewhat different from yours. I’ve been married for four years. We have a little boy, two years old. He’s a wonderful son, and I love him more than life itself. He means the world to me.” Gail smiled at this wonderful introduction that Rob had given to his family. He continued, “I got home last week from a four-month stay at a job site. I work construction all over the country. It’s just the nature of the business. But you know what? You won’t believe it ‘cause I can’t believe it. I came home and my wife told me she’s pregnant. She’s two months pregnant. Can you believe that! What the hell am I going to do? Leave? Leave my boy? Have a child that’s not mine? Live with a woman I can’t trust?”

“Oh, my God!” said Gail. She reached out and placed her hand on Rob’s shoulder. Rob’s eyes welled up and he allowed the tears to run down his cheek and fall onto his shirt. He sniffled. He wiped his nose with his handkerchief. He inhaled again and sighed.
“And that’s my tale of woe,” he said looking at her. She looked into his eyes and said, “Look who else has red eyes now?” and smiled at him. He weakly smiled back. He reached out, placed his hand over the hand she still had on his shoulder. They sat this way for a few moments as outside, the darkening of the approaching evening caused the street lights to come on and, inside, the tavern lighting increased slightly. The tears slowly subsided.

They each finished their drinks and sat for a while. Then Rob turned to Gail and asked, “You feel any better?” She thought for a moment, “Maybe. Maybe a little.” “Me too,” he said, looking at his watch. He continued “Did I mention that this is not a very good place to order food?” He reached into his pocket to pay for his drinks. “I do remember you said something along those lines,” Gail said, smiling as she paid for her drinks. “Well,” Rob said, “It’s getting to be about time to eat. Can I interest you in a burger or something just down the street? Nothing fancy, but the food is good.” She looked at her watch and said with a smile, “Yah, I could go for that.” They rose from their stools, felt unsteady from the alcohol, and held on to the bar for a moment. Still somewhat wobbly, they turned to leave and instinctively reached for each other’s hand for help and support. Walking slowly, they made their way out of the tavern, through the highly polished wooden door.
Positano Sunset by Joel Freedman
June

I am June Vance, who speaks from Death’s dark side,
Sleeping not in Spoon River cemetery
Immortalized by Masters’ deathless words,
Though I, like him, was child of America’s Midwest,
Always I yearned for ocean’s sweep and so
When I was claimed by earth’s mortality I chose
To give my ashes to the sea where life began.
Since first I knew of life I loved it with such passion
I thought that I, like Masters’ Lucinda Matlock,
Would reach the age of ninety-six and even more,
Acclaimed as oldest woman in the world,
Reveling in music, dancing, poems, and lusty views
Of muscled shoulders of young men engaged in sport,
And wondrous trips to movie house and foreign land
That fueled my imagination with tales
That I enhanced as hearers sat in awe.
My youthful life was Heav’n and yet it seemed
I waited all that life to be sixteen, the age
When every possibility felt open to my grasp
As I, first of my family, marched off to endless
Opportunities that college gave, not only school but best,
The world of men that loving but old-fashioned
Parents had denied to me was open now,
Their iron rule that no man was kissed until
The engagement ring was given I dutifully observed
As full five times I took that ring before at last
I married Verne, a steady and persistent swain
Beloved by my mother, so he would not do for me,
Until at last, like many other girls, I wed that man
Most like my father. We were unlike in many ways
And yet he let me be myself so I was free to bring that self
To share the things that he most loved. Blessed we were
With children two, our greatest common love,
And then came theirs, who called me Joy,
And other young who, drawn to me,
I cherished as my own.
As life went by and children left,
My love of life did send me on
To new pursuits, as civic leader, speaker
Near at hand and far afield, to lead new causes
For rights of women, blacks and more
With feisty voice that kept poor Verne on edge
About what bomb I might drop next.
I loved my life so much I could not think
Of anything that I would change, except its end,
My life an operatic aria I sang on center stage
Until the music stopped, too soon,
As brutal shock it was when cancer
Took me just a scant few years
Past but three score and ten, when still I felt myself
That girl who waited all her life to be sixteen.
And now consigned to the waves I love
I celebrate that banquet of a world
At which my time to dine was all too brief.

Verne Senior

At death my June went to the sea she loved
While I, a stabler sort, remained on land
And lived the extra years she craved
But was denied, until at last I took my rest
At several years past decades nine, my ashes
Not scattered to the sea but buried at a summer house
In Catskill Mountains that my family loved.
I did not ask a lot of life, but what I wanted most
Came in abundance, the one prized woman
That I ever loved, a woman who would say to me
That she could fly so high like soaring kite
In strong March winds because she knew
That I held fast from earth the tether
Of that wind-driv’n wonder that was she.
Professional achievement, too, was mine,
As leader in the realms of law and civic life,
Two children who would give us naught but joy,
Contentment from my home and all
That was familiar, but excitement as I traveled
To lake and sea and mountains east and west,
And went one time to foreign land
Where nothing could I understand,
Save just two words, “mit schlag,”
That said whipped cream would top my cake.
And many pleasures from the world of sports
Games that I played and coached, and watched
Wherever two top teams faced off,
Nebraska football in the fall,
And tennis, tennis best of all,
Till finally at eighty-five
I won a championship my own
The super-senior singles tennis king of all Vermont.
In life I lacked for nothing I most loved
Save only sharing with my June my final years;
So even when life gives our heart’s desire
That gift is only for today and when that day has gone
The memory must serve until we too pass on.
Hammond Castle by Arthur Sharenow
Role Reversal
Claire Rourke

I sighed when I read the above article in our local paper. Here it was, 2007, and I was transported back to 1940, the year I finished grade school. I knew my future had to be in business, as a secretary, medicine, as a nurse, or education, as a teacher. I had no interest in typing or shorthand and was useless around sick people, leaving teaching my only alternative. I did enjoy a certain rapport with the small fry in the neighborhood. Thus, I enrolled in the academic course in high school, expecting to go to Teacher’s College on graduation. Alas, there was no money for that when the time came. Fortunately, I was awarded a scholarship to a local business school where I learned to type, take shorthand, and do a little bookkeeping.

I wasn’t aware of stereotyping at that time. My dad was a New York City policeman and a “jack-of-all-trades” around the house. He could do anything. I eagerly held the flashlight as he replaced a wall switch or rewired a lamp and watched as he did minor repairs in the house or on the car. I loved our garage. Dad had all his tools neatly arranged there. Cotter pins were my favorite. I could fix anything with a cotter pin. They were in a square, green and gold tin that once held tea. All the nails, screws, nuts, etc. were organized that way. I built a birdhouse for a science project, putting shingles on its roof. I rewired a lamp in the church basement, to the amazement of the Red Cross ladies who met there. I was a frustrated female. I wasn’t supposed to do those things, much less like to.

On graduation, I went to work in the Law Division of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in Manhattan. There I typed, took shorthand, filed, and shook in my shoes when I had to have a lawyer sign his dictated letter for fear he’d change something.
Thankfully, this tedium ended when I was wooed, won, married, and moved to Waltham, Massachusetts where we built our home. My husband, Frank, being a bricklayer, bought bricks to build with. Not nice, new, smooth, and clean bricks, but used bricks with clumps of mortar stuck on them. I enjoyed sitting on a plank, hatchet in hand, chipping the old bricks clean. And it was a frightening thrill to help nail the roof boards. Inside, I did most of the countersinking of finish nails in the wood trim, filled the little holes with putty, then painted prime and finish coats.

I tell all this because, at age thirty-two, with three children, I finally learned to drive. Waltham High School had adult evening classes. In their brochure, I saw a class in Basic Auto Mechanics.

“Wow,” I thought, “I’d like to know more about the car.” I sent in my application and check only to have both returned a week later with a note saying the course was open only to men. I was furious, but accepted this snub with resignation. This was 1958! It was as if “Rosie the Riveter” never existed.

So, I am glad to see that world changed to a world where women can look men right in the eye and say, as Annie Oakley sang, “I can do anything you can do.” I won’t add the last word, “better,” but it’s sometimes implied.
A Man On A Mission

Laurel Ann Brody

“I am a man on a mission,” he muttered to himself as he put on his hiking jacket. Oh, how he loved that jacket! It made him feel important, purposeful, and virile, something he had not felt in a long while.

And the pockets! Two had zippers, a few others, snaps, and then there were two fastened shut by Velcro. So purposeful! So useful! So official! One held some food for sustenance. Another held the oh so vital bottle of water for hydration, and yet another, the mundane – the less adventuresome car keys. While donning each inch of his jacket, Roger’s posture straightened, became more erect until he was at full attention: head up, chest out, and ready to hike.

Roger took his first steps up the mountain. Today’s goal: the apex. Oh, how proud he would be to stand at the very top and look out over the valley. On previous tries he had tired. The heat had gotten to him and, in the name of safety, he had turned, down-trodden, and headed back down the mountain. But today would be different!

He felt the breeze push over his face as he marched forward. The wind took the idleness out of the stiff brush and it swayed as best it could, given its structure. Roger moved upward with great ease. He knew today would be different. He would make it to the top.

An hour later, his pace had slowed and his breath had become pants. Yet he pushed himself. “I am a man on a mission!” he whispered to himself once again. Sweat gathered in the folds of his forehead and dribbled down his back yet it cooled him. He was pleased that his hair was short, its fawn-colored strands glistening in the late morning sun. The terrain became rocky and most difficult to navigate. “Where do I place my foot?” he asked himself with each pace forward.

Roger concentrated on his foot placement so as to ignore the heat, the sweat, and distance yet to conquer. His spindly legs had begun to shake with the strain. But his hiking jacket gave him courage. Its tie across his chest pulled a bit.

It was not simply the loosely scattered rocks that made the terrain challenging. The face of the mountain was uneven and any misstep would be hazardous. Deep groves and cavernous depressions pockmarked the complexion of the ridges. Balancing was like walking a tightrope: at any time, a slip could occur and down he would go, broken.

Stopping for a drink of water, Roger gulped with avarice at first and then slowed once satiated. There was not much left to hike. He was almost there! Step after step, carefully avoiding the dangers that could slip him up, Roger plodded ahead. The top of the moun-
tain was in sight. One step after another after another after another. “One more yard, one more foot, one more step,” he whispered to himself until he was there. He finally had done it! The feeling was exhilarating! He breathed deeply, exhaling slowly in triumph.

Roger stood at the top of the mountain and looked out over the valley with great pride, and his broad chest expanded with bravado. His eyes examined where he had been: the brush, the rocks, the cacti, and the gritty dirt. Perspiration dripped down his cheeks, and it was good. It was all good.

One more gulp of water, and it would be time to turn back and begin the descent.

Going down had its own difficulties. More stress was put on legs and knees when trudging down the mountain. He had to make sure his footing was secure so that the angular slant did not undo his step. Halfway there he thought to sit for a few minutes.

Proceeding after a few moments, Roger thought he knew the male moving up the hill. They both looked at each other and, not being able to remember exactly where they had previously met, they each nodded. Roger proceeded down, while the other climbed higher. Wishing that his acquaintance had known that he had reached the top, Roger wished that they had stopped to speak. He just wanted to express his pride at his accomplishment and not to brag. Well, maybe to brag just a bit.

Exhaustion was setting in, and he could not wait to get to the bottom. The car was there. It had air-conditioning. Perks of human inventiveness and domestication were inviting.

Still wearing his olive jacket, Roger reached the car. Turning around to face where he had been, Roger chose to sit and wonder at the sight. His posture was elegant. His pride, obvious. For a moment, all fatigue dissipated.

When the keys were removed from the Velcroed pocket and the hiking jacket was thrown into the back of the SUV, his master unhooked the leash from Roger’s collar. Roger leaped in, and, with great satisfaction, curled up on his favorite towel making sure his jacket was lovingly entwined within his limp and dusty legs. Sleep overcame him. And he may have even snored – just a little bit.
Colombia Fruit Seller by Arthur Sharenow
Colombia Corner Store by Arthur Sharenow
Joe Comelchuk – Dishwasher

Kenneth Rosenfield

He came to our restaurant one evening asking for work; “Need a dishwasher?” Fortunately we were in need of one and so he was set to work. That was the night we found a diamond in the dust bin.

Joe was not an ordinary dish man; he may once have been an “ordinary seaman.” His look and garb spoke of that but to me he was identified by his innate dignity.

Joe came to work wearing a woolen watch hat, a navy pea coat that had crossed many seas, clothes that related him to a time before he had given himself over to alcohol’s embrace.

Face scarred by wind and rain, cheeks weathered by sun and wine, what work asked of him he gave, what life offered him he could not refuse.

His attendance depended on the appearance of his pension check and how quickly it could be liquefied. When that was accomplished it was good to have him on board.

One evening after jobs were assigned, Joe was left standing, eyes glazed, unfocused, body rigid, feet rooted to floor. I said, “Joe, you need a night off!”

Hand under arm I led him to the rear storage area; soft bags of rice became his bed. I prepared a makeshift pillow and an improvised cover for comfort.
I heard a voice speak out, Joe’s voice but younger. Very clearly articulated it said, “Thank you.” As I was leaving the same voice said “Good night!” Where was he when he spoke those words? To whom was he speaking?

I painfully regret my not befriending him, for not knowing him better. I might have made his life easier and I might have softened my sense of guilt and self-reproach.
A Nursing Home Visit

Elizabeth David

As I enter the nursing home, the scents of mingled urine and antiseptic institutional “toilet water” assault my nostrils. The fact that I am enlightened enough, sophisticated enough, not to comment on these odors does not change the fact that they exist. (Couldn’t we plant pine trees in nursing homes?)

As I climb in the stairwell to the second floor, the odor that engulfed me when I entered lessens. If I remain in the stairwell, I can pretend that I am in a movie house climbing to the second balcony, with the warm cozy smell of popcorn caressing my nostrils. My imagination provides me with a momentary escape from reality.

At the second floor landing the circular nursing station looms ahead. It is stationary, yet it offers the illusion of a revolving Disneyland amphitheater: caretakers in the center, residents circling about in wheelchairs, standing, leaning, shuffling, meandering aimlessly. The living room is to the right. I glance in. The television is on. People are lined up in chairs, mostly not watching. Sometimes the sound is off. That doesn't seem to matter until a caretaker is interested in watching a particular program. The woman I have come to visit is not in the living room.

Turning to the left, I swing halfway around the nurses’ station and walk down the railed hall. People stare at me. Their eyes are blank, some smiling, some intent, some scared. Some look at me as if they know me better than I know myself. I smile, say hello, nod as I move down the hall. I think, “What am I doing here, I don’t belong here. Oh God, deliver me.”

I approach room number twenty-eight on the left. There are four beds against the left wall, four closets on the right with a small alcove which houses a built-in chest of drawers, two drawers per person, with a mirror, set in, above. There is a large picture window at the far end of the room opposite the doorway and a shelf for whatever below. If I look straight ahead out the window, I see a tree, swaying, green in late spring and summer, golden red in the fall, and bare silver in winter.

Silver in winter is like the color of the hair of the woman I have come to visit. She is the reason I belong here. She is in the third bed on the left; as usual, the rails are up. She is in the winter of her life. It is a very long winter. Even the sunshine is cold. She is alone. I take a breath, hold it, and walk over to the side of her bed. Looking down at her face, I see she is not asleep, nor completely awake. I release my breath, bend over the rail, and kiss her cheek. She turns her face toward me and looks up. Her hazel eyes, her only speech organ, look at me. Her tears
well up and are about to spill, communicating more than any words. They tell me I am recognized, I hope.

My mother’s name is the color of vibrancy, the color of spirit and passion, the color of delicate flowers – the color violet. My mother Violet is now silver. In her mid-eighties, she is suffering from senile dementia. Lowering the rail, I pull up a chair and sit down by her head, taking her hand in mine. My heart clutches as she grips my hand (or is it my heart) in response.

I talk to her as if what I say really matters. I tell her I love her. I kiss her. We hold hands. Not so long ago, she would repeat what I said. So, if I said I love you, I could be assured of a response, albeit parrot-like. Once, within the last six months, she looked at me and said, “I have something to tell you.” I waited, holding my breath. What secrets was my mother, beautiful withering Violet, about to reveal? Nothing. Her effort was aborted by the short circuits of her mind. I was left dangling, frustrated, wondering. Her eyes told me she was embarrassed. “I love you Mom, it’s okay.”

We are together, me sitting, she lying in bed. We commune by eyes meeting eyes, through the touch of our hands, through the soft patter of my voice as I speak tones of love. Once in a while, I sing, quietly, a song she used to like, or a lullaby.

I do not understand why she is still alive. I do know that being with her as mother/daughter reversed is an opportunity for healing the wounds that have gone before, an opportunity to, simply, “be” together. We communicate from the silent depths that only two women connected as we are can feel. We are facing death together in the time that is allowed. When she dies, I will be an orphan.

Leave-taking is more difficult than arriving. I kiss her again. I stroke her. I promise I will return. I linger. I, finally, say goodbye. My tears spill over.

I walk, blurry eyed, down the railed hallway, past the amphitheater of the nurses’ station, down the stairway, from the balcony to the orchestra level. No popcorn here. I take a deep breath as I exit, sucking in the fresh air as if it will purge my body and soul of the decay that seems to have seeped into my being. There is an urgency to my movements which is in direct contrast to my earlier, lingering leave-taking.
I want to expel the aura of institutionalized death from myself.

I want to expel the guilt I feel every time I leave, by distancing myself from the nursing home.

I want to expel the image I have of my beautiful silver Violet, shrinking away before my eyes.

I cannot expel myself from myself/daughter/mother.

I pray for peace for you my lovely Mother. I forgive you. Do you forgive me? Do you pray for me?
Mid-Winter Dawns

Karen Wagner

It wasn’t so many months ago that the early daylight hours were filled with chatter and rabble, whispers and yelps. This morning the only sounds I could discern were the distant caws of hungry crows and the scamper of squirrels awakened too soon or up much too late into the snowy season.

If I stand near the feeders long enough, the intrepid chickadees will come and peer into my eyes with their all-knowing gazes that say, “Did you bring food? It is hard to find these days, you know.” I rustle deep in my parka pocket for a baggie of white sunflower kernels and extend them in the palm of my hand to my friends. Joyously they herald “chick-dee-dee-dees” to the entire neighborhood and flit past my fingers to snatch one precious kernel at a time. This brief commotion has attracted the attention of the tufted titmice who usually hang around the evergreens. These little creatures fly a bit closer, spread the feather combs on their heads in a composed salute, look at me through their sage eyes and, with no words, ask the same question “Anything for me today?” I know that they will eat the black oil sunflower seeds that often fill the feeders, but what they relish are roasted peanuts in the shell. It is incredible that these tiny birds can carry a whole peanut, but they do. So, out comes the baggie of roasted peanuts in the shell from the other parka pocket. These I lay on the pavement a short distance from my feet. The titmice are not quite as adventuresome as the chickadees in approaching a human.

During this brief hubbub, I feel more eyes upon me, watching from the branches above. They won’t come any closer now, but they will be here as soon as I step away. And I know what will please them. So once again I rummage in the deep parka pockets for another bag of winter treats. I cover the ground with a smattering of the cracked corn that the mourning doves crave.

A pair of cardinals frequents my backyard. They love the sunflower seed from the feeders, but, being too large to eat directly from the wire enclosures, they depend on the scattered seeds below for sustenance. I shake a few handfuls of seed onto the ground before I turn to go. My pockets are empty. I no longer look like an overstuffed snowman. With each bird that I see, with each one that chatters back to me, I feel a little more at ease with the world. The blank, gray mid-winter morn has something sacred written on it now.
Scripps Pier by Allan Kleinman
Sunset with Birds and Waves by Allan Kleinman
A Hole in the Sky

Peter Schmidt

A hole in the sky,
without a trunk,
or branches
or leaves.
Empty.

An acorn took root
many decades before,
only one of so many,
of hundreds
that flared up
ever briefly as shoots,
or were dined on
by rodents in prayer.

Once mighty, once sturdy,
its limbs now threatened
all underneath.
Forgetting
in senescence
to nourish its limbs,
to withstand fierce gales
and gravity’s physics;
Forgetting to wear
a crown of lush green,
and fading too early
to sere crinkly brown.

Over days in ten-thousands
it had reached up and out,
stretched upward and outward,
giving comfort and shade,
and refuge for wildlife;
Then in an instant,
in only one hour,
it vanished,
with a memorial
just above ground
of a life told in rings,
leaving . . .

a hole in the sky
and
a hole in the heart.
Time Warp

Pete Reider

An elderly Asian servant sweeps the doorstep protected by a surgical mask. Not a particle of the past transcends the warp of that shallow chalice tipped up to the mouth. The cement for these houses was poured about 1930. Nothing substantial – no wine, no wafer – crosses the lip of 83 years. …no getting ourselves back to the garden there is just the sound of Joni Mitchell’s voice. We are stardust, we are golden.
Suddenly love poems streamed into my e-mail. They were enchanting poems in several languages, such as my favorite Goethe poem: “Kennst du das Land wo die Zitronen blühn ...” They came from a man with whom I had, twenty-five years ago, a five-hours-long love affair with the two best kisses of my life. He was a man of distinction, an astrophysicist with many awards to his name. But he had always had many hobbies, and I assumed he was perhaps starting a collection of love poems that he sent to me for some unknown reason. But “no,” he finally wrote, they were really meant for me.

The unforgettable meeting had taken place just as I was about to leave for Canada to introduce Native Canadians to social work so that they could serve their own communities. This same man also wrote scholarly books and had urged me for at least a year prior to our meeting to come to his frequent book parties, which I did with some reluctance and only to be friendly to his wife who had once been my colleague. (He recently confessed that he had loved me at that time.) One day, he had decided to edit an anthology and asked me to contribute a piece. I agreed. He arranged for us to meet in a coffeehouse midway between our two homes which were an hour’s drive apart. As we met, he greeted my astonished self with the above unforgettable kisses. Afterward, he sent a good-bye letter explaining that his wife did not want us to meet again, but then he started writing many letters to me in Canada, resulting in my taking daily trips to the post office in my tiny, Northern town.

We kept up a slight correspondence for a few years. This long ago meeting, the beginning and end of physical intimacies between us, leads me back to the love poems in my e-mail. He was not interested in meeting me again, given that he was a faithfully married man who took apparently gentle care of his invalid wife. He disliked telephoning, but his poems continued to arrive faithfully.

What can we do when we get daily love poems from a man whom we remembered as having given us the two best kisses of our life? Thus started our e-mail love correspondence.

My virtual lover was then about to be eighty-eight years old, two years older than I, and he has now reached the age of 90. He goes daily to his office where he still does some academic work and looks at his e-mails. He declared, in writing, of course, that he needed a daily greeting from me to get started with his day. Whenever I need a vacation or have to prepare my courses and do not write for one or two days, he becomes agitated, and sends
reproachful e-mail poems of despairing love. From time to time we have bitter fights, such as about his reluctance to give me news of his occasional illnesses. I think complaining about physical pain, for example, would deviate too much from his impersonal style. With other fights I was sure this was the end of a silly fantasy relationship, but then one or the other labels our fights as lovers' quarrels and we continue our exchanges.

My e-mails are in German; to exercise our brains, his in English. I sent him the book I wrote a few years ago about my war experiences, which he did not read, and occasional other books which I was sure would interest him, but he does not read those either. But he loved it when I baked Apfelstrudel for him, in tribute to our common love/hate affair with Vienna. He shares my Viennese delicacies with his wife. He enjoys sending me, as reciprocal gifts, old non-technical papers that he had written for his own amusement about traveling experiences through the years. Our e-mails deal with politics that we luckily agree on, the absurdity of our society, of life in general, the books we are reading, philosophy, and odd thoughts that preoccupy our old heads. Sometimes we exchange dreams, and occasionally each of us has dreamed about the other. That makes me especially happy.

He does not wish to discuss death because at the moment we are living; he does not watch movies because most of them are depressing; he does not want me to read Holocaust books because they are too dismal. He is forgetful and often writes me the same thoughts two or three times. Sometimes he neglects to thank me for my cookies or for papers that I write and send to him. He is the cook in his family and enjoys sending me recipes, which do not interest me. We enjoy boasting to each other about small triumphs, talks he is still giving, my successful classes, agreeing that had we been married, our lives would have been a relentless competition. We use our computer hearts for greetings, and every message, on both sides, has to contain at least one loving expression. It is the only area in which he is not cautiously impersonal, yet I doubt whether he really loves me.
The Grande Dame’s Duet For Two Pianos

Ellen Friedlander

How do I love you?
Let me sing the notes.

You stand solid and elegant,
Gracefully displaying your gorgeous curves.

I send my kisses to your pianissimo as
Mozart, my angel, caresses your lovely keys.

Your andante cantabile always delights me,
Your allegro ma non troppo forever excites me.

The lovely upstart, upright Yamaha
Tunes into your dolce, swells with your forte
In harmony with your sweet demands.
  Johann Sebastian and Ludwig and Franz
  Leap up to greet our eager hands.

You partner the young one with tonal authority,
Fill my rooms with breathtaking sonority.
So we call you the Grande Dame – con molto amore.
These are the words engraved on a silver plaque fixed to my piano above the keyboard. Fannie was my mother-in-law, and I was always in awe of her masterful playing. I don’t have an accurate picture of her life after she left the Conservatory. I know she taught for many years, and I don’t think she did any concertizing. After marrying a very successful merchant and losing several babies, she finally had my husband, a preemie needing hospital care. As brilliant a musician as she was, her son and husband stayed the center of her existence, and that was where her devotion was concentrated. She would have been a standout in today’s “helicopter parenting.” Although I felt great respect and affection for her, it was very difficult to live with her overarching anxiety about my husband and our children. I have often wondered how she would have lived if she had won that competition in today’s world. Could she have “had it all” as the current cliché goes?

Fannie was a large woman whose physical power matched her “superior tonal quality,” as the Boston Globe quoted her celebrated judges, one of whom was the then-current conductor of the BSO. I rarely heard her play formally, but it was delightful to watch her enthral my kids with “Hall of the Mountain King” and “The Golliwogs Cakewalk.” I always mourned my own limited ability in those days, but I learned over the years not to even think about being in the company of giants. I am an adequate intermediate pianist with intelligent musicality and sadly arthritic fingers.

Fannie died on my fourth child’s third birthday, and we named our fifth child, born a few months later, Frances Lee, after Fannie Levis. At that time we had a large house in Lexington, and the piano moved into my living room. It is a beautiful, full grand of dark brown natural mahogany, which graces any room it’s in.

My piano turner, who adores the instrument, calls it the Grande Dame. Since leaving Fannie’s home, the Grande Dame has moved eleven times, one of those times to a storage facility during the two years we lived in Israel, where I began studying and playing two-piano music. I have become enamored of playing with a partner, so the Grande Dame currently has a lovely Yamaha companion. The legacy of the instrument has been a major influence and joy in my life.
Warm Reflection by Arthur Sharenow
Autumn Nocturne
A Ten Minute Play

Verne Vance

CHARACTERS

JESSIE BITTNER, a handsome woman, age 77
JACK BITTNER, Jessie’s son, age 45
PEGGY REYNOLDS, Jessie’s daughter, age 44
PROFESSOR FRANK BITTNER, Jessie’s husband, age 82
MILTON TRAVERS, an attractive widower, age 79
SARAH MARINI, Jessie’s closest friend, age 73

SETTING
The library-office of the comfortable home of Frank and Jessie Bittner in Charlottesville, Virginia

TIME
A late September afternoon in the present

Production Note
The role of Frank Bittner is performed only as recorded lines in a flashback so no actor is needed to perform the role on stage. If cast resources are limited, the part of Jack can be played by a woman as a second daughter of Jessie, and an actress playing one of the daughters can, with some makeup to age her, also play the role of Sarah. Thus the play can be done with a cast of one man and three women, two men and two women, or, if resources allow, two men and three women.

(Prior to the rise of the curtain, there is heard as background music Frank Sinatra singing the first four lines of the Kurt Weill/Maxwell Anderson classic, “September Song,” concluding with the line, “And I haven’t got time for the waiting game.” As the music fades, the curtain rises to show Jessie seated at a handsome desk at stage left. Prominently displayed on the desk is a large photographic portrait of Frank Bittner in his sixties. As appropriate to the dialogue, various characters glance at the portrait from time to time. The room is full of bookshelves filled with books. There is a fireplace at stage center. At stage right are several comfortable chairs and a small library table. Jessie is reviewing and sorting through some papers at the desk when Jackie and Peggy enter from stage right.)
JACKIE
Hi, Mom. Look who the breeze blew into town.

JESSIE
Jackie. It’s lovely to see you. But who’s that with you? She looks just like your sister Peggy when I last saw her some years ago.

PEGGY
Cut it out, Mom. I was here just a few months ago.

JESSIE
When you’re an aging parent yearning to see her children, months can seem like years.

PEGGY
I’m sorry, Mom. But being a mother to two teenagers and trying to run a small business and tending to the needs of a husband make it very hard to get away.

JESSIE
Is that all? I’m sorry, too, sweetheart. It’s just that I do miss you so. Particularly with Dad – the way he is.

PEGGY
How is he, Mom – any better?

JESSIE
The same as always, I’m afraid. He’s still … just not there any more. Whenever I go in to see him I keep hoping that his mind will wake up, even just a little, so I know that the Frank that was is still there. But that never happens. Alzheimer’s keeps squeezing and never lets go. I’m afraid that, after these five years since the diagnosis, Frank has reached what I call the German potato salad stage.

JACKIE
What’s that?
JESSIE
You know how much your father loved his mother’s German potato salad, the kind with the onions and bacon and vinegar and flour and sugar.

JACKIE
Oh, yes. Dad spent years trying to make it himself but he could never get it right. Then you made it for him, he shouted “Eureka!” and he never tried to make it himself again.

JESSIE
Well, Frank used to say that I’d know he was dead when I passed some freshly made German potato salad under his nose and got no response. I’m afraid that’s where your father is now – Frank Bittner, who had a fabulous memory and flair for teaching that made him the star of the UVA history department. Your father could make the Congress of Vienna as exciting as a Super Bowl game.

PEGGY
It’s so terrible, Mom. And it must be so hard on you. Isn’t it time to think seriously about putting Dad into a nursing home?

JESSIE
I’m very tempted, I can tell you. Trying to live a life of your own while caring for a loved one with Alzheimer’s is … not easy. Every single day is a struggle. But, as the Beatles sang, I get by with a little help from my friends. I have a social worker from the Alzheimer’s Association, and my friend Sarah comes in and looks after Dad so I can shop and do other things. So it’s difficult for me to think about sending your father away from this house and library – and me – that he loved so much.

PEGGY
I know, Mom. But you’re still healthy and vigorous so I hate to see so much of your life tied down to Dad.

JESSIE
Well, children, something has happened recently that may give me a chance to untie it a bit.
JACKIE
What happened; did you win the lottery?

JESSIE (Chuckling)
I’m not sure. A few weeks ago I met a man in my lifelong learning class.

PEGGY
Aha. What’s he like? What’s his name?

JESSIE
His name is Milton Travers. He’s an attorney who retired a few years ago — to take care of his wife, who had cancer. After she died he became involved in new things like these lifelong learning classes and community theater. Do you remember that Broadway musical I took you to when you were kids, “The King and I?”

JACKIE
Oh, yes, I loved it.

PEGGY
So did I.

JESSIE
Milton played the role of the king in his theater’s production of that show.

PEGGY
That’s the Yul Brynner role. Is Milton bald?

JESSIE (chuckling)
No. He has a most handsome head of hair. He writes poetry, too.

PEGGY
An attorney who writes poetry. Interesting. So are you just friends, or what?

JESSIE
I think he’d like to be … more than friends. And I might, too, if ….
JACKIE
If it weren’t for Dad.

JESSIE
I’m afraid so.

PEGGY
I’m not sure how I feel about this. It’s sort of hard to get my head around.

JESSIE
Of course, darling.

JACKIE
So have you been out with this guy … on dates?

JESSIE
Yes. We’ve had dinner once or twice. And gone dancing.

PEGGY
Oh, oh. Dinner’s pretty harmless. But dancing; that starts to get physical.

JESSIE
Well, yes. I guess that’s why it’s so popular.

PEGGY
So did you … feel anything special … when you were dancing with – Milton?

JESSIE
Well, Milton’s not as good a dancer as your father was, but I must admit that I did feel something like the shiver I felt when I first danced with your father.

JACKIE
Oh, boy. I sure don’t like the sound of that. Didn’t “The King and I” have that song “Shall We Dance?” where the governess sings about a clear understanding that a dance can lead to a new romance?
JESSIE
Yes. (She sings the first line of “Shall We Dance?”) Milton did that number with the governess.

JACKIE
I don’t think I love that show any more, with that shall we dance, new romance stuff.

JESSIE
Jackie, you’re forty-five years old. Don’t you think it’s time you grew up?

JACKIE
Mother, it is my understanding that you are seriously considering becoming involved in a romantic relationship with another man while you are still married to a man with whom you took some very serious vows at your wedding.

JESSIE
To the best of my recollection, you were not present at that occasion.

JACKIE
Don’t play games with me, Mother. Didn’t you take the same vows that Jimmy and I took? We were married in the same church, after all.

JESSIE
Yes, of course I did.

JACKIE
And you said you’d forsake all others to stick with Dad in sickness and in health until death you do part, right?

JESSIE
Yes, your cross-examination is impeccable, Madame Lawyer.

JACKIE
And I don’t recall an escape clause for Alzheimer’s.
JESSIE
Nor do I.

JACKIE
Okay, I rest my case.

JESSIE
Thank goodness. I couldn’t listen to any more. Jackie, I am seventy-seven years old. I don’t know how many more years I have left. I had many wonderful years with your father but, realistically, that man no longer exists. He and I can no longer give anything meaningful to each other. So should I give up some unknown part of my remaining years to give nothing real to your father instead of giving something real and meaningful to someone in the world who is still alive and wants to give to me what your father no longer can? Is that what you want for me, Jackie?

JACKIE
I … don’t really know, Mom.

JESSIE
And what about you, Peggy?

PEGGY
I guess I’m about where Jackie is.

JESSIE
And just where is that?

PEGGY
Confused and uncertain, I guess. Jackie, I need to go. But I should look in on Dad first.

JACKIE
Okay, Peggy. We’ll call you later, Mom, okay?

JESSIE
Fine. I love you children very much. I really don’t mean to upset you, but …
PEGGY
And I don’t mean to be upset, but, well, we’ll see you later.

(Jackie and Peggy hug and kiss Jessie and then exit stage right. Jessie sits in one of the arm chairs. The lights dim as Jessie remembers the past. The voices from the past are played from a prerecording so the remembering Jessie only listens but does not speak.)

FRANK’S VOICE
Jessie, it came through. I got my Fulbright. We’re all going to Vienna for a year – a whole year of Strauss and strudel and schlosses and schlag.

JESSIE’S VOICE
And Metternich and the Congress of Vienna. Don’t forget your work, Frank.

FRANK’S VOICE
Metternich’s not work, Jessie. He’s like you – joy and fascination

JESSIE’S VOICE
(She starts to hum the Merry Widow Waltz of Franz Lehar.) Come waltz with me, Your Highness.

FRANK’S VOICE
With the greatest of pleasure, Madame. Ahh, the Merry Widow Waltz, my favorite.

(A recorded orchestra picks up the song’s melody, reaches a crescendo, then fades. There is a brief pause. Then Frank’s voice is heard again.)

FRANK’S VOICE
Jessie, my Metternich book has been awarded the Salzburg Prize for the year’s best book on Austrian history. I think that makes me a sort of academic rock star.

JESSIE’S VOICE
The Elvis Presley of Austrian studies. My hero!

(There is another brief pause. Then Frank’s voice is heard again.)
FRANK'S VOICE
Jessie, something terrible is happening to me. I ran into President Baker today and I didn’t even know him. It’s happened with other people, too. It’s … like the world is slipping away from me. I’m … so afraid.

(The lights come up as the telephone on the desk rings. Jessie goes to answer it.)

JESSIE
Jessie Bittner. Milton! How lovely to hear from you. (Hesitantly) Well, yes, I’d love to have you stop by. No, really, that would be fine. I’ll see you shortly then.

(Jessie hangs up the phone. She does some tidying of the room while humming “Shall We Dance?” The doorbell rings, Jessie exits stage right and reenters immediately with Milton, a tall, distinguished-looking man. He hugs Jessie, gives her a quick peck on the cheek, and hands her an envelope.)

MILTON
It’s wonderful to see you, Jessie.

JESSIE
You too, Milton. (Holding out the envelope.) But what’s this?

MILTON
It’s … a sort of Shakespearean sonnet I wrote to you, Jessie.

JESSIE
A Milton who writes like a Shakespeare. That’s special. (She starts to open the envelope.)

MILTON
Please don’t read it now. I’m afraid I’d be embarrassed.

JESSIE
Milton, are you blushing?
MILTON
I might be. (Jessie places the envelope on the desk. He and Jessie sit down in the adjoining armchairs.) Jessie, this is a most handsome room.

JESSIE
It was Frank’s pride and joy. It’s the real reason we bought the house. He always dreamed of having his own library. This is where he lived with Chancellor Metternich.

MILTON
Chancellor Metternich?

JESSIE
Chancellor Metternich of Austria. That was Frank’s principal scholarly interest. He was absolutely fascinated with Metternich.

MILTON
But he still had time for you.

JESSIE
Oh, yes. He often told me I was the only woman he’d ever loved. I’m sure he loved me even more than Metternich. But then I had the advantage of being a live woman rather than a dead man.

MILTON (chuckling and glancing at Frank’s portrait)
Did Frank have other interests than you and Metternich?

JESSIE
Oh, yes. He adored baseball. I do too, luckily. We both love the Boston Red Sox.

MILTON
Oh, oh.

JESSIE
What?

MILTON
I’m a New York Yankees fan. Is that the kiss of death for me?
JESSIE
If Juliet Capulet could love Romeo Montague, I guess a Red Sox fan could work things out with a Yankees fan, if he weren’t too obnoxious.

MILTON
I’d try very hard not to be. Was Frank the only man you ever loved?

JESSIE
No, and I’m afraid it drove poor Frank crazy for a few years. We got engaged when I was just a freshman in college. Then I realized that I needed to do a lot more living before I committed myself to marriage. So I broke our engagement and became a sort of serial fiancée.

MILTON
A serial fiancée? I’ve heard of serial killers but what’s a serial fiancée?

JESSIE
Think multiple engagements. After I broke my engagement to Frank, I became engaged to four other men. Not at the same time, of course. At least I don’t think so; it wasn’t always easy to keep track. But Frank waited around until I finally realized that he was the man I really loved.

MILTON
You’re … quite a woman, Jessie.

JESSIE
When your wife became sick, did you date other women?

MILTON
No. I tried to take care of her – until the end. I loved her very deeply. She was a lot like you.

JESSIE
I’m so sorry, Milton.
MILTON
I thought I’d never be interested in another woman until I met you. And we did that reading together from Cyrano de Bergerac.

JESSIE
Oh, yes, Cyrano. That was … very special.

MILTON
I know I can’t really compete with a man like the Frank you knew but … is there any chance for me, Jessie?

JESSIE
I … really don’t know, Milton. Frank could die next month or he could live on for years, if you call that living.

MILTON
These things are not easy at our age, Jessie. As it says in that “September Song,” when you reach September, the days dwindle down to a precious few so you haven’t much time for the waiting game. I’m nearly eighty, and I’m afraid that puts me past even September.

JESSIE
I understand, Milton. I wish I could make it easier for you.

MILTON
You have no obligation to do that, Jessie. You must do what makes it easier for you. (The doorbell rings.) Are you expecting someone?

JESSIE
Oh, God, my friend Sarah said she might stop by.

MILTON
I should be going anyway.

JESSIE
Please stay so she can at least meet you.
MILTON
Of course.

(Jessie exits stage right and reenters with Sarah Marini.)

JESSIE
Sarah, this is Milton Travers. Milton, this is my dearest friend, Sarah Marini.

MILTON
I’m very pleased to meet you, Sarah.

SARAH
And I to meet you, Milton.

MILTON
I really must go. Goodbye, Jessie, Sarah. (Milton hugs Jessie, gives her a quick kiss on the cheek, and exits stage right.)

SARAH
He’s a catch, honey. Don’t let him get away.

JESSIE
He’s … a very attractive man. How’s Joe?

SARAH
Joe’s just great.

JESSIE
I’m so glad for you, Sarah. To have Joe after those sad, sad years with David. I wish I knew what to do about Milton.

SARAH
Let me tell you something, honey. I met Joe Marini when David had been very sick for a very long time. Not like Frank, but by then David’s cancer was such that it was hard for him to focus his mind on much. Joe was a widower and he wanted me. During our marriage David and I discussed almost everything, and maybe I should have discussed Joe with him. But in his semi-lucid state I thought there was no real point.
JESSIE
Did Joe … pressure you about … you know?

SARAH
Not really. I think I pressured myself. At my age every day is precious, and I didn’t want many more such days to pass of not seizing a kind of happiness I’d long been without. So … I slept with Joe while David was still alive.

JESSIE
Didn’t you feel guilty?

SARAH
The first time I slept with Joe I felt something … delicious … that I hadn’t felt in years. If that feeling was guilt, guilt sure has an undeserved bad rap and my mother has a lot to answer for.

JESSIE (chuckling)
That sounds like something maybe I should try.

SARAH
Maybe you should.

JESSIE
It wouldn’t be easy. My attorney daughter has very forcefully reminded me that my marriage vows do not include an escape clause for Alzheimer’s disease.

SARAH
I’ve taken those same vows myself, honey, not once but twice. We usually take those vows, at least the first time, when we’re very young and know little of life. So I think those vows are personal promises to do our damnedest to stick together through thick and thin. But then life happens to us, in all its unexpected variety, and often throws us curve balls. Even married people are not slaves and I think we’re always free to agree to change the terms of our vows to each other to meet those curve balls.
JESSIE
But how do I do that with someone who is present physically but absent in all other ways?

SARAH
I think all you can do is take your best guess at what Frank would suggest based on your fifty years of knowing him.

JESSIE
I … suppose so.

SARAH
I have to run, honey. Please give my best to your kids.

JESSIE
And my best to Joe. (They hug, exit stage right, Jessie re-enters stage right, and sits in a chair by the fireplace.) So, Frank, our marriage vows are just between the two of us, no one else. You let me be who I wanted to be. You let me fly like a kite when I wanted to fly, and you held me close when I needed to be held. I could fly so free because I knew you were at the end of the kite string. Now that you can no longer hold that string, will you let another man take that string so I can fly again? You always said that my happiness was your greatest joy. I think I could be happy with Milton, Frank. And that happiness would not affect what we had together or where we are today. I think you’d like Milton, even though he is a Yankees fan. So let me go, Frank. Please . . .

(Jessie gets up, goes to the desk, picks up Frank’s photograph, begins to hum the Merry Widow Waltz, and does a few waltz turns holding Frank’s photograph. Then she stops, kisses Frank’s photograph, and returns it to the desk. There she notices the envelope with Milton’s poem, she opens it and reads it to herself until the concluding lines, which she reads aloud.)

JESSIE (reading)
And though by Autumn’s time my days are few,
If hope you give to me, I’ll wait for you.
(Jessie smiles broadly, begins to hum “Shall We Dance?” and does dance steps to that melody with increasing speed and energy until the

CURTAIN

NOTE: The complete text of Milton’s sonnet to Jessie is:

She left me much too soon, the woman of
My soul’s best half, the part that leaped to sense
The true and good in all, that stretched her love
As far as heart could reach; no fence
Could serve to bar her feel for human need.
All this was lost when her bright light went out.
I thought that ne’er again would such a breed
Come back into my life, I had no doubt
That when she died my world of love was gone;
And then like lightning flash to me you came;
To darkened world you brought a glowing dawn
And lit for my late years a new heart’s flame;
So though by Autumn’s time my days are few,
If hope you give to me, I’ll wait for you.

At the director’s discretion, Jessie can read the complete sonnet aloud or she can read aloud only the final rhyming couplet which states Milton’s basic message to her.

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