

Aged Whine: Grousing from My Side of the Hill

By

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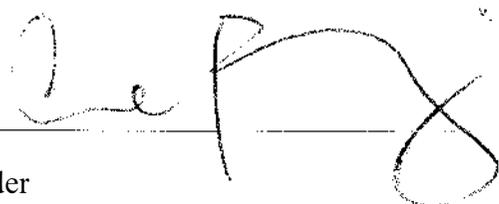
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Chair, Graduate Committee

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my ex-husband, my daughter and my brother.

Ironically, without your rejection, I would never have gone in this direction.

This is lemon out of lemonade, flowers breaking through an asphalt parking lot,

God in the midst of fire.

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Introduction

What drew me to this campus, besides a genuine love of writing, was the added gift of a Diversity Fellowship. My diversity did not entirely thrill me as some diversities go.

I am old.

Further evidence of this diversity occurred when I was dropped into the middle of several twenty-something's in a college classroom setting. I fit in somewhere between their mother and their grandmother and for a long time, they didn't know what to do with me. My hair is stark white, the wrinkles are obvious and I have to take the elevator to get to the second floor.

I have adjusted fairly well; old age crept up on me slowly and allowed me to adapt to the changes one-by-one. My brain, on the other hand, has never caught up with my body. It is locked somewhere in the 1970's, when I first attended SUNY Brockport and sported an outrageous red afro and World War II jet pilot glasses, when Lawrence Ferlinghetti came to my house and partied with several of the English professors and I, well, I had never even heard of Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

It was in those days that life held hope and promise and another word for future was *eternity*.

Today, I collect social security and dust bunnies and both are swept away as soon as they arrive. I have not only *entered* the sixties, I am a product *of* the sixties and I should be retiring and enjoying life. Instead I have compiled a collection of life

experiences that are specific only to me; not only am I old, but I have what I have been told is a colorful history and a lot of stories to tell.

This thesis, while it might not exist for eternity, will at least allow these stories a bit of a future.

My early concerns as a student were that I would lose much of what I had that I considered a natural gift and what came “naturally” would get all entangled with the styles, formalities and techniques I would soon be learning. I was afraid that it would be like someone trying to analyze walking; thinking consciously about how every step is done technically can result in stumbling and perhaps some awkwardness. Walking might become a chore. Writing might become a homework assignment, or worse, an assignment within a time frame.

This never happened. The insights only brought fine-tuning and necessary awareness to the table. More than that, they led to a personal discovery about myself as a writer, a discovery that has contributed to an intense and very personal healing.

Over the last year, I have found myself unconsciously writing down every quirk and strange event that related, directly and indirectly, to both my past and more to my recent entrance into senior citizenship, marked, I think, by applying for social security. I’m not talking about the ridiculous Maxine cartoons and old age jokes that fill up an inbox, but the personal and very specific events I have discovered by living

them. It is really these little bursts in life that are sometimes overlooked when, in actuality, they need to be both expanded and expounded on; that if it was worth thinking about, it was worth writing about.

I have led a strange life with equally strange outcomes and to waste them on just my experience and not birth them on paper might actually be a sin. Nearly everything I had written before I became a student was non-fiction. Time-wise, it would be useless for me to expand on anything else. I joke to my friends that I have just one good book in me to write and publish and then I can die.

The majority of the vignettes of life that surfaced, I first wrote in the form of the actual vignette writing style. It is a style I discovered my first semester in graduate school, and it became an instant fit; actually, it gave a name to what it is I was already doing, only I didn't know it had a name. Much the same way these events popped in and out of my recent life, so, too, this writing style provided a perfect format for each one of these little episodes.

My timing could not be more perfect. This is the age of the woman, the age of the short, the age of the memoir and the age of me, all coming together in one explosion of words. It fits in nicely with what the literary world is presently enjoying. It is embraced by the generation that is used to the quick succession of a learning style first introduced by Sesame Street and culminating with texting and twittering: give it to me now, give it to me quickly and make your point.

I began to read more of these vignettes, published in a number of books that emphasized these "shorts" as something new and exciting that was taking over the

literary world. The vignettes I intended to produce would have more than just movement to them. My plan was to introduce the reader to my life experiences while not referring to the experience itself. I easily picked up on the quote from Anton Chekhov, “Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass,” and attempted to embrace it as my own. The fact that I first read that quote in a Grammar Class and not in a workshop is a moot point. That I understood what this meant, on both an emotional and scholarly level, took me the better part of my two-year graduate experience to comprehend, embrace and practice. My intentions were pure enough, but my skills needed fine-tuning and like me, they were flawed and immature.

I knew, too, there had to be some degree of madness in sharing my life this way in order to make it real and some degree of reality to make me appear a bit mad. Since my life, my mind and my stories embraced both, I thought I would have a firm foundation to build upon. The result should leave the reader knowing that I am an intelligent woman, that life has handed me many lemons and that I have preferred to suck on some of them and not always add the sugar.

My early attempts at this ended in complete failure.

I have an undergraduate degree in Speech Communication, earned nearly forty years ago, with an emphasis in Oral Interpretation. In other words, I can talk my way in and out of a lot of situations with all the drama of a Sarah Bernhardt. Within the framework of those last four decades, I have little literary background in anything more than the Bible. That is not a bad thing, but it didn’t add to my

scholarly endeavors. I served for three decades as the wife of the pastor of the largest congregation in my community, but dared to take a stance against what I felt was an unhealthy church atmosphere, coming sadly from the “top.” It resulted in a huge loss, but not just of my marriage. The church and its family of believers, as well as many members of my natural family, put me, so to speak, out to pasture. I was not aware of the consequences to my soul that that expulsion took. I spent four years “self-preservating” and the result of that battle to survive has, ironically, affected my writing style in the same exact way it affected my psyche: I write with PTSD.

My characters are always annoyingly apologetic, just as I am being now, and this negativity puts the reader off guard. It sets up a barrier between the reader and the writer; worse, it tells the reader not just what to read, but how to read it and, worse yet, how to interpret it. My early characters are over-obsessed with being older than dirt and firmly believe they could not do anything well or right. They allowed the reader no room for their own thoughts and imaginings. Again, just as I am doing now.

I was introduced to a concept or poetic device known as “ars poetica.” It is the act (or *device*, if you want to define it using more stringent terms) of a writer to step away from a writing and letting the attuned senses of the work itself convey the proper emotion, imagination and expression. The gift is in being able to find that place in writing where it is absolutely necessary to STOP. It is the writer using restraint. It is the writer shutting up. It is what I am learning to do and why I didn’t end this paragraph on the word STOP. My characters have been Carol-the-wounded

and my two years as a graduate student taught me to attack my stories with a renewed confidence; to release the tight reigns of word-manipulation, and trust the ability and the brilliance of my reader.

Many of my earlier short stories were attacked by my professors, as well as my more educated friends, with a large pair of hedge clippers. The last lines, or worse, the last full paragraphs, were chopped off, indicated by very large X's and NO with a capital N, followed by that screeching exclamation point! In every one of these stories, I was telling my audience that the moon was shining. Then I told them, again, that the moon was shining. In a number of cases, I might have been suggesting that I was the one responsible for the moon's creation.

The psychology behind that is, amazingly, all part of the learning experience. What a startling discovery I made when I began to understand that much of the creative part of Creative Writing is in the direct correlation between the psyche of the writer and the content of his or her work. The fact that I had my own diagnosis to work off of gave learning another dimension.

In the classroom, I have also been challenged to detail some of these stories into a larger work. "Larger" for me is eight to ten pages and I have included three of them in the thesis whole. My first attempts at story-telling were marred. I had no idea what scene was. I saw what I saw but I never invited the reader into my mind. Unconsciously, I believe that I made too many assumptions about the reader knowing where I was and what I saw, as if they should be able to guess what it was I was thinking.

This is not an uncommon practice, more often taking place between a husband and a wife.

“Well, why can’t you see what it is I’m thinking? You should know me by now.”

The reality is that we can’t assume what someone else is thinking; we have to detail and define what these thoughts are. We have to be specific. We have to touch the mind, where the understanding and the imagination exist, and we must leave not only a clear impression, but the impression must also leave an imprint. If we want the reader to fully grasp what it is we are saying, we owe him that right to see where it is he or she is standing, so they have a place to move from.

The withholding of scenes and settings is not unlike the way in which I held myself in during my emotional recovery. Not only were my assumptions incorrect – that surely the reader knows what’s in my head, for goodness sake – but that the process I would have to go through in order to bring the reader into my world would be a painful one. I was already hurting and now I would be hurting again. Creative writing is good, but it is also painful.

There were times when I experimented in swearing. In real life, I didn’t start swearing again until after I was divorced and then I felt I had the freedom to do anything I wanted. When I realized that I actually didn’t *want* to swear -- with my mouth or with the mouths of my characters – I had already thrown in a couple of choice words, a few grossities and a little bit of potty language, none of which were a comfortable fit and seemed to jump off the page like a zit. I’m not fully convinced

they should all be withheld, obviously, but my own mouth doesn't need soap and I don't need to clean my keyboard.

There is a noticeable eradication of my ex-husband from the majority of my writings. The first two vignettes, *The Gospel of Truth* and *Disconnect*, are the only ones I wrote that directly mention my ex-husband, and they are followed by the very first story I have written in nearly forty years, *Faulty Foundation*. It is based on him as well, and intentionally allows for either further explanation or even a sequel. This longer story is the only attempt I made to confront my emotional response, in which it was necessary to dismiss him, at least emotionally, in "containment."

The decorative urn about the fireplace held Scoot's ashes...I thought that keeping my diseased husband like that was one of the strangest things I'd ever done...but it helped me sleep at night, knowing where he was.

Contained.

I did not want to be divorced nor did I ask for it. It is several years later and I still carry the first page of my divorce decree in my wallet, in case anyone asks who divorced who, or in case I forget it myself. In my church experience, they ask those things. Somebody has to be blamed, and I was tired of being the scapegoat. Divorce is my spouse, lying on his death bed, as he is flipping me his middle finger.

If I have forgiven him, it is because I believe he "knows not what he has done." If I have not forgiven him, allowing it life again, even on paper, might give

birth to a stillborn. Apparently I am still working through this, because the near-silence about my ex-husband seems almost intentional. I write about everything else I have experienced these last several years but him and his absence.

This page is the most I have written of him. He is the black space of my past. He is the white space of my thesis stories.

The next section reveals family-related stories, *Heredity*, *Mothering* and *Fire Places*, marking the beginning of what could be an entire book, were I to dare the digging-up process and further family separations it would take to finish it.

The Hobby was birthed out of my reading this very obituary in our local newspaper. What came afterwards were a series of questions in my mind that led to this projected fantasy. It may seem a little macabre but reading the obituary section first, even before the comics, is something I have discovered many of us seniors actually do. It is one of the few times that I have gone into the head of another person and pretended I was someone else. I am not fully convinced that there isn't a bit of me in that person. And oddly, I still haven't given the character a gender.

The middle sections, four vignettes focusing on recent events and my new way of looking at things, could probably be classified as unimportant and not worth eternalizing. That would be a waste! *Tada*, *Driver's Side Air Bag*, *The Bathrobe* and *Cat Bowls* need life, so I gave it to them.

Brownies took a long time to write.

The last section is "man" related and I secretly refer to these three vignettes and one short story as "No-man" tic Writings. Being single again is something I

rather despise. It is a combination of loneliness, memories and regrets. But it is also independent thinking, deliverance from control and a toilet seat that stays up.

Double Date, *B-Charmingly* and *The Crush* were the most fun to write, but the actual experiences themselves were painful. *Lip Service* is my personal favorite of the three longer stories that I have included in this thesis.

Most of what I have written is non-fiction; to the degree that I'm willing to see it, I'm willing to write it. I am among the many who believe that there is no such thing as pure fiction. Truth will always expose itself.

The world around me now is an entirely different one from the world I used to know. Before, I was sheltered by four walls and a Board of Elders, both of which kept me at bay and at attention. This is the basis of that proverbial one book I hope to write. The center of my universe lies in a relationship that I have with God through the manifestation and for me personally, the divine revelation of Jesus Christ. None of my writings appear to center on the center of my universe and yet He is there. I am convinced that without Him there would be no gift, no fellowship, no ability, no imagination, no creativity; there would be no faculty or college or master's degree, were He not appointing it to me as part of a bigger plan.

Graduate School is the practice needed to bring my scattered thoughts and experiences into alignment. Workshops have been my PTSD counseling sessions. The four boxes of journals in my back room, waiting to be compiled and formed into one cohesive story, will one day come together because of this college experience. Perhaps a future book will show bravery, that what I have yet still allowed to remain buried can one day be resurrected. These seeds should not stay inside much longer and ignorance is saying that I choose to set these experiences aside, where they cannot hurt me. They hurt more when they are stagnant; like rivers that stop their flow, they take on debris, emit a foul odor and are of no use. I am looking forward to my own exorcism.

Until then, I have a number of less intensive, shorter ones to share in this thesis. I have every intention of using my humor, odd as it is, as a way to bring some kind of necessary relief.

Isn't that, after all, what humor is for?

I am not sure that I can ever rightfully call myself a scholar. I struggle even now to bring in more scholarly elements and understandings into my thesis introduction. My mind is located directly next to my heart, I think. It is not wrong to be emotional; it is not wrong to be honest. This applies to both the personal self and the creative writer. In order to be successful at both in life, it is necessary to not just

know what to say and how to say it. Something must be added to the mix in order for communication to take place, for epiphanies to happen and for one life to enter into the core of another. I am nowhere near to having “fully arrived,” either at a higher state of spiritual development or of scholarly gain. I am, and will always be, still in school, still learning.

As an undergraduate, I took a course that introduced me to poetry. “A poem does what it says,” reiterated my professor, time and time again, until we ‘got’ it. This same principle can also be applied to any form of creative writing. It is the one time, like childbearing, that human beings can create life out of nothingness. It is the one time we can be like God.

In the very first book of the Bible, Genesis, it says in chapter one, verse three, “Then God said, ‘Let there be...’” and from then on, whatever He said came to be. In other words, words have power to create life. Post-menopausal, this is my only way to reproduce, so I must tell my stories in a way that will leave a lingering seed, full of promise. I have never given birth and lost the only pregnancy I had the day they told me the test was positive. All I ever wanted to do was birth a life that came from my own self; I had thought this desire would never be fulfilled, until I took up writing again.

Perhaps the pain of all these experiences is the thread that runs through it all. While I have not been spared the long and excruciating process of labor, or the pain that accompanies it, what you hold in your hand makes it all worth screaming about.

THE GOSPEL IN TRUTH

The pastor of my church kept getting new revelations that he told us were from God. Apparently we were not able to get these revelations ourselves because he was the man at the top and God only goes to the top, like Moses on the mountain.

He told us new and exciting things, things that would keep the women in their place and the men at the wheel and the Holy Spirit contained in a box. We were told that wearing hats or veils on our heads meant we were submitted to our husbands, that the Trinity did not exist and that it was up to our leaders to make many of our decisions in life. I told the pastor that I did not have these revelations myself and that they, in fact, seemed contrary to what I was reading in the Bible and he said to shut up and obey and finally, about three decades of bickering later, he divorced me.

I don't know if the rest of the church has gotten any new revelations about who God is, but I am having a lot of my own and one of them is that pastors are not God and the other one is that I can hear from Him for myself.

It's pretty lonely where I live, but at least my house is in order.

DISCONNECT

I overheard my husband say something very unpleasant and degrading. He said it about my brother. He said it to our daughter who, at the time was a teenager. I told him later, when we were alone, that I had overheard him and that I not only did not like what I heard him say, but that I did not like that he had said it to our daughter. I could tell that he agreed it was the wrong thing to do. He replied,

“Even if you’re right, I won’t listen to anything you say because it’s coming out of your mouth.”

It was at that moment, and not the legal one on paper, that I knew our marriage was over.

FAULTY FOUNDATION

Millie sat politely at my kitchen table, trying to focus in on pleasantries, but she was obviously losing the battle. I watched her intently, sizing her up from a newer perspective.

I was the one in charge now.

On the outside, Millie was quite the professional, although I did notice that she wasn't keeping up with her roots and it showed. Her make-up was always perfect, her outfits were always in vogue and her blouses were always unbuttoned at the top. I suspect she had leaned over for a lot of sales and was normally the top salesperson in her company. The market was not good and the twinkle that usually lit up her eyes had lost some voltage. Instead, her eyes darted back and forth like hummingbird wings, moving so rapidly that they almost didn't appear to be moving at all. But I saw them and I knew exactly what they were doing: assessing the rooms, comparing the variables, adding up the profits and probably paying off the Visa bill. Her skillful eyes would never detect anything but the houses' monetary worth.

Good. She was a perfect fit for the job.

Millie was the realtor and I was the homeowner and once again we would be like best friends for a short period of time while she did her job and I patiently endured both the process and Millie. I intended to move on from this place, literally and figuratively; except this time, I would have to be a bit vague, sidestep a few issues and let her see only what I wanted her to see.

“So, Millie, I’m selling another house and making a new start for myself, closer to my daughter in the Catskills. I think this ought to do it, once and for all. And I think you’ve made more money off of me in the last four years than I’ve earned the last six months.”

I laughed just slightly, set my eyes into a downcast look and smiled my little half-smile at her, knowingly. I do the sympathy thing well. Always have.

I felt a bit awkward at my own kitchen table, a poor looking specimen next to a designer suit. I lived in what I referred to as church pajamas – baggy pants with elasticized waistbands and oversized tops. Today was no different and I wasn’t trying to impress her with anything but the sale of this house. The funeral wasn’t that long ago and *yes*, I told her, *I am not rushing to judgment on the sale of my house and no, I am not going to wait out a full year of mourning.*

I’m in control this time, Millie.

Millie knew my housing history. Houses really get their history from what takes place inside their walls. This town was small enough for everyone to know that my own story began with Jake, husband number one who couldn’t keep it inside his own walls. When Jake left, the losses led to a downsizing of humiliating proportions, and on a variety of levels. Sometimes shame is measured in square footage or neighborhoods. That dump on Graves Street was all I could afford and while most of the town was sympathetic to my situation, no one expressed that sympathy in cash.

Meeting Scott was the best thing to happen to me after Jake finally cleared his memory from my heart. The fact that he was financially secure never hurt, either, and we bought this

house together from Millie just three short years ago. Scott's untimely death changed my whole world and I tried desperately to move on without moving. But he wouldn't let me. He seemed to remain in the house and I needed to be left alone to work through all the losses. This was going to make me or break me and selling the house was part of the healing process. My emotions were on overload, but I kept myself calm and carried on with the transactions at hand.

Politely and professionally, Millie didn't ask for more details than I'd given her already. Her eyes were still fluttering and I saw that she was too busy 'profiting' from the experience.

"It's a great house," Millie said. "A rare, rambling ranch in the middle of cookie-cutter colonials."

I'd almost forgotten that this is what I hated the most about Millie. She was the Queen of Alliteration. There were days when I couldn't figure out if she was ADD or clever. It didn't much matter. For now, she was my realtor and she was the best at what she did. I knew for a fact that her fat commissions covered the butt of a gambling husband. Whatever moved her, and he and his spending did, had to move me. Soon.

I followed Millie around as she wandered from one end of the house to the other, beginning with the laundry room at the far end of my L-shaped ranch. She already knew everything about the house but was looking for the improvements we'd done so she could price it appropriately. I was relying on her greed and I knew I wouldn't be disappointed. Scott and I had put a lot into this place. There was still too much of him in every room, in its design, in its adornment, in its impression.

Even the laundry room wasn't immune from the sound of Scott's voice, where I swear he kept calling my name, day after day. Doing laundry became a nightmare and I did a lot of hand

washing to avoid going in there. Millie liked the way you could block off the laundry room from the rest of the house with those newly-installed pocket doors, which I closed daily. She never heard anything but the towels, unevenly balanced, thumping loudly in my dryer. I put them in there on purpose, to keep the voices down to a minimum. Thump. Ella, thump, Ella, thump, thump.

“I’d keep it closed, too,” Millie said, “Damned dryer makes a dastardly disturbance.”

We walked through the kitchen where she’d already done the hummingbird thing, and she commented favorably on the stainless steel appliances I intended to leave and the granite countertop that wowed everyone who walked into the room. From there we headed into the dining room, where I’d spent the last four months eating Lean Cuisines with a salad and a lot more wine than my Zoloft called for. Millie liked the room’s elegant feel. I liked that I couldn’t remember much of anything after dinner.

The living room, too, was a showplace of sorts. It had also become my bedroom, but the pillows and comforter were hidden away and nobody had to know that I had slept on the couch for the last four months. The decorative urn above the fireplace held Scott’s ashes, lending itself to the rest of the accessories in style and color. If she knew what was really in that urn, Millie would probably refer to them as ‘incognito inners.’ I wasn’t going to chance it.

I thought that keeping my diseased husband like that was one of the strangest things I’d ever done. Macabre, actually. I’d allowed people I didn’t know to burn up an entire human being that I had made love to and put the leftovers in a jar that sat on a ledge with silk flowers and photographs and a flat screen TV.

But it helped me sleep at night, knowing where he was.

Contained.

Millie found the bathrooms sufficiently updated with ceramic tile floors and elegant lighting fixtures. The spa tub in the master suite was a hit and the master bedroom was right out of those upper-end decorating magazines. Scott wanted the best and that's what he got; that I got to share it with him was what made our marriage so special.

I'd never slept in my bedroom since Scott had died, right there in bed, right next to me and right in my arms. I never again wished to relive that night, or that look in those eyes that stared vacantly at me and seemed to ask why. *Why, honey, why?*

I'd moved all my clothes from our bedroom and put them into the guest room so I wouldn't have to go in there again. I realized I hadn't stepped foot in this room, until Millie showed up, for all these months. It was in here that I heard him cry out to me the loudest, so the doors were always closed. The room was eerily cold and Millie seemed uncomfortable, too, giving it just a quick scan and moving on to the next room.

"Kind of creepy and cold," Millie muttered.

I showed her the rest of the house, commenting that I had redone the other rooms and the basement since Scott's death, for the sake of keeping busy. Millie, as expected, praised me for my ability to create what she called "eye candy for the hungry buyer." It was the only thing she said all day that wasn't alliteration.

"Beautification beyond belief," she added.

We finished our tour of the house by descending into the basement, the place where most people hide the mechanics and pack away what is rarely needed but can't seem to let go. I was no different from anyone else in that respect, but you can't see what you can't see, and the bones

of the house - the electric work, the heating and cooling mechanisms - all passed Millie's eye inspection, and, I knew, any professional inspector the new buyers would hire.

Scott and I moved into this place with Jake still following us here, at least in the form of all the necessary paperwork I was forced to keep, and the family photographs my daughter insisted not be thrown away. These things belonged somewhere where it was dark and hidden and after Scott and I built the custom-built cabinetry in the basement family room, I buried my paper past in one of its cubicles. After Scott died, I turned a drab cellar into another magazine picture and it was during this last decorating project that I realized my greatest talent: I distract well. I can decorate houses and adjust facial expressions and bury past deeds. House staging is an art for the realtor, but for me it was a necessity. I 'necessitated' the whole damned house, top to bottom, and was quite proud of my work. Scott started it but I had finished it. There was nothing else to change, to improve or to add to; now it was time to go.

"It helped me, Millie, to put my life back into my own hands."

"Perseverance and practicalities prosper people," she said.

Millie only had eyes for the finished product and knew that she could ask even more for the house than she had first thought. *Fine. Whatever. Just do it.*

Tour over.

We agreed, at least and at last, on a generous asking price, followed by the myriad of paperwork I'd come to know and hate. I was almost scott-free now and just had to get past the Disclosure Statement. Pretty general stuff, until I got to question #9.

Are there certificates of occupancy related to the property? If not, explain below.

I never really invited him back, so I never 'explained below.'

Structurally, there is no engineering problem, but rather, I guess, an engineered one. I could get past that one and answer what I knew on a natural level.

I got to question #22 and hid a smirk.

Is there any termite, insect, rodent or pest manifestation or damage?

Pest infestation? Pesty, maybe, but not what they had in mind. I checked NO.

Mechanical stuff should be okay. I knew that everything was fine, but #33 stumped me a bit.

Are there any known material defects in any of the following? Security systems...?

Well, security was the biggest problem in the house, but nothing about it was ‘material,’ just materializing. And I was sure I was dealing with a ‘system’ that wasn’t going to be addressed on a Disclosure Statement or picked up by any inspector.

I checked the NO box, without guilt.

I knew my legal butt was covered. Guess that’s two butts for the price of one: mine and her gambling husbands’. Big butts both, but covered, nonetheless.

“We won’t wait without worrying, will we?” muttered Millie and she winked and sauntered out the front door to her rented BMW. I nodded and gritted my teeth behind my same half-smile.

Give me some sympathy, sweetie and sell it soon, I thought, then realized how unhealthy it would be to hang around Millie too long.

I didn’t have to: Millie’s drive and the upcoming Christmas season worked together perfectly and it sold for the asking price in just three business days. The newlyweds loved it. It was their first home purchase and they were desperately in love. I knew the feeling. It wasn’t

that long ago and sometimes it doesn't last long, either. They come and they go. Feelings. Love. Desperation. Husbands.

The unseen didn't 'manifest' throughout the inspection process and I was out of there faster than you can say whatever alliteration Millie made up this morning. Passing through the laundry room, I headed for the garage, carrying with me the last item in the house - Scott's urn. It continued to speak to me through the stoneware itself and I wasn't sure if it was the double dose of meds I had taken or the decision I had made to leave the place where the memories lingered. I was going to take Scott with me, no matter where I resided, and I didn't want him around. I couldn't let him, wouldn't let him go with me. It was time to stop the voices, stop the hurting, and stop the fears.

I knew that Jake had left me because he chose to and he'd left his own residue that I knew I'd never shake off. Scott, on the other hand, didn't want to leave. I'm the one who forced the issue and no one knew the better.

I opened the urn for the very first time and realized, silly as it seemed, that I'd never seen Scott look so small.

HEREDITY

When my Uncle Bill made out his will, he left a nice chunk of money to his sister, who is my mother, and she, in turn, left all she had to me and my two brothers.

Nobody expected Bill to die so soon, least of all Bill. Uncle Bill contracted one of those diseases that take its time and its toll. He was the first person I have ever known to turn into a talking skeleton with lips. I hope he is the last. I went in to see him in the hospice two weeks before he died. His head was propped up with two pillows and his arms were folded neatly over the white sheet that covered his torso. I realized it looked as if he were practicing his posturing for the casket that would soon hold his body.

Uncle Bill was cremated instead. I had never before set my eyes on a container that held somebody I loved. It was creepy. His older brother, a recluse for lack of a more honest description, spotted the urn at the same time I did. He rarely went to funerals but was forced to go, since it was his brother, after all. Leaning over to me, he whispered in my ear, "I've never seen Bill look so small." Years later, I would use that line in my thesis. Twice.

After the will was read, my mother grabbed on to her inheritance with a headlock and tried to figure out how to live on what he gave her and leave the most she could for her kids. She had heard that the rest of his money, and there was more of it than people knew, was divided evenly among multiple nieces and nephews, *her* nieces and nephews, as well. It came down to survival and statistics and a place of desperation. My mother wrote to all her nieces and nephews and told them she was poor, that her days were

winding down, that she was no longer able to work because of bad health and they were all healthy and had decades of workability left inside them and if they really, really loved their Aunt Mary Kay, they would hand over their inheritance to her. Many of them did. The money came in just in time for the diagnosis.

Years before, my parents divorced and mom ground her teeth at night at the prospect of having to get a job and raise her three kids on the salary of a gopher girl. She did it, though, but I suspect the grinding finally got down to her insides. By the time she reached her 68th birthday, her insides were as worn down as her tooth enamel and the doctor gave her a meager three weeks to put her affairs in order. She had taken care of that long before her insides began to sizzle. She knew that harbored resentment has to live somewhere and sadly she gave it a resting place. When resentment took my mother, we all got a nice chunk of change, some of which, I was informed years later, rightfully belonged to my cousins.

MOTHERING

I drove into the Wendy's Drive-Up and ordered a Frostee. At this stage, the final one, it was the only thing my mother would eat or drink. We were watching her die every day and every day we were at her beck and call. A Frostee was the only thing she wanted now.

It started with the newspaper. *Too hard to read.* We canceled the subscription.

Then came the telephone. *Cancel it* she said and we did. *I only want to talk to my kids.*

Then it was the TV. *Too hard to concentrate.* We had them shut off the TV.

Only the Frostee brought 12 ounces of joy to her waking hours. We wished that we could, too.

The last Frostee I bought her sat there and went flat and stale and paled, like my mother, to room temperature. On the second-to-the-last day of her life, she asked the doctor for a shot that would stop the pain, stopping as well any connection she had to the outside world. *But your kids,* argued the doctor and she said *They know I love them; just give me the shot* and he gave her the shot.

FIRE PLACES

“If Jesus wants to save me He can come down off his high throne in heaven and do it Himself!” Those words, and the normal telephone good-byes, were the last ones I heard Uncle Gene say to me. Two weeks later, they found him dead from a massive heart attack. He was alone in his own bedroom, face down in his own feces, making it easy for Cousin Andy to find him.

I was just a little girl. I think I was too small to understand and too scared to tell anyone and too trusting to believe that what was happening was anything but normal. I was lying on Uncle Gene’s bed and staring at the ceiling and we were talking and he said to me, “So whose face do you see up there?”

I saw that it was my face.

Gene had drawn it himself, in pencil, and it looked exactly like me because he was a good artist. His slanted bedroom ceiling, up there in his own mother’s attic, was his personal Sistine Chapel project and I guess that made me a work of art or maybe even a god. It never struck me that it was my face that he would look at every night before he went to sleep. I was, after all, his favorite niece. But I did think that it was a waste that this man, who could draw so well, would use his bedroom ceiling to display this picture of my face and those of two of my cousins who also visited him up there.

In the will, I inherited the small fortune he had saved and bought myself a gas fireplace, just as a reminder of where he was.

It wasn’t nearly enough to pay for the counseling.

THE HOBBY

The dead kid's obituary included his picture. Showing obits with a picture makes them come to, well, life, you know? I didn't mean that as a joke, really, but if you studied that section of the paper like I study it, you'd understand. I need the visuals.

He looked like he was maybe in his late twenties - just a kid, really- but then those obit people can trick you there, too. You have to read all of what the obit says 'cause sometimes those old-timers from World War II have pictures of themselves at twenty-something, and you read about their life and find out they were 83 when they died. This guy wasn't old; he was in his thirties, thirty-two to be exact, and I suppose we all want to know what kills a young man so young. "Natural causes" only make me more curious. It didn't say that.

His name wasn't familiar. When I read the newspaper, I like to memorize the names of everyone who gets killed in a car crash or burns to death in a house fire or gets stabbed or shot. The ones who just drop over or drop out, well, they don't get their own story in print and these obits are the first clue I have about them. Unless you're some kind of big-wig, the newspaper doesn't care if you keeled over, went slowly and painfully or just stopped breathing. Knowing these things is important to me; who were they and what happened to them is what it's all about. It's like lookin' at a tomb stone and seeing the dates of someone's birth and death on it and thinking about this person whose body or ashes are right under my feet. I just want to know what happened just before that last date. It's a curiosity I have and I try to keep it in check and not go too overboard about

these things. Still, I kinda read into what they say and try to figure out if they were a saint or if maybe the loved ones were glad to see the person go. I want to know what they did all their lives and if the Humane Society is going to get a contribution in their name. I want to know if the family was at their bedside or if they were involved with their church or if that little flag next to their name meant they were going to get that 21-gun salute at the gravesite. I'm curious to know if maybe there's going to be a lawsuit over the accident or the murder and if there is, I plan to follow it right til the end.

And I ask questions like, for instance, was the deceased person just some nobody that won't be missed or were they loved like crazy by their family and friends or will they make a shrine for them on the side of the road, or will I end up going to some spaghetti dinner fundraiser so their kids can go to college? It's important for me to know these things. I have to be up on this because I end up mingling with the grieving and knowing this kind of stuff is the only way I can fit in. I get my answers the only way I can; I go to the wakes and I let myself fit in with the mourners. I've gotten fairly good at this.

You could say it's what I do for a living. I live among the grieving. I really crack myself up when I think like this but it really makes me come alive to hang out at funeral parlors. The atmosphere is electric. I'm like an electric screwdriver that doesn't work unless it's plugged in and charging. Funeral homes are my power source for living. I'm not planning on writing a book or anything but it's something I have to do. Like a calling or something.

I have this giant calendar on my desk at home and it has lines on each day so I can plan my afternoons and evenings. I usually start at the farthest one away and work my

way back home, if there's more than one I'm interested in attending on a given day. I used to do that when I went garage-saling, before I lost my job, when I had the income to do that kind of thing.

I don't work at a real job anymore so I have a lot of free time but no money to spend. The government is taking care of me pretty well and so I go to the wakes and the funerals and the memorial services, too, if I can fit them all in. Sometimes I get invited to the meal between showings. I'm pretty nondescript so I don't stand out and nobody remembers me, anyway. They're not supposed to; there's nothing to remember and that all that works to my advantage.

If I can, I study about the dead person from what I hear on TV or read on-line or in the newspaper so I can make comments and find some kind of connection with them when I introduce myself to the family. It's a little tricky but I've been pretty successful so far. Sometimes I'm a fellow student, an old friend from high school, a former teacher or a neighbor, and once I even said that I dated the person. It was pretty gutsy of me to say that and I'd never done it before. It worked out well, since most of them thought the deceased was gay and it gave the Mom a little peace of mind to meet me. Anyway, I pretty much stick to less involved connections and find out all I need to know through the media. I learn a lot more, though, from standing in line. I eavesdrop a lot but I converse even more. I've gotten pretty good at this.

I really like using the newspaper the best. I can hold it in my hands and read the details, underline things, make comments in the margins. There's a lot more detail in the newspaper. I go to the porch first thing in the morning and get my paper and I read the

obits. Second section, second page. I compare them to the names I memorized the days before and see if there's something more to learn about the person that I might have overlooked. There always is. It's amazing what those little blurbs have to say about a person. It makes me want to do my own obit myself. Ahead of time, of course.

Think about it. Most of these blurbs are written by someone who is in deep mourning; these are the people who walk around in a kind of dream state because most of the time they're actually in shock. By the time they have to plan what to do for the funeral, the dearly departed has already reached the realms of sainthood in their minds. Then the guilt part kicks in a bit and someone from the funeral parlor, who probably never knew your deceased loved one, is helping you write this little ditty for the paper. Mourning distorts so much and really can mess with your head. All these things mix together and it makes a lot of these obits read like resumes for heaven. Read some of these things for yourself and see what I mean. No one's *that* perfect.

Anyway, about this young man that died; he was 32 and he looked like he wasn't posing for the picture they used. I mean, really, think about that, too; what if you died today and they put this dumb-ass picture of you in the paper and there isn't a thing you can do about it? Like, "Hey, don't use that one. I was stoned. Get the one from the yearbook or the last one around the Christmas tree when I actually smiled." But, no, unless you know for sure you're dying and you have time to get those kinds of things together, someone else is going to make a few choices out of your reach and they might not be good ones. There's really a lot more to do in getting ready for these things than you've probably thought about, which is why you have me clueing you in.

I think the world spends entirely too much time teaching you how to live - no, telling you how to live and no one actually cares all that much about writing up the final paper. Like with the picture they use. Sure, most people probably looked like hell the week before the cancer took them and nobody uses one of those, if you were dumb enough to take a picture of a person with one foot in the grave. I've never seen anyone's picture that didn't look anything but polished. Unless you were a nobody. Hardly anybody's pictures are cut out of group photos but I have seen a few in my day and it makes we wonder if no one loved them enough to take a good picture of them.

The guy, it turns out, was in the 'nobody' category. You can usually tell by the crowd. Sometimes I get there and the room is jam-packed, down the hall and into the parking lot. The people who died that draw in the big crowds are usually in government or they're teachers or teenagers killed in a car wreck, so all the students show up and have a reunion in the parking lot. Cops and firefighters are another story altogether. I don't even bother with military persons. Anyway, when the person is well known, all the mourners look like hell, too. These are the ones that really make my heart race. This guy, on the other hand, didn't seem to make much of an impression in the world. No wonder he died. There was no cheerleading squad on his field and I stayed the whole time waiting for more people to come in.

I think maybe he hung out at the Open Door Mission or something. I saw three or four people standing near the coffin and one of them I recognized from TV. He was in a commercial for the Mission, a Santa Claus kind of guy with that Jesus-loves-you smile.

Since our ages matched up, I was originally going to be a co-worker. That means you show up because you really care or the boss told you to. It's usually my most impersonal connection and it's nearly always worked for me. I changed my mind when I got there. I figured the guy wasn't working, like me. We went to grade school together, I said, and it seemed to work. But the fact that there were only five of us who ended up coming, including the deceased, well, this wasn't quite what I was expecting, what I was hoping for.

I'm not the religious sort so you won't find me hanging out at the casket with rosary beads in hand. I've only hit the kneelers a few times, like when I was curious about finding the place where the bullet hit, or the neck got broken.

Maybe I should have been a make-up artist for the dead. It might have saved me lots of time and gas going to these things. But then I might lose my connection with the mourners and that's where the kicks really come in. I can mourn as well as anybody; I know the lingo and the behaviors and I suppose if this were a high society gathering, I'd be the one who would know how to play the crowd. Except not today. There was no crowd to play. There were no crowds to mingle with and that said a lot more about the guy than anything I could read in the papers.

I always know that I don't belong when I go to these things. I'm like a schizo about it when I go: there's the 'me' who's getting off just being there and there's the great actor who plays the role of friend or classmate or whatever. I can separate these things in my head and that makes me good at what I do. This is the one time I feel like

I'm in control. I like the word professional, but I don't know what my Title would be. Professional Mourner, maybe. Mourners used to be professional.

But not today; not this time. This wake was unsettling somehow and I figured I'd just find out how he 'died from mental illness' and go home. I made small talk with Santa to get some details – wrist slits, pills, a running car in the garage? You have to be really careful about these things 'cause 'suddenlies' make people ultra sensitive. I got a hint or two that it had to do with ropes and they found him in the basement. Geez. I'd sooner leap off a roof! What's with this guy? I heard you usually crap over all yourself when that happens and it makes it doubly tough for the person who finds you. That's the kind of thing that really makes a statement and doesn't need a note, eh?

So I made it short and sweet. There wouldn't be a luncheon, and if there was, I'd be stuck going to the Mission again. I wanted to peek into the casket and get a look at this guy before I went home. Maybe check out his neck or something. But I just went home instead. There was this weird kind of reverence thing going on and I suddenly felt the closest thing to shame I'd ever known.

TADA

This morning I applied for Social Security and it wasn't until I was coming home that I realized the odometer had unfolded quietly into that long anticipated six-digit number. I never saw it happen. I knew it was getting close and I watched for it every day, waiting for the infamous turnover: 100,000. I totally missed it and now it was at 100,024 and it was all over, some twenty-four miles ago, and I couldn't even say "Tada!" when it happened.

All my good friends own old cars and we brag about our mileage like grandmothers brag about their grandchildren. We sit in my kitchen, we sit around my own grandmother's round oak antique table and we compare notes. Eleanor speaks first.

"I hit 100,000 a few years ago on the way back from Greece, when I used to walk around the Mall. You know, when I was good about what I ate and exercised and all. Jeez, I hated those days." Eleanor is pretty much the same shape as my Grandmother's table.

"Damn near went off the road when mine did the change-over, I got so excited," Eva piped in. "I remember thinking that it was corresponding, weirdly, to menopause. Change over – change, get it?" Eva patted her moist forehead.

We laughed. Eva is seventy-six and has been going through menopause for twenty-four years. We will continue to humor her, I think, until she dies.

As for my turnover, the one I missed completely, the one that I could not say, "Tada!" over, well, I think I don't have enough time, desire or energy left to put that much mileage into another car. The three of us only care that our old junkies will again pass inspection. We are all flat broke, alone and unaffected by the plummeting stock market. One of us chimes, "Zero times anything is still zero."

DRIVER'S SIDE AIR BAG

The woman driving the car in front of me is doing old lady things.

She is driving ten miles an hour under the speed limit. Her right-side wheels are hugging the right-side road line. Most of her head is hidden by the headrest of the driver's seat. She is hitting the brake pedal for intersections, cars traveling in the opposite direction and shadows that are cast from the trees on the side of the road.

She is alone.

Worse, she is wearing a triangular plastic scarf on her head.

I step on the accelerator and tailgate her to the next town. I swear at her under my breath. My idea of swearing is *darn you* and *get a life*, but I am fired up and verbal.

I imagine that I have a sign attached to a fifty-foot handle that I am able to stick in front of her driver-side window. It says "55, *stupid!*"

At the age of 63, road rage is not a healthy sport for me. That it affects my blood pressure and increases my breathing is the least of my worries. I am a danger on the road and to this little woman, who is probably on her way to a doctor's appointment where she is going to be given more pills to keep her alive and on the road for at least another decade.

I am, in many ways, still tailgating her.

THE BATHROBE

What I wanted was simple enough – a bathrobe like the one I was wearing now - the one I wore every night, the one made out of chenille, that wrapped around and tied at the waist, fell 54” to my ankles, had a hooded collar, size M. No buttons, no zippers. Too hard to hook and buckle before the first cup of coffee. I wasn’t too concerned about color because I’d put enough stipulations on it already. Besides, bathrobes are meant to be felt on the inside. The outsides are for others to see. I didn’t much care who saw. I lived alone.

The one I had now, the old one, came with an apology. “It’s chenille,” I told people who caught me, “It’s supposed to do that.” *That* was pill. It was supposed to lose its tufted lines and as it did, it made flat, barren spaces on a canvas of soft pinky-peach, perfect decorum for the likes of a bag lady. I didn’t much care. It was warm and the hood made it warmer and I lived alone in upstate New York where winters start on Halloween and end, if you’re lucky, the day after Easter.

I searched the local stores over a period of three years. I discovered that chenille bathrobes were not the rage at this time. Someone I don’t know who lives in a warmer climate and makes a ton of money decided that for me. I tried the internet, dared to walk the streets of E-Bay and learned that chenille is for nursing home residents and maybe I could find one used. That would be like wearing someone’s underpants and I scratched myself with the thought of it.

I checked the label of my old robe and typed the brand name into Google. In just seconds I crossed the ocean and found myself in a rich and colorful exchange of words with an Irishman who checked the stock, the back room and the rejects and could not find me what I wanted. He named a little boutique in Brooklyn that sold the brand and I called them. A Jewish woman who answered the phone regretted they *had only one robe left, so sorry*. It was a size medium, 54” long, tied at the waist, had a hood and was a rich sapphire blue. It was also four times what I would have spent on a bathrobe. *Yes we can mail it for an extra \$11.00* and in three business days I am wearing a robe of royalty.

The following week, with no preparation, no internet search and a limited budget, I went to a used car dealership and bought the second car I test drove. My only stipulation was the color.

CAT BOWLS

I spend about \$15.00 every four months replacing the water purifier that's attached to the faucet at my kitchen sink. I am not a big stickler about purified water, though I do believe that fluoride will probably give you cancer if your microwave doesn't first. I do it, however, for my cats.

About thirty years ago, my cat, Boy, nearly died because the itsy-bitsy, unseen by the human eye, dirt granules in the drinking water had clogged up his urinary tract and given him an infection that almost sent him prematurely to that big litter box in the sky. I held him throughout the night, making promises to God that had something to do with giving Him my firstborn, and in the morning Boy's temperature was normal, and he lived fifteen more years. I became infertile, I think, that very day. Looking back, it seems like a poor exchange.

Now I use these children substitutes as a way to help displace the loneliness that comes with rejection and wonder why I picked cats and not dogs: these selfish beasts that pick and choose to care on their own time, and according to their own mood, displaying their affection infrequently, always with a raised-up tail and a fully exposed rectum. Still, I love to have them around, greeting me in the window as my car pulls into the driveway. They know my sound. I suppose, too, that I am purring, in my own way.

I want them to live another fifteen years and grow old with me, so I give them this purified water.

In the background, I hear their licking noises even now; sweet creatures whose tiny tongues are drinking to satisfy the thirst that comes with the dry heat of winter. I realize it is not the kitchen that carries the sound, and I turn to see them, guilt-ridden, running away from my open toilet bowl.

Perhaps, and sadly, I may outlive them both.

BROWNIES

My freezer stopped freezing, which wasn't that much of a big deal since we lived in a duplex and our neighbor was the landlord. He came by and transferred our food into his own freezer. Within a day or two, he fixed the problem and loaded our freezer back up with more than we had taken out. His marijuana brownies found their way into my freezer, unnoticed and unlabeled. I served them to company the next night.

I love brownies. I have always loved brownies the best and probably more than cookies. My mother had a recipe that she called Fudge Bars and they were still a brownie but had the consistency of fudge. The batter was better than the brownie itself and there were times when my best friend in high school and I would make up the brownie batter and split it evenly, eating the uncooked batter with a spatula while we listened to a Johnny Mathis album and day-dreamed of getting married, having children and serving the cooked renditions to company. We didn't know about salmonellae then and if we did, we wouldn't have cared in the same way my friend's teenage daughter doesn't care to stop texting while she drives on 390.

My company included a chocoholic who ate four brownies and the rest of us used diplomacy and limited ourselves to one. Two of us were unaffected. My friend and I, however, took off; he traveled a lot farther and a lot faster and a lot longer. I, on the other hand, went just far enough to go out of my mind.

Pastor's wives, for the most part, do not take illegal drugs.

Four gallons of water and twelve hours later, he and I were back to normal. It would be another month before we learned about the landlord's error in shipping and by then I had already miscarried. It was my only pregnancy.

DOUBLE DATE

I get to the movie theatre early so I can chat with the girls at the candy stand. One of them is flirting with a young man covered in tattoos. I learn they are engaged to each other. I show them my college ID so I can get a discount. The senior price is the same, but I don't like to show proof for that, so I use my college ID.

"I have a degree from SUNY, too," the young man says. "But I'm making more money using my skills to draw on people's skin." His body is covered with ink impressions that look like someone was using his appendages for practice. He is a poor walking advertisement for his store, I am thinking, but I don't suppose he put all of them on himself.

What does a young girl see in a man who is more blue than he is white?

I enter the pitch dark theatre and I am the first one there. I take a favorite seat and read useless information on the screen about people who are famous. *Entertainment Tonight* tells me they are also in rehab. I am finally no longer alone. Five more people come in, two couples and one other loner, a man about my age. I wonder, "Did his spouse leave him, too?"

He is a few rows in front of me and he is balding and I realize I never went out with a man who was balding. I was married for so long that I was never involved with a man who had time to lose his hair. My ex had thick hair; this man's hair is thin. His ears are long and large I read somewhere that this is what happens when you get older. Your nose is supposed to get bigger, too. I am sure that happens to other people but it will never happen to me and I will wear light-weight earrings so that my lobes will not be overburdened.

The movie is a disappointment.

We both leave alone, as the credits roll, and never so much as exchange even a glance. I am willing, though, to fall in love with a man who has no hair at all. Perhaps I will have to run my fingers, instead, through his elongated ears.

B-CHARMINGLY

I have wasted three easy monthly payments of just \$19.98 on a dating service that will only add to my rejection by having perfect strangers tell me that “The distance is too great,” which is another way of saying you’re not worth the trip.

Why do I do that to myself? It’s like buying a lottery ticket – you somehow think that this is it or your ship has come in or the knight on the white horse is just around the corner. The fact that it’s always the Titanic and the dragons are out in full force is something you set your mind against and you dream. Just a dollar, or six cents shy of sixty, and that dream.

Every morning is like a cattle call. I open up to new matches and check them out head to toe. The fact that they might be doing the same thing to me is humiliating, so again I set my mind on the dream and believe he’ll be a great looker looking just for me; that the one who is interested is not the fat and bald guy two inches shorter than I am or the guy who’s obsessed with wearing turtlenecks and wants all his women to do the same. No, this one is perhaps a retired millionaire who loves insecure divorced graduate students who collect social security and carry more baggage than a movie starlet on vacation. He has a great sense of humor, perfect grandchildren and no mortgage; he has all his hair and it is soft and white and wavy. He’s looking for company, companionship and more cats. He has to like cats; no way am I getting rid of them for something meaningful like a relationship.

I'm not a bad catch, actually. I have a great sense of humor, and was Class Clown, 1964, Marion Central. I am still using my humor to this day to excite a crowd or cover up an embarrassment. The older I get, the less effectively this works, which is something I don't fully understand.

I'm disease free, which nowadays is rare, especially for my age. If I were forty years younger, it would have a different meaning entirely. I could use a couple of crowns on my back molars, but at least I have my back molars. I have some age spots that are fun to watch grow and spread and some days I use them like a Rorschach test and try to figure out what their shapes look like. Except for the big toe on my right foot, my nails are long and pretty and they are actually my own. They are very adept at giving good backrubs, which I haven't had the pleasure of doing in a number of years. That particular big toe is another thing altogether; shouldn't be located on a human being, actually, and unless it spreads, I probably won't do anything about it and will camouflage it with bright polish in the summer. There was nothing on the form to give that away.

I have a mortgage that will be paid for when I'm 89, which is about the time I can stop working and retire. Other than that, my finances are in order and my credit is in the 800's. My house is a little showplace. I'm not a neat-freak but I don't like outward chaos to connect with the inward chaos I am always experiencing, so I keep things tidy. That way, I never have to apologize to unexpected company that I don't get anyway.

Some of my friends think I'm beautiful and others use the words *attractive*. Somebody once used the word handsome but they're dead now.

What I do have is beautiful hair. That's like saying someone has a great personality; it's what they don't say that really matters. But people have stopped me on the street and told me this. Unfortunately, it's always women who stop me. I admit to being a bit overweight and will probably make that resolution later on this week and for sure this time I'll finish what I started like I did the last time I did this.

I have very few phobias. The fact that I won't travel more than fifty miles from home, and only in clear weather, and never at night, is a moot point. That would help make me a cheap date and a cheaper wife. Big trips would be to the mall in another county during the day.

I have filled out the forms, stated the obvious and unleashed my soul. One man has dared to step out and communicate with me through a hidden e-mail connection. We exchanged about a half dozen blurbs and I never heard from him again. I just don't understand men. I didn't make that big a deal out of the toe.

These things simply don't work like the ads tell you they will. I'm sure it has something to do with being older or else it's simply that the good men don't have internet access.

THE CRUSH

It's funny how you can trick the eye into beholding a stocky, bent over, double-chinned man in his mid-sixties and visualize yourself going to town with him on your oversized couch.

That's pretty much the way it was with Mark.

Mark is a well known man in this community and of course I have changed his name because he is well known.

I first met him nearly forty years ago, when we were young, newly married to other spouses and living back-to-back in a busy village neighborhood. Our children often played together. When my family moved to another part of town, so did the relationship.

Now, some three decades later, we run into each other in stores and coffee shops and even campus corridors, where he sometimes serves in an adjunct capacity. We have shared coffee and the past. We are both alone now and could do a one-upmanship on the divorce details but choose not to. Divorce itself is enough to have in common.

We talk about scholarly things, family things, spiritual things and our conversations leave me intrigued. My heart does this leaping thing when I see him; heart-leaping, I have discovered, is not reserved for the young. It is the most emotion I have experienced, outside of anger and revenge, since my husband left.

One particular afternoon, we sat quite closely at a small round table at a campus café, and in response to something he said that was clever and cute, I touched his arm. I

have not touched a man in that way – a flirtatious way - in years. It startled me. It was then that I noticed his lips. They are usually the first thing I notice on a man but for all these little snippets of time that we have chatted together, I didn't focus on them because they were too busy conversing. Mark is a talker and now that mouth was not just moving, it was full and ample and typing out the word *ample* is the closest thing I've experienced on a sexual level in years. I realized I wanted to kiss that mouth.

I imagine that Mark and I have fallen in love and I become a step-mother and have to learn all the names of his children and his grandchildren. We are sharing a household of all of our favorite things, some of which include his own children. I attend many more events in our little community, holding on to the arm of this giant of a man. I am looking prominent while looking up into his eyes and smiling at the knowledge of what we have. We have found love again, even in our senior years, and everyone is so happy for us and we are both glowing. Neither chivalry nor hormones are dead. The leaping heart continues.

Suddenly, I am young and playful and I don't have to take Advil before I shovel my driveway. I can not only squat down, but I can come back up. I bathe without using the grip-bar and I don't need concealer under my eyes. I can sneeze without crossing my legs; my hair is once again cinnamon-nutmeg red.

Does he see himself as svelte?

Later that day, I Google his name into my computer and learn what makes him passionate. I see occasional cups of coffee steaming over nothing more than

pleasantries. I see a future of attending community events alone. I see no family at Thanksgiving but my own. I see a great set of lips going to waste.

LIP SERVICE

The last time David kissed me was forty years ago, almost to the day. That I remember stupid stuff like that is the work of hormones reaching their crest; the same ones that are now daily depleting themselves, according to scientific research. But the kiss was hot, he was hot, everything he did was hot, but we didn't use the word **hot** back then.

Then, he was cool.

What made us go to the other end of the temperature spectrum, anyway?

Why am I playing around with silly, adolescent words and thoughts?

Why am I avoiding the obvious?

David just pulled into my driveway in an ugly little red car.

He's here. Shit.

David was in town and wanted to see me. 'In town' is about an hour away but he wanted to make the drive. He lives in Minnesota now and we've seen each other on and off at class reunions and funerals. He's the one from the past that you always wonder about: if you should have gotten married, what your kids would have looked like, if he ever thinks these same thoughts about you. You wonder why he wants to see you at this stage of your life and can't help but think it's that male menopause thing you read about.

At our age, there's a lot more past than future and suddenly the past seems sweeter than it actually was.

It was the summer of 1962. We were running around in somebody's cherry orchard in the middle of nowhere in my hometown of mostly Dutch immigrants and a few of us melting-pot transplants. Everybody's last name started with De, Ver or Vander. David was a De.

I don't remember whose property we were on or who else was there or why we were even there. Kids our age could only get jobs picking cherries from all the orchards in our town. Somehow David and I ended up under this cherry tree with nobody around. Suddenly, this puny adolescent kid with buck teeth planted a big one on me like it was his first time ever, like he's been practicing on his hand or maybe his pillow and waiting for this day to happen. He must have practiced a lot because something worked and we both found more than a monetary reason to go cherry picking that summer.

I gave David a list of near-by restaurants we could meet at for coffee, but he wanted to come to my house. I hadn't seen him in ten years and somehow restaurants seemed safer. David was handsome as a boy, even with those protruding teeth and maybe because of those protruding teeth; he was handsome ten years ago and I doubted

he'd changed. A recent high school alumni newsletter described David's appearance as "...well, you know – the same as always. David never ages and his appearance never changes."

The last time we saw each other was at a funeral home. His older brother had died suddenly and we exchanged hugs and awkward eye-contact. Ten years before that, we exchanged identical eye-contact at another brother's funeral. These weren't the best of meeting places and the atmosphere held no other tension but grief.

In actuality, I didn't want to see David: I was chubby and old and my hair wasn't cinnamon red anymore, with or without help, and I was coming off the backside of an ugly divorce. Maybe it was more a case of I didn't want David to see **me**.

I really did want to see him: I was chubby, so-aren't-we-all, and he must have white in his hair – for-goodness-sakes-he's-sixty-something-too and he's been through a divorce himself and so I said sure.

I had broken rule #1. Stay away from the past.

I paced the living room, watched the clock work its way slowly to the next hour and hoped that the sun would come out. Literally. My living room, kitchen and eating area is one large room with a cathedral ceiling and three skylight windows. There's a double window facing the front yard and a sliding door that opens to a deck in back. On sunny days, the room is filled with a golden hue, a combination emanating from the ceramic tiles on the floor and the wall paint and the sun. It startles people, refreshes them. I wanted David to come into my home and see all this sunshine and be tricked into

thinking that I am in control of my life, that there is a golden glow about me that is beyond the golden years we are now both in, that I am infinitely happy.

Maybe I should paint a smiley face on the front door☺. I'm thinking stupid-stuff. I am fifteen again and I'm thinking of the past and our on-and-off again relationship that carried itself haphazardly into our twenties, seven years total; a relationship that was never really defined.

I didn't need a David-factor in my life right now. I needed A's. Priorities were different now. I needed to plan out the visit, control it, work through it, and then get past it, like my counselor advised; the same way I now approached everything else in my life.

I'll hug him at the front door. Forget the smiley face. I'll just give him a little hug, tell him "it's nice to see you," while not looking at him directly, at his deep brown eyes, at the wisps of white that undoubtedly weave themselves into the dark brown of his hair. I'll invite him to sit down, pretend we are old friends. Yes, we are. Old friends.

And I'll try to not look at his lips.

I always loved his lips the best; that overbite that he had, not really bucked teeth but curved out just a bit over his lower lip, enclosed in a full mouth. I loved that mouth. I became a 'mouth' person the same way a guy becomes a leg man or a breast man. I always stare at mouths, looking for full lips encasing an overbite. There has never been a boy or a man in my life whose face I could stare at for hours and simply enjoy as much as

David's. We didn't know phrases like 'eye-candy' then. We used that temperate gauge thingy.

Suddenly, I'm thinking those adolescent thoughts again: *was I even his first kiss? I won't ask him, won't bring it up; it's a half century ago memory. Store it away with all the others.*

I didn't even bother to clean the house. Thirty-one years married to a minister made me the world's best housekeeper, though not, I guess, the world's best wife. My house was always clean, always waiting for unexpected company. Company used to come by a lot but not so much anymore. I hadn't had company like David before.

It turned out to be a fairly warm September day; the sun finally peeking out from the early morning clouds. I wanted it be to cooler so I could bulk up in a sweat shirt and pants and hide the excess pounds. Instead I wore a long, loose top in one of my "good" colors, threw it on over an elasticized bottom; church pajamas, I called it – it looks acceptable and hides a multitude of sin. He showed up in a striped short-sleeved shirt and shorts but they couldn't cover up the little tire tube around his waist. That wasn't there ten years ago. I began to relate, and then to relax.

I motioned to David to sit down, and pointed to the two chairs that faced my couch. I had arranged my living space to promote that perfect triangle of conversation: the couch against the front windows with two comfortable side chairs facing the couch,

each at a 90 degree angle. In truth, it was set up to satisfy my favorite television angle; to recline on the couch, propped up by its red floral pillows and positioned for comfort. To fall asleep. I set the DVR to record every 10 PM show I watched because I almost never made it to 11. Two years ago, I got rid of the 'our' furniture and bought my own. I replaced the couch with one that had an outrageous Victorian flower pattern on a red background. My ex would have hated it. He was not a flower guy, not a lover of Country Victorian. I loved this couch more than anything besides my two overweight cats, and mostly between ten and eleven.

David ignored my hand gesture and sat down next to me on my couch. I tightened up. He was breaking the second of my boundary rules in just one day. First, he was in my house and now he was sitting terribly close to me on my red flowered Victorian couch. The one I fell asleep on.

I'd forgotten how dark his complexion was, forgotten that his Dutch ancestry had given him this pigment, how he always looked as though he had a tan, even in the winter, even in upstate New York in the winter. His skin was a rich mahogany tone and at one point, making a point, I let my pointer finger glide on his knee, accidentally digging my nail into his flesh. I saw that the imprint from my nail stayed with him the entire time he was there. Ivory on mahogany.

I couldn't avoid staring at his teeth, wrapped now with nice porcelain crowns, but still keeping the overbite intact. Teeth like that won't stay forever without reinforcement. I knew that. I was a dental assistant before I got married.

Sometimes, when people get older, their lips begin to curl inside their mouths and almost disappear; as if they were as swallow-up as their years. Sometimes they take on a new shape, a thin shape, an unwelcoming shape. It's bad enough that our ears get longer and our noses seem to spread and jowls make an entrance; do our mouths have to retreat at the same time? I better understood the reasoning behind the collagen craze, though I'm admittedly repulsed by the twin-worms effect.

David's lips were full and soft and just the right size and I remembered them on mine and concentrated at being the present perfect hostess and not the past one-time lover. Suddenly the thought struck me and I kept it to myself: *how did it come to be that I would find men over sixty attractive?*

We spoke for a full two hours, mostly about where our lives had taken us. When you're a teen-ager in my little hometown, your life is about school and siblings, cheerleading and sports and parking on Jagger Road on the week-ends. Your hormones are crazed and what is a memory you think you have is probably just a distortion of what really happened. Now it's marriages and children and grandchildren. It's our war, Vietnam, and the new one, Iraq, and divorce and the loss of parents and brothers and decades of life experiences two single hours can't even begin to explore.

When David was 20, his mother, pregnant at the time, passed out behind the wheel of her car and flew into a huge field of dirt and grass and one lone stone wall. She

hit the wall and was killed instantly, leaving 16 children without a mother, three of them under the age of five. David, one of the older ones, was in Vietnam when his Mom died.

He told me that he divides his sibling up into two groups: the ones who were already on their own and the others who didn't have a mother to raise them.

I never even knew that he went to Vietnam. He'd put 27 years in the Army. I never knew that.

I knew sneaking out to Jagger Road and sharing a six-pack with him.

He'd gotten a college degree, had two children with each wife and now he was retired, had been retired for 6 years.

I knew meeting behind backs and barns and bushes with David.

David spends his days playing with his grandchildren, traveling to other counties, working part-time in a big box store.

I never really knew David. I knew a teenager, a kid, a boy. I didn't know this man.

David spent most of his visit with me talking about his mother and he shared some of the conversations they had and her hopes and dreams for him and all I could think of was "How in the world did she ever find the time to talk to her kids one-on-one?"

Sometime during our conversation, my two normally could-care-less cats began to crawl all over the couch, the coffee table, me, David. Upward tails displayed affection and I became aware that they had never done this before. It completely disturbed our focus and interrupted our conversation. In the past, Murphy virtually ignored company and Marcus wasn't a climber. It was so peculiar.

"I think they're jealous," I thought.

"I think they're jealous," he said.

We both laughed.

The rest of our conversation stuck to the past and left out all parts that hurt. It's those things that, in actuality, make us the people we are today.

I walked him out to the driveway, to that ugly little red Chevy that the rental agency gave him. David moaned when I commented on it. He wasn't happy about it.

"What do you drive at home?" I asked and knew before he answered that it was a Toyota Camry. That was the same car I'd always wanted to own. Silly thoughts began to surface, like what if I **had** married him: would I have a better car or would we still be paying off all the exorbitant bills for the kids' dental work?

It was about four in the afternoon, my cul-de-sac was filled with parked cars but no one was outside on the street. Just the two of us. The sun was still shining.

David opened the car door, hesitated to get in, and turned back to me. I was standing at a healthy distance, readdressing rule number 2. He moved towards me, both arms fully wrapping around my waist, the waist with the little tire tube that matched his own – probably the only thing we both had in common now - and he held me longer than was comfortable, long enough to feel familiar.

The kiss was unexpected, ‘affectionate but not romantic,’ I told my friends.

Is that even possible?

I giggled and put my hand over my mouth.

“Well, nothing’s been **there** for five years,” I said and realized later there was nothing more or less eloquent to say than what I said.

“Was it okay?” he asked,

Does he mean am I still a good kisser or did I cross the line?

“Yes,” I replied.

I waited every day as I pulled up my e-mails, hoping to hear from him to, at least, say it was nice to see you so that I could say nice-to-see-you-too and send off that last e-mail that was another way of saying a final good-bye without talking about what

happened. There was no need to find the right words. There was no e-mail. What happened wasn't conducive to a follow-up.

David might have been looking for the women he lost – mothers and lovers. And now I can say I probably didn't love him as much as his memory. Now we're both at the end of our lives and we have just this one life and so little left of it and I'm thinking, *did you ever tell your wife about our visit?*

David couldn't see my face as he pulled out of the driveway and I walked slowly back to the house. There was a grin on it that I wasn't willing to share. It stayed there for hours. It was not the sweetness, the tenderness, the passion – there was none, really – not the memories of yesterday or this particular moment in time. There was no Hollywood drama or romantic ending about what happened in my driveway.

No, I just loved the fact that, at this stage and at this age, white-haired and overweight, I am, at least, still kissable.

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