

# **absolute**

**NINETEEN NINETY-FOUR**

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# Short Stories

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# *The Race*

by Gerald Bennett

Old John Russell was a die-hard horseman, born in Arizona, who had devoted his entire life to horses. He had started out as a kid cleaning stalls and walking “hots.” Later, he began galloping horses and finally got a jockey’s license and rode from coast to coast. He had made a good rider and pursued that until injuries and gaining weight forced him to retire, so training was the next step.

Times were tough for John now, as he was crowding seventy. His life’s savings and only possessions were an old worn-out and road-weary Ford pickup and two Thoroughbred race horses that were in about the same condition. If it wasn’t for his Social Security check, they all would have starved to death before now, but it was his way of life.

John was small of stature but a proud little man. His hair was silver gray, and he walked with a slight stoop in his shoulders. He still had a very sharp, alert look in his eye and was nobody’s fool although he had made some mistakes in his life. His clothes were always clean but carried wrinkles from being handwashed and hung on a wire to dry. You could tell by looking at him that he usually never had more than two quarters at a time in his pants pocket, especially after buying feed and bedding for Navigator and Iron Clad. They had been good, honest horses in their prime, but those days were long gone. Navigator was ten and Iron Clad was eleven. In most states, race horses are forced to retire when they reach twelve. Iron Clad was pretty well used-up, but John couldn’t think of getting rid of him after all the miles the three of them had gone together. John just wanted to win a race or two so he could rent a small pasture and they could all retire together.

John had been running in California, but, in the fall of ’77, he decided to go back to Rillito Race Track in Tucson, Arizona, where he hoped to see a few old friends and racing would be easier.



He pulled up to the stable gate and asked the guard if there was any chance of getting stalls for his two old horses. The guard assigned John stalls and a tack room in barn "A" and said, "I really kind of hate to give you those stalls, Old-Timer, because you are going to have a sorry neighbor just across the shedrow from you. Nobody seems to get along with Bud, but they are the only stalls left."

John found and bedded the stalls and got Navigator and Iron Clad on solid ground. This would be home for now; anywhere that his horses were comfortable and he could set up his cot and bedroll, he was happy. John unwrapped the horses' legs, hung a bucket of water and a hay bag stuffed with alfalfa and timothy in each of their stalls, and went to the track kitchen for a cup of coffee.

Wanda had arrived earlier that day. This was just the next stop on her road through life. She had driven up in an old yellow rusted-out '70 Dodge station wagon. All of her belongings were in it, including three ducks in the back. She talked to and treated these ducks just like they were her kids. She would soon become known to everyone on the track as "The Duck Lady" and be considered a little strange.

No one knew where Wanda came from and she never said. She just showed up that morning in the track kitchen, looking for work. The heavy aroma of burned grease, onions and peppers burned her eyes and nose when she first came in. She ordered a cup of coffee and two slices of bread with no butter, and asked the cashier if any of the trainers were hiring any grooms. She said that she had plenty of experience—with horses, that is. She had that look about her that gave the indication that she had lived more of life than many people twice her age.

"You should be in luck," he said, "because the border patrol raided yesterday, and a lot of people are short-handed this morning. Are you sure you don't want some butter for that bread?"

"No, that's for my ducks," she said.

She thanked him and took her coffee and bread and sat down at a table next to a window that looked out on the barn area. All the eyes in the room followed her as she had a rather striking beauty about her, long reddish-brown hair down to the middle of her back and a sprinkle of freckles on her nose. She was tall and slender, about thirty-five years old.

She took a sip of the strong black coffee, wrapped the bread in a napkin, and started to hum a catchy little tune. She just seemed to disappear into a world all her own.

Bud Grieder, a horse trainer, had just come into the kitchen to grab a quick cup of coffee. As he paid for the coffee, the cashier asked him if he needed a groom.

Bud replied, "Hell, yes! The border patrol wiped me out yesterday!"

The cashier pointed to Wanda. Bud hesitated a moment, then said, "I guess a woman's better than no help at all!" He walked up to the table where Wanda was sitting, startling her out of her trance.

"I hear you're lookin' for work. Well, come on, let's get to the barn. We got lots of work to do and I'll have to show you how I want it done. You may have your way of doing things, but, by damn, we'll do it my way, 'cuz I'll be payin' ya!"

John watched this and thought to himself, "That must be my neighbor from across the shedrow."

Bud had a string of fifteen, both quarter horses and Thoroughbreds. He was an ornery, cantankerous man, about fifty, who had a crippled arm, and so was handicapped when it came to doing many of the things that needed to be done with horses. He wasn't all that successful as a trainer, but it was the only occupation that he knew.

When a race was over, if he didn't win, it was always the jockey's fault, starter's fault, or somebody had interfered with his horse. It was almost unbelievable to him that he might have just been outrun by a faster horse.

He never got around to shaving except on race days, just in case he would get his picture taken if he won. He was a tobacco chewer and usually had a brown stain from the corner of his mouth to his chin. He was not really the picture of success and almost a little revolting.

The morning after John arrived, he found out what the guard had meant about Bud. He watched how he treated his horses and Wanda. He had known many like Bud in his lifetime and had little respect for any of them. He could see no excuses for Bud's appearance or actions, but he knew it was best to get along with his neighbors as he was stuck with them until the end of the meet.

That afternoon, John saw Wanda by her old Dodge with the hood up and thought the neighborly thing to do was see if she needed some help. He had been watching as she had gone about her work, singing and acting as though all of Bud's bitching and moaning just went in one ear and out the other.

The first thing John noticed when he walked up to the car was her ducks, and he asked her why she had them.

"They are the best friends I have ever had; they are always there to listen to my troubles."

She told John about her younger days and how her daddy had wanted her to go to college like her older brothers and sister, but she had got in with the wrong crowd, got

to smoking pot and doing drugs and dropped out of school.

“They’re all successful now,” she said, “but I’d rather have my ducks and way of life than all their responsibilities and worries.”

John, Iron Clad, and Navigator settled into the routine of the race track. The days were warm and John spent a lot of time sitting on a five-gallon bucket on the sunny side of the barn, running cold water on Navigator’s legs. He thought a lot about how things might have been different if he had only listened to a friend years ago.

When he was riding at Turf Paradise in Phoenix, he was at the peak of his riding career and making money almost faster than he could spend it. His friend Bill had a couple of good horses and was making money, too.

At that time, Turf Paradise sat way out from Phoenix, right in the middle of acres of irrigated carrots. Bill wanted to pool their money and buy some land out by the track, but John thought, ‘What would a young fellow want with acres of carrots when there were girls and good times to spend your money on!’ He was thinking now that the land that he could have bought for \$100 an acre was worth \$10,000 or more an acre these days. It wouldn’t have taken many acres and he could have retired in style. These old horses could be standing under a shade tree and he could be fishing.

One afternoon, when Wanda had finished her work, she saw John running water on Navigator’s legs. There was a nice puddle that had formed just behind the old horse in a little low place in the ground. She said to John, “Do you think it would bother your horse if I went and got my ducks to play in that puddle?”

“No, that’d be fine ’cuz I’m gettin’ ready to put him up anyway.”

As Wanda was getting her ducks, John shut off the hose and put Navigator away. It was mid-afternoon and most of his work was finished for the day, but it was still too early to feed the horses. He pulled a bale of straw out into the warm sunshine and got out his pocketknife. It was an “Uncle Henry” that he had carried the past fifteen years. He got the piece of driftwood that he had been carving on when he was just killing time.

“Why aren’t you over in the kitchen with the rest of the trainers?” Wanda asked when she returned with her feathered friends. “They finally got a beer license and there’s always a pitch game goin’ on. That’s where Bud spends most of his time.”

“Ya know, I’ve listened to them tell stories and brag on their horses for years. It seems like every time they tell those stories, the horses get faster and the women get better looking. I’d rather just sit and enjoy the sun and talk to you. Why don’t you bring that old chair over here and just relax ’til feedin’ time.”



Wanda set the wobbly canvas-and-wood folding chair down and said, "What are you makin' out of that stick?"

"I don't really know yet, but it looks like it should be something. It's got some character just the way it is."

Wanda shut one eye, cocked her head to the side and said, "It kinda' looks like one of those snakes that I used to see when I tripped out. Sure glad those days are in the past."

"How come you're still workin' for Bud? He treats you like crap, always hollerin' and bossin' you around. You've already lasted longer than anyone thought you would."

"Well, Bud is a little short-tempered, but could you imagine tryin' to do some of the work that has to be done with just one good arm? How would you get that knife open and be able to hold that stick and whittle? Things like that really affect the way some people act."

"Ya know, I never really thought about it. I guess that would tend to wear on a person. Say, how about us going over to the kitchen for a beer and sandwich after we get the horses fed?"

Wanda smiled and said, "You know, John, if we walked in there, every head would turn and they'd all say, 'Look! That crazy Duck Lady has her hooks in Ole John!' We'd better just be friends over here at the barn."

John smiled, folded his knife, laid down his stick and pulled the condition book out of his back pocket.

"When are you gonna' run that old cripple?" Wanda asked, pointing toward Navigator's stall.

"I think the second race next Saturday will just fit him."

"Well, Bud's entering Gallant Lad in that race and I think he'll be tough."

"You just don't know how good my ole horse really is. Let's just make a little wager. If Navigator outruns Bud's horse, you owe me a supper in the track kitchen; if, by chance, Bud's horse wins, I'll buy."

On Friday afternoon, the clouds started building up in the west and by evening, rain had started to fall. It rained all night. John's prayer had been answered because Navigator loved the mud and an off track.

That morning, it was still raining and continued off and on most of the day. The horseshoer arrived to put mud calks on Gallant Lad for a little extra advantage. John looked across and thought to himself that Bud was wasting his time and money because the big races that Navigator had won had been in the mud. Navigator put his head out over his stall door and nuzzled John's arm. John reached up and scratched Navigator's

cheek and said, "Old Boy, if you can pull this one off today, we'll all retire to greener pastures."

Tension started to build when the call for the first race came over the speakers. John put the bridle on Navigator as Bud hollered at Wanda to grab the blinkers for Gallant Lad. As they led the horses toward the paddock, John noticed that Bud had shaved and put on a clean shirt, in anticipation of a win.

The horses were on the track now. John thought Navigator looked as good as he ever had, despite his age. He was on his toes and prancing as he was led toward the gate, obviously excited.

John thought his heart was going to come out of his chest as he heard the announcer say, "They're all in the gate!" He was almost too afraid to watch, but his eyes focused on the number three gate where Navigator was standing alert and calm.

"Come on, Old Man, just one more win."

"And they're off!" Navigator got out good, but it was Gallant Lad that took the lead. When they came by the grandstand the first time, the horses were strung out, with Navigator in the middle of the pack. As they went down the backside, Gallant Lad and the horses with the early speed began to fade as Navigator's jockey took him around the outside and started passing horses. As they approached the head of the stretch, Navigator was running second to Gallant Lad and gaining with every stride. At the wire, it was Navigator winning by a head. Was it John's imagination, or did that rainbow that now stretched overhead end in the winner's circle?

Back at the barn, as John was wrapping Navigator's legs, Wanda walked up and sat down on a bale of straw and said, "We don't have to go to the track kitchen to eat tonight; we can go to the Chaparral and get a good steak 'cuz I bet \$10 on that ole cripple! I couldn't pass it up when he went off at 25 to 1."

As John put Navigator back into the stall, he said, "That little place where me and the horses are going to retire has a nice duck pond on it."

# *Miss Tilly's Existence*

by **Tonya Keller**

Miss Tilly slowly climbed her front porch steps, absently listening to the jingling sound of her keys. It was difficult locating the right key, fitting it into the lock and opening the front door. She entered the living room and gazed around, feeling as if this were the first time she'd ever seen the furniture and decorations. With a sigh, she let the oak door swing closed and leaned against it, scrunching her eyes shut against the tears she'd been fighting for the past two hours.

The funeral had been lovely; everyone shared that opinion, and Miss Tilly never disagreed with everyone. She attended the funeral because it was expected of her, because it would have caused comment and speculation had she not attended. The truth was, though, that she had wanted to go.

"Although he was unable to speak for almost fifty years, he did find a certain measure of peace in this town."

She carefully removed her hatpin and her hat. Next, she took off her coat and gloves, leaving them on the vestibule table before moving slowly toward the kitchen. She hadn't eaten lunch, knowing what lay ahead, knowing she would be too nervous, possibly too upset to deal with a sour stomach. Now, she imagined, she should be hungry.

After a small dinner of vegetable soup and crackers, she prepared for an early night. She wanted to go to sleep and forget the last few days. As she exchanged her rusty black dress for a flannel nightgown, she made a concerted effort not to think, losing herself in the nightly routine of getting ready for bed. If she didn't think, the pain wouldn't come.

She absently pulled the pins from her hair, releasing the tight bun she habitually wore. Picking up her hairbrush, she slowly began stroking it down the length of her hair,



moving to her dressing table and sitting down. She looked into the mirror and was surprised into dropping the brush.

Who is this? Not me, she denied to herself. I'm not that old. I can't be. As in a dream, she saw her hand reach out to trace the features in the mirror, feeling only smooth, cool, hardness where she saw wrinkled, sagging grayness. A hand which had always seemed capable now trembled with age—pale, purple-veined and liver-spotted. She refused to accept it. The mirror was lying.

"Although he was unable to speak for almost fifty years, he did find a certain measure of peace in this town."

She didn't want to remember it; she wouldn't think about it. She couldn't deny the memories, though, when they came. She remembered watching Grayson Mitchell, remembered sitting in the red, crushed velvet seats with her sisters and watching as he walked, danced, rode, fought, and loved his way across the film screen. She had fantasized about meeting him, about hearing his voice for the first time, about seeing him in person.

No! That was enough! It would hurt to remember more. She snatched up a book she'd been meaning to read for awhile, settled into the old, overstuffed chair by her bedroom window and forced herself to read the printed words. She read the same sentence seven times before admitting defeat and allowing the book to rest in her lap.

"Although he was unable to speak for almost fifty years, he did find a certain measure of peace in this town."

Why wouldn't these thoughts leave her alone? She didn't want to think about that day, didn't want to remember the most humiliating day of her life. But some part of her mind was out of control because the memory came anyway.

It was a beautiful autumn day when she found him in the park for the first time. He hadn't looked exactly like the star she'd seen in silent films thirty years earlier, but she hadn't really noticed the differences, only the similarities. She had been certain, on seeing him, that they were meant to be together. Her heart had raced when she approached him and settled hesitantly on one end of the park bench he occupied, watching carefully, waiting for him to notice her. When, after several moments, he still hadn't acknowledged her presence, she ventured, "I'm Matilda Somers. I teach history at the high school here in town."

He showed no signs of even hearing her. She nervously smoothed a few loose strands of hair back in place and tried again. "I remember your movies. My sisters and I were probably your biggest fans. I even had a schoolgirl crush on you." She tittered



nervously, aware of sounding foolish but unable to stop herself. "We always wondered why you stopped making films, why you never made another after the talkies started."

Though she realized now why he'd been angry then, when it actually happened, she had been confused by his furious yet somehow pained expression. She'd only had time to notice that he was still incredibly handsome, that his eyes were a striking shade of blue and seemed very bitter before he stood and marched away from her, all without speaking a word.

"Although he was unable to speak for almost fifty years, he did find a certain measure of peace in this town."

The words had been spoken by Reverend Andrews who had given the eulogy. She wondered why no one had ever explained Grayson Mitchell's reticence, his inability to speak. He had been somewhat of a recluse, never leaving his home or inviting anyone over, but surely someone must have known. She'd seen him herself only a handful of times after that day but, with the memory of his rejection always close, had never gathered enough courage to approach him again. If only she'd known, she might have helped him, she might have tried harder, she might have...if only she'd known...but she hadn't known.

"Although he was unable to speak for almost fifty years, he did find a certain measure of peace in this town."

At the funeral this afternoon, she had felt strangely unreal and out of place. Thinking back now, it seemed that he had looked very old and shrunken against the white silk of his coffin. There had been nothing in his appearance to remind her of the strong, virile man who had fired her imagination and her dreams, both as a girl and later as a woman. She had never before noticed his age, always seeing him through the eyes of a young girl viewing her hero. Recognizing for the first time just how she had deluded herself, she wondered, too, how he had seen her.

She stood up, going to her bookcase. Ignoring the feeble, old appearance of her hands, she searched, fumbling for the right year. There it was, the school's 1945 annual. Feeling fragile and afraid, she returned to her seat and slowly opened the annual. When she found the picture of her class from that year, a small involuntary moan escaped her throat. She had already been old even then, almost fifty years ago. The black-and-white photo showed a woman past her youth, with graying hair, lifeless eyes, and nervous, fluttery hands. She appeared just what she was: a spinster living on her daydreams and growing older. This was how he'd seen her on their first meeting. Was it any wonder he'd shown little interest in her or her words?

Miss Tilly closed the book gently, unable to face such intimate knowledge of herself. Her shoulders shook as the tears and sobs which had been threatening all day finally overcame her will to hold them back. She sat like that for a long time, crying softly to herself. When the tears finally slowed and then stopped, she was empty. She carefully got up and replaced the annual, pausing to pull the lace curtains away from the window. She was surprised to see that the sun had set without her noticing, and this sent a fresh wave of pain through her. Grayson Mitchell was dead, and Miss Tilly Somers had never lived.

# *An Errand to Run*

by Paul Kerby

It is six o'clock on Monday, the twenty-first of February 1992. I have the evening off and I have no plans. I'm bored. Should I sit around the house and do nothing? Should I read a book? Should I call my drinking buddies and go out on the town? No, I want to do *something*, but I don't want to spend a bunch of money that I don't have. Besides that, I have to work in the morning. I don't want to go into the restaurant with a hang-over.

I finally arrive at a nice compromise. My friend Lilly, who lives down the street, would *love* to go see a movie with me. I'll pick her up at about seven. I just have a quick errand to run, and then we'll be on our way. Perfect. I'll enjoy some interesting company, see a good movie, and I won't be up until all hours partying.

As arranged, I stop by Lilly's place a few minutes after seven. I have to go in to say an obligatory hello to her thirteen felines. They swarm all over me as if I'm wearing catnip, which I assure you, I am not. Her duplex, dark and eclectic, always smells like a litter box, no matter how much incense she burns.

Lilly, her long black hair in a thick braid, is dressed in her usual seance attire. Black stretch pants, black silk blouse, black shawl, black stiletto pumps, and lots of gold jewelry in shapes of ankhs, half-moons, and pentagrams. I suppose she's making a statement, but I've never cared to ask her just what it is she's trying to say. Sometimes ignorance is bliss.

Before we head to the theater, there's something I have to do. It should take only about ten minutes. The movie doesn't start until eight o'clock, and Lilly doesn't seem to mind a quick detour.

## II

We pull up to the clinic at about 7:15. There are hardly any cars in the parking lot, so this shouldn't take too long. I give the receptionist my anonymous card, complete

with my own personal bar-code. We sit on cold metal chairs in the reception area and wait for my number to be called.

As I'd hoped, there aren't many people here. A couple of frail, nervous queens, a biker chick with her biker dude, and a portly, older gentleman of indeterminate sexual persuasion. Who can tell these days, anyway?

In about five minutes, the counselor calls out my date of birth. I recognize the guy right off, the head of the clinic. He's the one I usually talk to. Quick. Easy. A real nonsense type. I follow him back to the office.

He asks me to take a seat, sits and arranges himself, and opens my file. Same old file. No name. It has my birthday and my bar-code printed across the top.

I know it is physically impossible for this particular man to look nervous. He's as cold as an icicle most of the time, flat affectation, as if no discernible emotional messages are being transmitted from his brain to body. But somehow, watching him now, the realization slowly dawns on me, this time *something* is different.

In his best robot imitation, he says, "Sometime since your last test, your body has begun producing antibodies to the HIV virus. After your Western Block came back positive, we administered two more tests on your blood samples. Both showed you to be positive to HIV. Because you tested negative in April of last year, there is reason to believe you were exposed to the virus sometime within the last eight months. You have a good chance of living six to ten years. There will probably never be a cure for HIV, but in the next few years, they may be able to find drugs that can help you to cope with the disease. Do you have any questions?"

Do I have any questions? My God, I hate this man. What is he saying to me? He's made a mistake! They've mixed up my blood samples with someone else's. They're wrong! He's wrong! I want out of this place! I want to disappear! I want to die right now!

Positive? I thought positive was supposed to be a good thing. You know, like thinking positive, keep a positive outlook, you're always so positive. Something's wrong here!

Of course, I don't say any of this. I am senseless and speechless. I nod my head in pretended understanding, trying to remember how to breathe. The air has disappeared from this tiny room. I am disembodied. I'm inside the pencil that the counselor keeps thumping on the desk. The noise the pencil makes as it strikes is deafening. The robotic drone breaks through.

"There are lots of support groups and community organizations that, if you take advantage of them, can contribute to the quality of life that you have left."



“Well, since you don’t have any questions, right now I’d like for you to take a new computer survey that we’re asking our HIV-infected clients to participate in. It takes about ten minutes. Afterward, we’ll draw some blood samples to test your T-cells. We need to see how badly your immune system has been impacted so far.”

I smile and nod my head as if I think this sounds like a marvelous idea. Why is it that, even under the most repugnant circumstances, I feel the need to maintain social decorum? I have every right to tell this man what I think of him. Would it be so unreasonable for me to fall on the floor and flail? If I broke every framed certificate in this room, would I be too out-of-line? But no, I remain pleasant and agreeable.

Of course I’d be thrilled to take your stupid little survey. You’ve just told me I’m as good as dead, that I’m going to die of AIDS soon. But I’m going to sit here at your computer terminal, pecking merrily at the keys. I can’t think of anything I’d rather do right now than answer these insipid and insidious questions about how many people I’ve slept with in the past year, the past month, the past week. I’d love to tell your computer every minute detail about all my many sex partners, what color, what sex, what position.

The survey takes what seems like hours to complete although it is probably more like twenty minutes. This whole process makes me feel dirty. I haven’t been overly promiscuous, just your semi-average healthy American male. Yet somehow, answering all these questions, I feel like the lowest of creatures. Not even human. Something that lives in alleys or dark stairwells and exists only to gratify its most sordid yearnings.

All this time, in addition to everything else, I’m also worrying about my friend Lilly. What’s she doing now? What must she be thinking? I told her we’d only be here for a few minutes and that was decades ago. That was someone else’s lifetime ago.

I complete the survey; then, I am led like a docile prisoner to the lab. The man drawing blood is also familiar to me. He’s the same guy who has always taken samples from me for my HIV tests. He, too, knows that the circumstances are different now. He smiles and acts pleasant, but I can tell he didn’t expect to be taking blood for a T-cell count from me.

I’m touched, but I pretend nothing is different. I offer up my blood like I’m serving hors d’oeuvres to guests. Here, have some of this. Oh, and you should try some of this, too! It’s all calorie free. Don’t be sparing; there’s more where that came from.

Finally, I am finished. The counselor tells me to call back in a week to find out my T-cell count. I roll down my sleeve and stumble into the waiting area. Lilly is

reading some HIV pamphlets, looking a bit disoriented. I smile and say, "Sorry it took so long. Are you ready?"

As we walk out, the counselor waves me aside. "Be careful who you tell about this," he says, looking suspiciously at Lilly. "Remember, you can never un-tell anyone."

He's got a point, but I feel patronized just the same. I grab Lilly's hand and race outside.

We reach the car. Before opening the door, Lilly looks at me with concern. "Are you all right?"

"No," I answer, the long-awaited tears stinging my eyes. "The tests came back positive. I'm going to die."

### III

Lilly and I never made it to the movies that night. To her credit, she sat and talked with me late into the morning hours.

Obviously, I didn't die. In fact, I haven't even been sick. I could get sick with one malady or another next week or next year or never. The same could be said for anyone who is alive and reading this right now.

It was not my intention to teach a lesson or to have a moral to this story. If there is a lesson here, it might be: Be careful when a friend asks you to go with him to run an errand. But you know, just like that counselor said, "You can't *un-tell* something." It might be more appropriate for the lesson here to be: You cannot *un-get* this virus.

# My First Discovery

by Heather Maier

*Sometimes when we brave the unknown in search of something new, what we discover isn't what we expected to find; instead, it's something better. This is part of Kay's first discovery as she ventures ahead into the endless possibilities that life can offer her.*

Last summer, Julie Nutall moved to San Diego or San Francisco; anyway, it was some place in California, to live with her dad and his new wife. Ronda sent Julie lots of letters but it was a long time before Julie sent Ronda anything, and then it was just a postcard. Ronda showed me it at recess one day. It was a real pretty picture of the ocean with a bunch of boats on it. On the back it said, "Wish you were here" and then it was signed "Juli" with a little smiley face where the dot of the "i" goes.

"She's so dumb," Ronda said. "I don't know why she didn't write some more. Like that really tells me anything. I know she doesn't really miss me." I didn't blame Ronda for being mad. After all, last year Ronda and Julie were best friends, but then Julie moved, like I told you already.

"It looks like a real neat place, don't you think?" I said. I haven't ever seen the ocean except for in books and on TV and stuff. The furthest I've ever been from Jordon Springs was to Colorado to visit my Aunt Kathy, and that was when I was five so I can hardly even remember it.

"Well, if she thinks I'm going to write her a letter when she only sends me a dumb card, she's wrong," Ronda said. She was going to tear up the card so I asked her if I could have it. I put the picture up by my bed so it's the last thing I see every night. Someday I want to see the ocean in real life and maybe even ride in a boat like one on the postcard. I'll have to go to San Diego, or wherever that place is, someday.



This year, on the very first day of school, Ronda asked me if I wanted to eat lunch with her. I could hardly believe it; Ronda is the most grown-up 5th grader I know. Well, anyway, ever since then, Ronda and me have been best friends. We're both in Miss Fern's class at Jordon Springs Elementary, and that's real lucky 'cause in Miss Fern's, you get to choose your own seat as long as you don't get caught talking too much, so me and Ronda get to sit together. Last year, when I was in 4th grade, Ronda hardly ever even talked to me. She said she and Julie thought I was pretty babyish back then. She's probably right. I think I'm a whole lot more grown-up this year, now that I'm 10.

Today after our spelling test, Miss Fern told us to get out our history books. "Who knows what today is?" Miss Fern asked. Barbara Petty raised her hand really high. Ronda and I don't like her very much 'cause she's such a know-it-all. Ronda says she's the teacher's pet, but really I don't think Miss Fern likes Barbara all that much. She hardly ever asks her to pass out papers.

Anyway, when Miss Fern called on Barbara, Barbara announced in a real loud voice that today was Columbus Day.

"Very good," Miss Fern said. She always says that. "Today is Columbus Day."

Miss Fern had us open our books to page 34 and told us to read to page 37. "And I don't want any talking," she told us. Then Miss Fern went out of the room to do whatever it is teachers do when they leave the room. I started reading about Columbus when all of a sudden this paper ball landed on my book. I looked around to see who threw it and Buddy Simpson was sitting there, pointing for me to pass the ball to Ronda, so I did. Buddy Simpson has a real bad crush on Ronda, and she likes him, too. I wanted to ask Ronda what the note was about right then, but Miss Fern came back in the room and so I didn't dare. Me and Ronda have got in trouble before for talking and Miss Fern said next time, she'd move us. So I just tried to concentrate real hard on the stuff about Christopher Columbus, and I asked Ronda about the note as soon as we got to go to lunch.

"Well, before I show you, if I show you, you got to pinky swear that you won't tell anybody," Ronda said. Like I would! Sometimes Ronda drives me crazy. After all, she's told me tons of secrets, mostly about her sister Patty and Patty's dumb boyfriend, and I never tell anybody. Still she makes me pinky swear every time. Sometimes I try to make up secrets to tell Ronda 'cause I only have a little brother so I don't have anything good to tell. Even my made-up stories aren't as good as Ronda's stories about Patty, though. It really makes me wish I had an older sister, especially because Ronda gets all kinds of good stuff like lipstick and perfume from her sister. One time, Ronda

wore some lipstick that Patty gave her to school, but Miss Fern made her go wash it off. Now she just puts on Kissing Potion Sticks 'cause they just make your lips shiny and taste good, but they don't have any color to them or anything.

Anyway, after I pinky swore, Ronda showed me the note from Buddy. I could hardly believe it. It said, "Ronda—Do you want to kiss me after lunch." At the bottom of the note, there were two boxes, one said Yes and one said No. Ronda had checked the Yes box. "Will you take it back to him for me, Kay?" she said. "And tell him I'll meet him behind the cafeteria."

Ronda's kissed lots of boys before. Once she even got caught behind the cafeteria with Frank Berry. That was before, when Julie was her best friend.

After I gave Buddy Ronda's message, I ran back to the cafeteria to wait with Ronda. She was putting on some strawberry Kissing Potion when I got there. "Is he coming?" she asked me.

"I think so," I said. I peeked around the corner and, sure enough, Buddy was coming. Two of his friends, Marty T. and Wade Grover, were coming, too. Buddy and Wade were playing keep-away as they walked, and Marty was jumping all over, trying to get the ball away from them.

"Come get it, Marty," Buddy said. He was holding the ball above his head. Buddy's pretty tall, especially compared to Marty, who is the shortest kid in the whole 5th grade, so there was no way Marty could get the ball. Still Marty kept jumping, like he would jump high enough sometime if he just kept trying.

"Well?" Ronda said. "Is he coming or what?" I guess I must have been watching them all for a pretty long time.

"Ya," I said, "and Wade and Marty are with him. They'll prob'ly be here in a few minutes."

"Good," Ronda said. "Then I still have time to comb my hair." I watched her take a little comb and mirror out of the purse she always carries. "What do you think Marty and Wade are coming for?" Ronda asked.

"I don't know," I said. It was cold in the shade of the cafeteria, and my arms were getting all goose pimply. It was a bright, sunny day out on the playground, so it was really kind of funny how cold and dark it could be just by going round a corner. I could hear some 3rd graders playing jump rope on the playground. I like jump rope, but Ronda thinks it's babyish, and besides, it makes you all sweaty.

After Ronda got through combing her hair, she came and leaned against the wall by me. "Will you keep a lookout?" Ronda asked me.

"Sure," I said. Miss Fern had playground duty, so someone would have to keep watch to make sure Ronda and Buddy didn't get caught. When she got caught with Frank last year, they made her stay in from recess for a whole week.

"Hi," Buddy said when he came round the corner. Marty said, "Hi," too, but Wade just looked at the cafeteria wall like he'd never seen a brick before. Wade's a year older than the rest of us so he's in 6th.

"Do you like strawberries?" Ronda asked Buddy. "If you don't, I have a grape flavor and a peppermint." She started to open her purse to show Buddy the Kissing Potion Sticks, but Buddy said that he liked strawberry just fine.

"Does your friend want to kiss Wade?" Buddy asked. All of a sudden I felt really trembly, like I do after I've ran the 600 meter race during gym. Kind of like my head is spinning around and all that's left of my body is my heart, and that's just pounding and pounding. I like Wade. A lot of times when Ronda and me watch Buddy play baseball, I really watch Wade, but I didn't think I could kiss him. I thought it would be just too weird. Ronda was saying something to me. I could see her lips moving, but I couldn't hear her. It seemed like a long time before everything stopped spinning.

"Just a minute," Ronda was saying to Buddy. "I'll talk to her." She walked over and grabbed my hand and pulled me away from everybody else so we were right by the corner again.

"Well," Ronda whispered. "Do you want to kiss him, or not?"

"I'll just keep watch," I whispered back. I really was feeling very cold and I just was dying to get back in the sun. My nose felt like it was about to freeze right off.

"That's what Marty came for," Ronda said. "The guys already had it all planned out. I guess Wade's had a crush on you for a long time. Come on. You think he's cute, don't you?"

I looked over at Wade. He was still looking really hard at the wall.

"I'll let you use my kissing sticks," Ronda said. "It's really no big deal. It's just fun."

I could hear the girls around the corner playing jump rope again. They were doing my favorite, "Little Orphan Annie." When I used to play jump rope, I could do that one better than anybody.

"Never mind," Ronda said. She made her eyes go up into her head. "You don't have to do it if you don't want to." She walked over to Buddy.

I knew when she did that that she was thinking I was really dumb. I looked over at Wade again, and I could tell he was watching me out of the corner of his eye. Then



I remembered what Ronda said about me being a baby last year, and I thought, "Why not! What's the big deal!" So I stood up tall and walked right over to Wade. "If you still want to kiss me, I will," I said.

So it was all set and Marty went to the corner to keep watch and Ronda and Buddy started kissing. I've seen people kiss before, like my mom and dad, but it was totally different watching Ronda. She and Buddy looked weird pushed together like that, and I couldn't watch very long 'cause I started to get really embarrassed.

"Well," Wade said, putting his baseball cap on the cement. "Do you want to kiss long or short?"

My voice sounded all shaky when I said, "Short."

"Okay," Wade said, and then he started to lean forward and I had to shut my eyes. I just couldn't watch his eyes getting bigger and bigger in my face. I felt his arms on my shoulders and then I felt his lips. They felt so funny! Warm, but kind of slimy and tingly at the same time. Then I knew that Ronda was wrong! Kissing was a big deal! I've never felt like that in my whole life! It was tons different than kissing my brother.

"Do you want to do it again?" Wade asked me. I felt like I was inside a cloud and his voice was very far away. "Long," I said. I couldn't believe I said that!

Then it happened all over again except this time the tingling went past my lips to my neck and down my back. In fact, it went clear down to my toes. It was really weird! Just then, while I was still thinking about the tingling and why I felt like that, Marty said Miss Fern was coming. When I opened my eyes, Wade was picking up his cap. "I'll see you around." He smiled a little smile, but his eyes were really sparkly. Then we all ran out to the playground.

Buddy and Wade and Marty went back to playing baseball, and Ronda and me went to swing on the swings by the gym.

"See," Ronda said. "I told you it was no big deal. Julie and me used to do it all the time." She started swinging and talking about Buddy and how cute he was.

I really didn't listen. I was swinging as hard as I could. I stared into the blue, blue sky and I reached my feet to the sun. I swung higher and higher till it seemed like I might touch the top of the sky, if a person could. But, of course, the sky never ends; it just goes on forever till you're in outer space. It's kind of like infinite, or something. "What do you think it would be like to be able to fly?" I asked Ronda.

"That's a dumb question," she said. "You think about the weirdest stuff." I think Ronda probably thinks anything besides boys is a weird thing to think about. Anyway, I didn't pay any attention to what she said anyhow. Instead, I closed my eyes and tried

to imagine what it would be like to be able to fly. Just after that, the bell rang so we had to stop swinging and go in.

"I bet Wade will want to kiss you again tomorrow," Ronda said as we walked to the school. I didn't say anything. I'd already decided that if Wade wanted to kiss me again, he'd have to ask me himself or I wouldn't do it. And I didn't want him to throw me any dumb note, either.

After lunch, Miss Fern passed out big sheets of paper. "I want you all to draw a picture of Columbus' ships," she said, "to commemorate his discovery 500 years ago." While we were drawing, she told us some more stuff about Columbus, like how he thought he'd discovered India and that's how the Indians got their name. She said, to his dying day, he said America was India and that he was very sad it wasn't. It seemed crazy to me. I would have thought America would be tons better than India, anyway. It seemed to me that Columbus had set out to find a certain thing and he couldn't even see when he found something better.

"Do you want to use some of my crayons?" Ronda asked me. She has a big box with 68 colors. For some reason, I was kind of mad at Ronda, so I said, "That's okay."

After I drew Columbus' ships, I looked at the picture for a long time. I thought about the ocean in my postcard, and then I looked at the blue line I'd made for the water in my picture, for the endless ocean that Columbus' sailors saw day after day. The three ships looked funny, floating on the white paper. I took my crayon and colored the whole ocean in. Blue. Blue. Blue like the sky. I practically used up the whole crayon. Then my picture was done.

I think I'll take it home and hang it by my postcard.

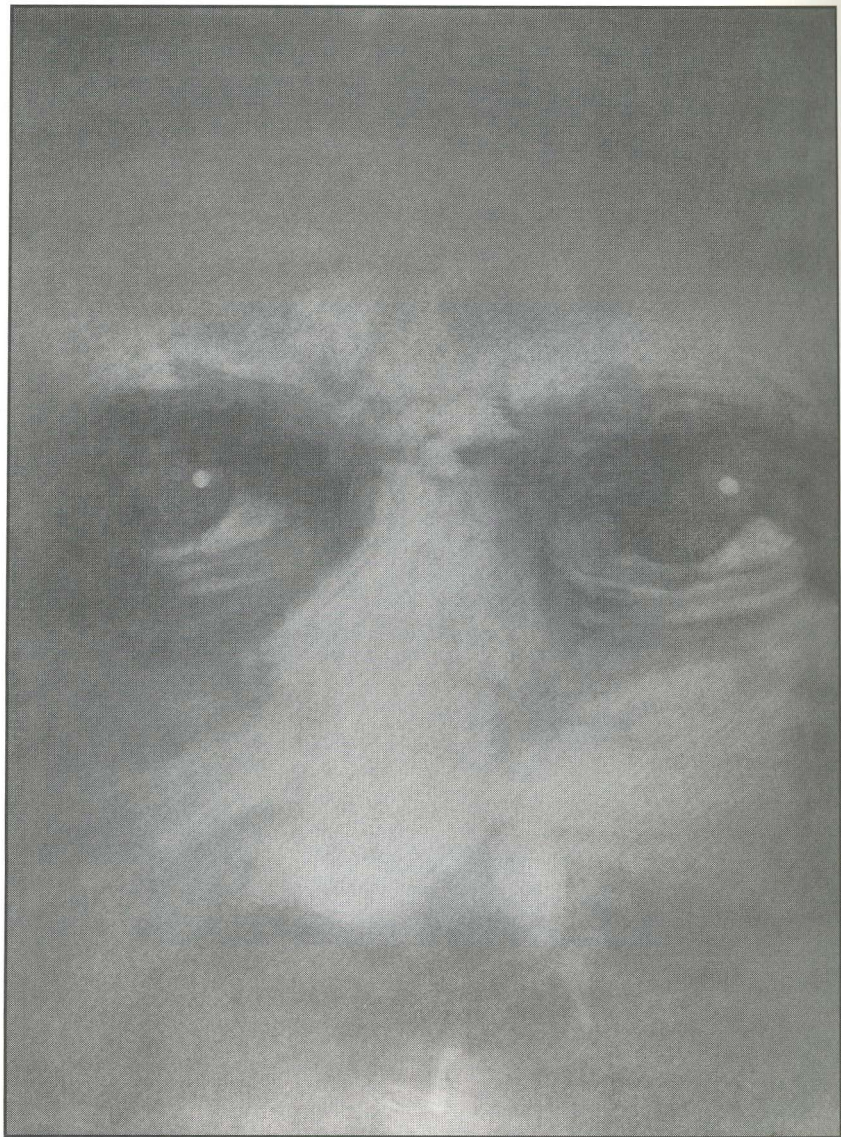
**Art**

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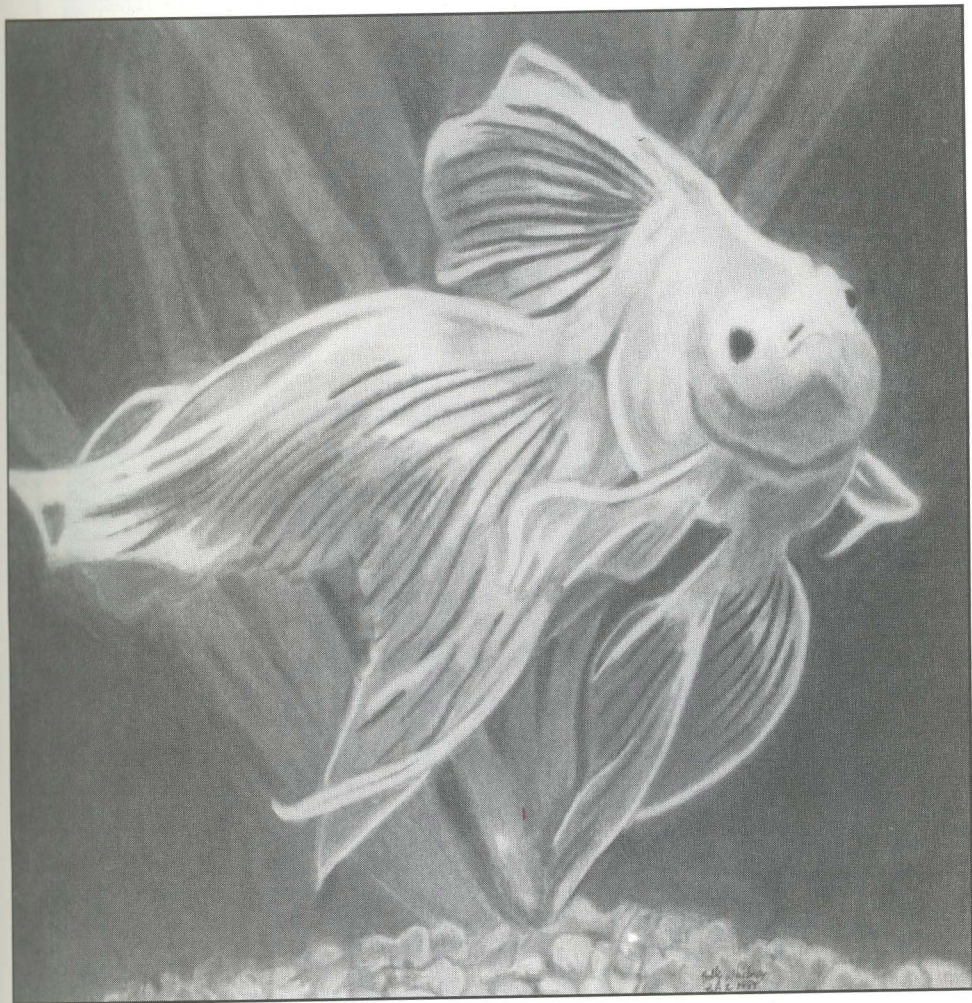


Josh's Things  
Gayle Melvin



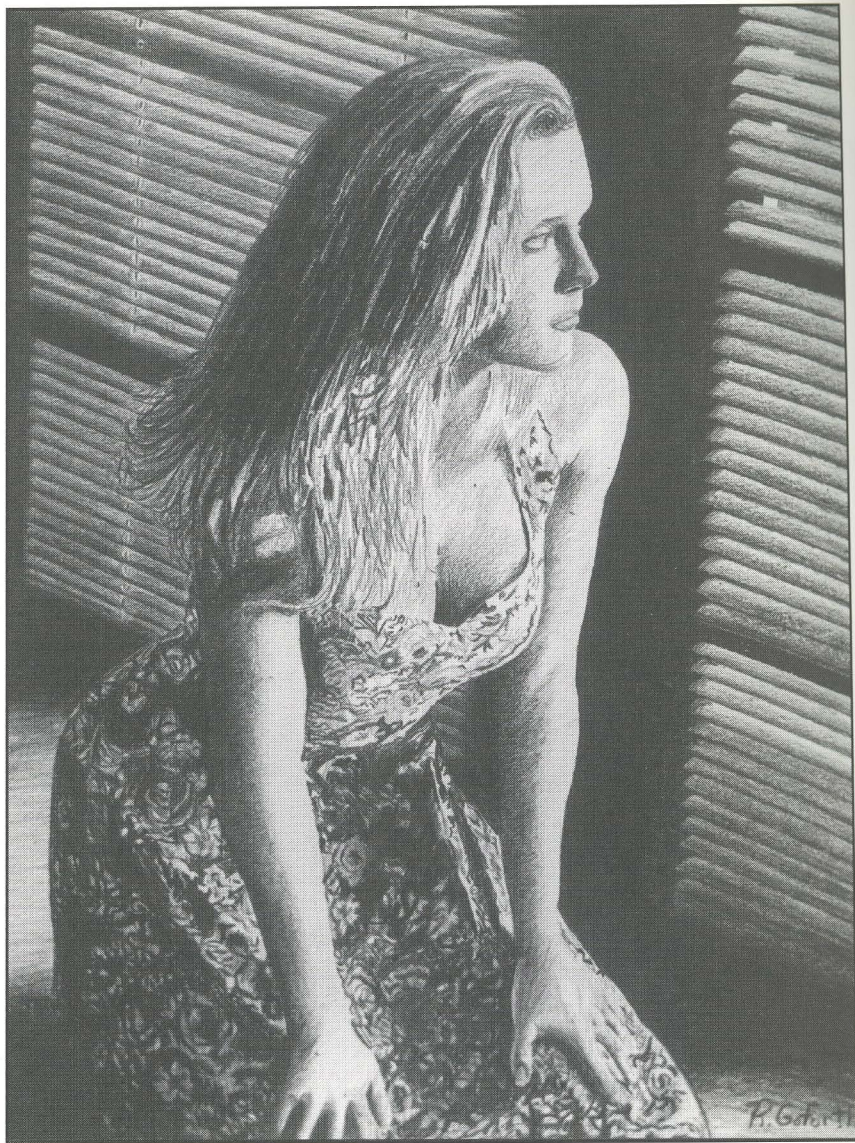


**Untitled**  
**Rickie Foreman**

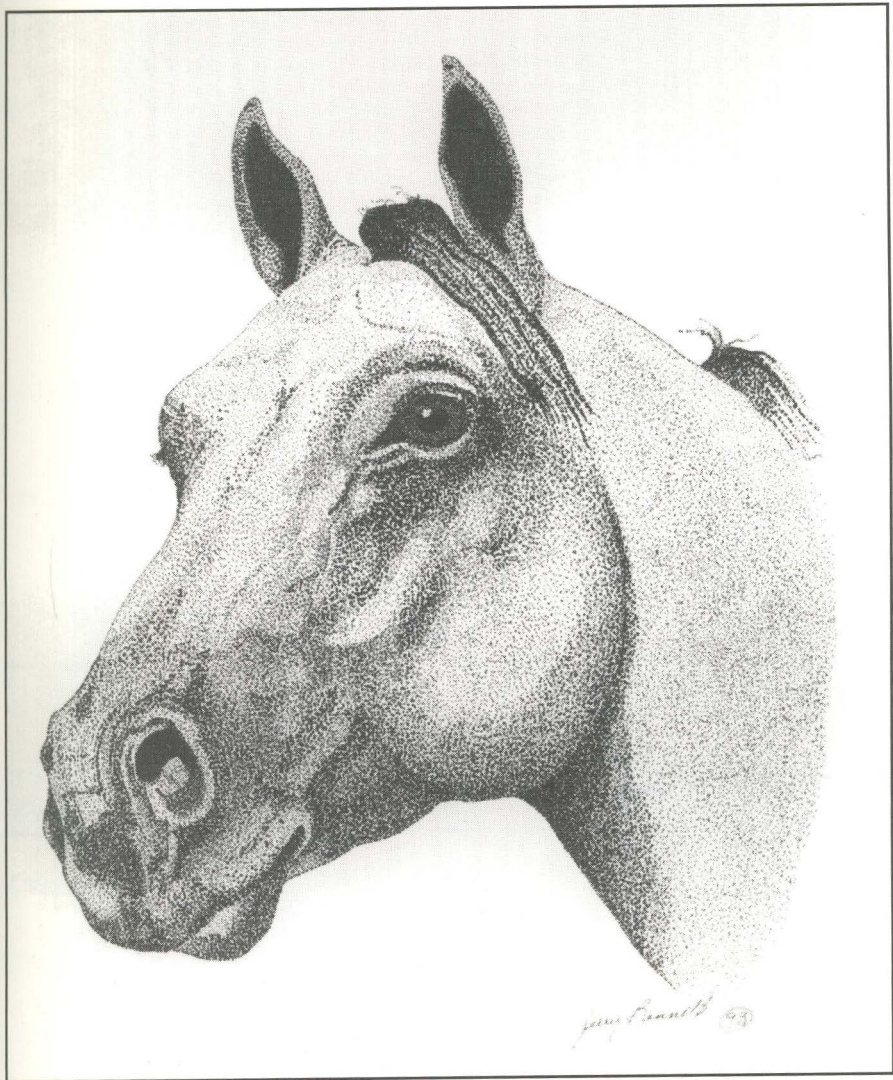


Gold Fish  
Holly Whitney





**Fear**  
**Russell Goforth**



**Old Blue**  
**Gerald Bennett**

# Poetry

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# *Moments of Time*

by Arte H. Martin

Moments of time become tiny diamonds

I count them  
through the thoughtful years

In the alleys  
among my memories

Somehow I laugh and cry  
despite the reality

The precious seconds glimmer  
and fade away  
like  
the  
sand  
spilling  
from hands

Which helps these lazy days to be numbered  
with the gems of my past madness and revelry

Moments of time become tiny diamonds

I count them



# *The Trampoline*

**by Margaret Brock**

Rusted frame  
grey springs  
of coiled steel  
held the black  
tarp taut.  
Suspended  
above the ground  
on old oil drums  
that wobbled  
as we bounced  
unending.

Popcorn, flips,  
chicken  
risking harm  
to play and win.  
Higher, higher  
flinging youthful  
limbs and heads  
to the sky.

Bouncing out frustrations  
sometimes in the cold,  
a magnet to the neighborhood.  
They would come  
and share our  
fun and join  
the carnival.  
Acrobatic feats  
attempted only  
in our dreams.

But then,  
it ended  
on the day Denny  
went through the seam.



# *Crooked Time*

by Bertha Paulk Wise

I have lived in crooked time

I've been awakened at

2:57 a. m.  
in Florida  
where I'm teaching  
an e. e. cummings' poem  
to present students  
former students  
AND

H O R R O R S  
a former professor from Oklahoma  
who hates e. e. cummings  
AND  
the poem is nonexistent

I have lived in straight time

I've awakened at

6:30 a. m.  
where I know  
next week next month  
next year  
high school graduation  
marriage  
babies  
Disney World  
divorce  
death

I prefer crooked time.

# *Lonely Eagle*

by **Larry B. Stem**

I dive into the black water, and a school of silver fish  
scatter.

I pursue and pick this one and that till sometimes I am  
lucky

I catch one, and bring him to the surface and in the light  
of day, watch him fade and die.

I am the cormorant, the kingfisher, the eagle. I am the  
lonely hunter.

I am free, I soar high, I live forever...I am lonesome, I am  
alone.

And one day, I see the one, the only, and I pursue...only to watch them fade...away.

I am alone, again.

The king of my world.

# *Don't*

by **Sheilah Freeburg**

Don't touch me —

I'll break.

If you look at me,

I'll bruise.

Should you kiss me,

my flesh will melt

and hang in strips

from exposed and fragile bones.

Don't love me,

lest I cease to be me

And become lost in you.

# *Stallions*

by Kyle Drew

you are ferociously wanting to kiss...  
you don't even pretend well when you work—  
oh, little busy body, you act & assume

A Serious Face,

but i see your eyes-those blue flames-hotter than red,  
disciplined through time.

you sizzle & violently stand fast,  
not even a verbal hint of your inside.

go ahead and scream & throw something hard without  
explanation;

claw the carpet, why don't you, and break a vase,  
crush a styrofoam cup in one hand,  
then slide everything off your desk

& THEN,

let's walk directly toward each other,

& pull ourselves close,

& without any words,

Let's

aggressively, vehemently

kiss...



# *Old Woman, Winter Sun*

by June Weeks

She sits drowsing  
in the Winter Sun,  
The old white house,  
her windows shuttered, closed.  
She dreams of days when  
she was a lady,  
When people lived within the walls  
and were alive, vital, and real.  
She dreams of ladies,  
a parade down the garden path,  
When laughter drifted  
among the live oaks.  
Now there is no laughter,  
only the groans of ancient trees  
Trying to remind her when  
life was young and sweet and new.  
She sits drowsing  
in the Winter Sun.

# *Stuff*

**by Kortni Kinslow**

I'm sitting here with the only  
“you” I have left.

An old smoking case, silver floral  
patterns spill off the edge.

You said it was brilliant workmanship  
But its only real  
value is the inscription from me.  
It gleams in the 100° summer sun  
marked 75¢ in the box marked “stuff.”

# *When I Retire*

by **Jana Dickerson**

when I retire—

I'll buy ten pair of jeans and tee shirts and  
pack the iron away

When I retire—

I'll dig out all the old Elvis records and treat  
myself to a concert twice a week

when I retire—

I'll walk on the beach, any beach, every  
chance I get, and I'll pick up pretty shells and  
let the sand ooze through my toes in exaltation

when I retire—

I'll travel this United States of America and  
drink in the smell, sound, feel, of freedom from  
stress and routine and pressure

when I retire—

I'll stretch my mind in new directions, meet new  
people doing fascinating things, go to movies in  
the middle of the afternoon, eat popcorn and not  
feel guilty

when I retire—

I'll take long naps, play with the dog for hours  
at a time, frequent the library on rainy days  
and play hooky

when I retire—

I'll write poetry, listen to Oklahoma sunsets,  
get off the super highways and smell the spring  
flowers

when I retire—

I'll go to the park, watch the geese and ducks  
play tag and that funny black and white spaniel

swim vainly in pursuit  
when I retire—

I'll hug my grandchildren harder and more often,  
visit my mother more, spend more time with old  
friends. I hope I'll love more wisely and understand  
more completely

WHEN I RETIRE.



# **Essays**

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# *A Summer of Wild Ponies*

by Tonya Keller

Dreams and wishes are strange things. As children, we have grand, majestic hopes; some realistic, some not. As we grow older, however, we begin to accept wishes in whatever proportion they're granted. For me, learning to accept pieces of dreams wasn't as painful a lesson as it might have been.

To have a horse was my biggest wish from the time I was seven. I was horse-crazy. Every book I chose from our tiny school library was about horses. I read Walter Farley and Marguerite Henry and Anna Sewell, and I was captivated. My mom and sister hated every minute of it. They simply ignored me when I talked about horses or anything to do with horses, which was why I looked forward to visiting my dad in the summer. He liked horses, too.

Staying with Dad in the summer wasn't really an option; it was part of my parents' divorce agreement. I wouldn't have minded the visits at all except that with Dad came a stepmother with whom I didn't get along. I detested her but defied her authority only when I felt reasonably certain of doing so without consequence.

Dad, Sue and their boys lived in the Ozarks on the Arkansas side. The house stood in a small valley surrounded by mountains. A stream from the Illinois River snaked through the valley, and a seldom-graded dirt road ran straight across Dad's land. The wild ponies came to drink twice each day from the stream and the big, spring-fed pond at the north end of the meadow.

Most of the people in the area considered the ponies a menace, and the worst one was the stallion leading the herd. No one actually knew where the stallion had come from although most of the mares had belonged to local people before they were stolen by the stallion.

When Dad and I stopped in town to check the mail one morning, a group of men were standing in front of the grocery store-cum-post office, talking. They hailed Dad

and me, motioning us over. Dad went willingly; I went grudgingly. I knew all about these men when they started talking crops, pesticides, building materials, the snake population—things guaranteed to have me fidgeting to get away within seconds. Today, though, they were actually discussing something I found interesting.

"Hey, Lonnie, kiddo." Earl, the owner of the grocery store, acknowledged Dad and me. "We were just talking about that damned stallion. He stole Mike Jansen's mare the other night. Mike and Whitey and me were thinking of getting some of the other guys together to round up the herd."

Assenting nods and murmurs accompanied Earl's words. The others started adding their own ideas.

"Lots of fine ponies in that herd."

"We could probably sell a bunch of 'em in Fort Smith at the rodeo next month."

"He's still got that mare and colt he stole from me last year. Wouldn't mind having them back."

"Everyone could take their pick of the herd."

"Course, we might have to shoot the stallion to get the rest."

This last came from Whitey, a tall, dark, skinny man I'd never liked, just out of principle before. Now, I had a reason. Sometimes, Oklahoma and Mom seemed really far away. Some of the people around here lived up to the stereotype of backwoods hillbillies. I looked at my dad and asked, "Why would they have to shoot him?"

Though he understood my feelings about the ponies, he told me the truth. "The stallion won't give up his mares, Punkin. If we take them, he'll just steal them back. No one can break the stallion; they've tried it before, so the only way to separate the herd is to kill him."

I was horrified. Hearing they might actually shoot the stallion scared me. I had seen the herd only from a distance and then only in the early morning or at dusk, when the light was faint. Even obscured by twilight or morning mists, they were an impressive sight.

The stallion, always on the perimeter of his herd, galloped around his mares, nipping and guiding, keeping them in line. More lenient with the colts and fillies, he allowed them to frisk and run although never too far from the rest of the herd. His mane and tail were a white-gold color that went beautifully with his dusky, copper-colored coat. All of the mares and foals were varying shades of bay or dun—no black, white or brown anywhere in the herd.

When I had first discovered the ponies, I started getting up early every day, hoping

to see them as they came to water. I rushed through my chores every evening to get outside in time to see them before the light failed.

Every time I saw them, I walked a little farther into the meadow, drawing closer and closer to their range. I hoped to get close enough to the ponies to make friends, so I walked slowly, careful not to startle them, getting closer each night to my goal. They were becoming used to seeing me approach and weren't nervous about my proximity at all on the night Dad figured out what I was doing. He came after me, startling the ponies away, and hauled me back to the yard, lecturing the whole way.

"I understand how much you like horses, Tonya." The only time he called me by name instead of Punkin was when he was mad at me. "You've got to understand that those are wild horses out there and they all weigh a lot more than you, even the littlest ones. They could hurt you pretty bad without realizing or meaning to. From now on, you stay in the yard and out of the meadow."

I had agreed, that night, to stay in the yard when the ponies were around, but now, hearing that the stallion might be shot just because he was wild and free, all agreements were null and void. Furious with these men who thought only of profits, I decided to get to the stallion before anyone else could. I wasn't sure if there was really anything I could do to save him, but I was still determined to try. Dad would be mad, but he'd never actually disciplined me in any way, so I wasn't too worried.

My opportunity came sooner than expected—the next day. Sue put the boys down for their nap after lunch and was out like a light herself when I checked on her. Recognizing an opportunity to get outside alone, I tiptoed back through the house and went out, careful to keep the screen door from slamming shut in the afternoon breeze.

It was hot outside; the meadow and the surrounding mountains were dusty and the air was hazy with heat. The only place worth being right then was in the water, so I headed for the pond at the other end of the meadow.

The field's weeds reached up to my waist; they caught and dragged against my clothes and skin. By the time I reached the pond, I was drenched in sweat and covered with scratches and cuts from the burrs hidden in the weeds.

I peeled off my shoes and socks and waded into the cool water, feeling carefully with my toes for the edge of rock that accompanied a sheer drop into deep water. Dad had told me no one had ever been able to measure the pond's depth and that there were several local stories about people and livestock drowning in its depths. He made it sound eerie and mysterious. I was intrigued, but there was no way I wanted to gauge the water's depth for myself. I was adventurous, not self-destructive.



Remembering Dad's stories—I had an idea they were just stories—left me feeling a little spooked, so I inched my way back to the pool's edge and sat with my feet still submerged. That was enough cooling off. I sat there with my chin resting on my knees, wondering how I could help the stallion. Maybe I could wait until dusk when they came to drink. No, that wouldn't work. Dad and Sue would find me long before dusk.

I couldn't come up with a single, workable plan. Growing extremely frustrated with myself and my lack of scheming ability, I must have been really absorbed with my thoughts because I never heard anything before I felt a brush of something at my shoulder.

Startled, I flinched from the touch, uncertain of what it was. Loud scuffling broke out behind me. Fearfully, I turned, dreading to see what could cause so much noise, sure that it was something large enough to eat me.

I was surprised, then, to see the herd of ponies in the meadow, in broad daylight. A young colt stood close to me, his eyes rolling white in fear and uncertainty. Not far behind him stood the stallion, sides heaving and covered in sweat. All of the ponies in the herd looked as if they had been running hard. Their coats were dark with sweat and foam; their heads hung low between their knees. I knew enough about horses to realize this meant they'd been panicked and that most of them were probably on the verge of collapse.

I realized, too, that they were here for water, and I was blocking their way. Trying to calm my frantically beating heart and loud breathing, I scooted slowly out of the water and along the ground until my back rested against the trunk of an old elm tree. I then settled back to wait, watching the ponies as they watched me.

The minutes crawled past while we remained frozen, watching each other. I was just starting to be afraid again, recognizing the truth in what Dad had said about their size compared to mine, when the colt took a tentative step toward me. I held my breath in anticipation.

Watching me warily, he stepped toward me again, head alert, nose and ears twitching. The stallion just stood quietly and watched, uncertain if I presented a threat or not.

The colt came closer and finally stretched his neck to snuffle against my head and shoulders. Still not daring to move, I had to swallow my giggles when he lipped my ears and hair; it tickled. He grew a little bolder and shoved against my chest, pushing me off balance. I fell back, startling him into wheeling away again.

Regaining my seat against the tree, I held my hand out toward the colt. He snorted and shook his head a little, but, curious like most babies, he extended his neck to sniff my hand. I let him get used to my smell before slowly stroking his soft muzzle. He seemed to like that because he moved closer and butted my hand. In that moment, we became friends.

I don't know how long we spent getting to know each other, but it must have been quite a while. I noticed the ponies calming and settling down as they came to drink from the pond and then slowly spread out to graze. The stallion, after a long drink, continued to watch the colt and me. I was a little disappointed that he hadn't approached, as well.

Slowly, I stood up, allowing the colt to get used to me in a new position. He was a beauty—a dark sorrel color with liquid brown eyes—just about my height. His fetlocks had long, feathery wings that reminded me of pictures I'd seen of Pegasus. He let me lean across his back while I stroked his neck, face and ears.

The stallion, growing impatient and, I think, a little jealous, nipped the colt's rear end, startling him into running away. As the colt wheeled, one of his rear hooves clipped my right knee, causing it to buckle. The pain made my eyes tear, but I couldn't flinch, not with the stallion so close.

I stood, gritting my teeth and holding my body stiff, waiting for the pain to recede. After a few minutes, I could once again concentrate on the stallion. He still watched me carefully, as though testing me. I cautiously extended my hand toward him, palm flat, facing up.

He, braver than the colt, immediately nuzzled my hand, demanding caresses. I stroked and petted his face and neck and began talking to him softly. He didn't even flinch when I moved to stroke his chest and withers. After some time, I grew brave enough to slowly lean against him, letting him hold more and more of my weight. When he didn't shy at this, I leaned across his back. He pranced some but still allowed it, so I mounted fully and grabbed a handful of his long mane.

He immediately took off, not trying to unseat me, just moving. I had ridden before at my uncle's ranch but never bareback. It took a few minutes to get used to his gait; then, I gripped tighter with my knees, wrapped my arms around his neck and urged him to a gallop. He ran smoothly, without breaking stride. We circled the meadow several times while the mares and foals continued to graze unconcernedly.

I was elated. Dad had said the stallion couldn't be broken. And so he hadn't been. He had been gentled, not by me but by someone in his past. He was easy to ride and knew guidance commands. This was not an untrained wild pony.

When we finally stopped, I realized there were two trucks stopped along the road.

My dad was standing beside his truck, talking to Earl. I urged the stallion back to the pond and quickly dismounted. Worried and apprehensive about being caught doing what had been forbidden, I quickly retrieved my shoes and socks, put them on, and raced back to where Dad and Earl were talking.

Though out of breath, I still rushed to explain, "He's not really wild, Dad. None of them are. They let me pet them, and you saw me ride. He didn't even try to buck me off—just let me ride!"

Dad grinned and hugged me to him. "Settle down, Punkin," he said. "We saw that for ourselves. Earl figures the stallion's probably just man-shy. He was probably mistreated by men when he was younger. Since you're a kid, and a girl to boot, he probably felt you were safe."

I was still a little worried and asked, "But you won't have to shoot him, now, will you? He's tame, and he can be ridden."

Earl laughed at my question. "When the other kids around here find out he can be ridden, they're going to be driving their daddies crazy to get that stallion for them. I don't think shooting him will even be brought up again."

Relieved, I turned to watch the ponies. The stallion was rounding up the herd, guiding them on their way. Dad urged me toward the truck. "Hop in. It's probably dinnertime, and I'll bet Sue's wondering where we are."

Through the rest of the summer, the ponies were allowed to roam free. Dad got me a curry-comb and a bunch of halters. I spent my afternoons getting the ponies used to brushing and the feel of a halter. The yearlings and foals didn't like it much at first, but the older ones accepted and even enjoyed being cared for.

I learned in the next summer's visit that the ponies had been rounded up in the fall. Some were sold while others became pets to Dad's neighbors. The stallion was given to a girl who moved later in the winter, taking him with her. Dad had a new horse of his own, now. He was a big, red Thoroughbred named Chief. I had fun with Chief but still missed the herd of ponies from the previous summer.

I never got my wish to own a horse of my own. I remember, though, that for a while I had a whole herd. And instead of seeing the stallion killed, I was able to convince Dad and Earl that he was worth saving. I still hope someday to have horses, but until that happens, I can remember my summer of wild ponies and how part of my wish came true.



# *A Man's Tools*

by Thomas Harrison

The summer of my twelfth year was a time of wonder and adventure for my sister and me. Cyndi, a year my junior, and I lived with our mother in a turn-of-the-century Victorian-style house in the secluded Kansas countryside. Cyndi and I would spend hours roaming the surrounding pastures, searching for grass snakes or chasing rabbits through the thickly wooded windbreak that marked the northern boundary of our farm. It was a time of innocence and a time of change for it was during this time that our mother remarried.

Our new stepfather's name was Kelly Ross. He was 6'4" tall with a lean, rugged build that reminded my sister and me of the Marlboro Man. He was a good, soft-spoken man, and Cyndi and I took an instant liking to him. When he moved in, he brought with him truckload after truckload of wondrous items.

The most intriguing item of all was a huge tool cabinet. I was quite positive that it was the biggest tool cabinet the world had ever known. It was bright red, with shiny aluminum handles on its multitude of drawers, and stood head and shoulders above me. Despite the fact that it rested upon four sturdy wheels, it took Kelly and two of his friends—and an accompaniment of grunts, muttered curses, and rattling tools—to muscle it into the garage.

After the cabinet had been put into place, the men walked wearily into the house for a much-needed break. More than one had a hand held against the small of his back.

In the silence of the stiflingly hot garage, I stood staring in awe at the giant red tool cabinet. Years of carefully ingrained manners told me that I shouldn't look through the drawers without Kelly's permission, but manners are easily ignored when held tightly in the grip of wonder and curiosity. I slowly began to open one drawer after another. I had never seen such an astounding array of tools and machinery. I was familiar with



many of the tools, but some of them looked as if they had been pulled straight out of an episode of *Star Trek* or *Battlestar Galactica*.

"Tommy?" I heard Kelly say in his gentle yet rugged voice.

"Wha...?" I blurted out, nearly dropping the futuristic looking gizmo I held in my hands.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Huh? Oh...uh...I was...uh...just looking at...uh...your...uh...tools," I replied rather lamely.

He stared at me for a few seconds, then smiled and said, "From now on, please ask me before you get into my tool cabinet. OK, Tommy?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry I didn't ask you this time. I promise to ask next time," I said.

"Good," he said. "Why don't you help me finish unloading and then we'll drive into town and get something for dinner."

"Yes, sir!" I replied enthusiastically.

As I walked out of the garage to the truck, I looked over my shoulder to see Kelly quickly opening the drawers to look inside and reaching into one of them as if to rearrange something.

As the years passed, my relationship with Kelly matured, and I came to realize that he was a simple man with simple needs and a casual attitude in most aspects of life. When it came to his tools, however, he displayed an almost fanatically obsessive need to keep them clean and orderly. Having realized this shortly after the first "incident" with the tools and yet not really understanding it, I upheld my promise to get his permission before using them, and when I was done with them, I always went to great lengths to make sure I put them back precisely the way I found them. Well, almost always, that is.

The second and last tool "incident" occurred in the spring of my freshman year of high school. For my thirteenth birthday, my parents had gotten me a Kawasaki KX-80 motorcycle. It was racing green and faster than the wind. Being an adventurous boy, however, I was always looking for ways to make it go faster and jump higher by equipping it with one high performance piece after another.

One afternoon before going for a ride, I decided to adjust the carburetor on my bike so that I could get a little more power and speed. Kelly was at work, so I didn't think he would mind if I used his tools without asking, so long as I put them up when I was done.

I finished the adjustment quickly, and, leaving the tools on the floor, I went for a test drive to make sure that the bike ran correctly. When I returned ten minutes later, I saw Kelly's truck in the driveway and Kelly putting something in the tool cabinet. As I shut off the engine, he closed the drawer and slowly turned around. When I saw the look in his eyes, my first instinct was to turn and run for my life. His eyes were like those of a wolf gone mad. The barely contained fury I saw there spoke a thousand words and burned deep into the depths of my soul. When he spoke, his voice was calm yet shaking with underlying rage.

"There are two things that no man should mess with," he said, holding up two fingers. "Another man's money and another man's tools." With that said, he turned and walked calmly into the house and never again did he mention the incident.

It was not until recently that I was able to fully understand his obsessive behavior when it came to his tools. My vacuum cleaner had broken down, and when I went to get the tools necessary to fix it, I found my tool box to be all but empty.

"Honey," I said to my wife, "do you know where my pliers are?"

"Yes," she said, "they're in the upstairs bathroom, in the drawer."

At that moment, it all fell into place. It was as if a door had been opened somewhere deep within, and understanding suddenly hit me like a hammer right between the eyes.

"Carrie," I said, "there are two things that no one should mess with. A man's money and a man's tools."

# *The Destruction of a Culture*

by Julie Dye

The Native American has suffered a long history of broken promises, stolen property, and mass genocide at the hands of Euro-Americans who came to this country, many times for the purpose of escaping persecution. Perhaps the most tragic irony of American history lies in the fact that the Europeans fled countries across their native continent to practice their religion without punishment or force. Then, after arrival in America, those who sought freedom and fairness, in turn, forced native people off their property and refused to tolerate and respect the religion and cultures of the American Indian tribes.

As portrayed in many ways in film and literature, the whites have destroyed nearly every facet of Native American culture. *The Way to Rainy Mountain* by N. Scott Momaday portrays this effectively without really coming out and saying it. By using three voices, Momaday sheds light on the legends, the historical past, and the present status of the Kiowa and gives us a chronological record of their history as a nation. In the legends of the Kiowa, as told by his grandmother who represents the historical voice, we are shown the reverence the Kiowa held for the earth and the natural beings they shared it with. Although the Kiowa respected all creatures, the buffalo, which represented the sun, was at the center of their religious beliefs and ceremonies. The whites correctly assumed that depleting the buffalo population would destroy the American Indian, not only by taking away their main source of food but also by taking the source of their spiritual health.

The annual Sun Dance was the focal point of the Kiowa's religious rites. "The buffalo was the animal representation of the sun, the essential and sacrificial victim of the Sun Dance" (Momaday 3). However, it was required "to impale the head of a buffalo bull upon the medicine tree" (Momaday 8). Since the buffalo were gone, a group of men



traveled to Texas to find a bull. Momaday's grandmother was fortunate to witness the last Sun Dance, but on that day, she also saw the death of the Kiowa god. They could not find a buffalo for the Sun Dance, so the hide of a buffalo was used instead. "Before the dance could begin, a company of soldiers rode out from Fort Sill to disperse the tribe. Forbidden without cause the essential act of their faith, having seen the wild herds slaughtered and left to rot upon the ground, the Kiowas backed away forever from the medicine tree" (Momaday 8).

A similar shocking image is portrayed in the movie *Dances with Wolves* when all members of the tribe have packed up their belongings, including homes, to embark on a journey to find the buffalo. After traveling for several days, the tribe happens upon a hillside covered with the raw and rotting corpses of buffalo, killed by whites only for the price a hide would bring. The tribe is forced to go on, and when they finally reach the herd, we see that they hunt with honor and respect and take from the land only what they need.

Killing the Indians' main source for life and spirit is not the only way in which the whites contributed in destroying the religious culture of the Native American. In the film *Black Robe*, we are shown how the Euro-Americans tried in vain to convert the North American native tribes to Catholicism. The tribes, as shown in the movie, are in harmony with the land and the spirits which reside in all things, but the missionaries see them as primitive savages. It is ironic when the Indians in the movie see the "Black Robe"—the priest—as a demon and find a medicine man to help them make his bad spirits go away.

In both "Snares" by Louise Erdrich and Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, the Native Americans practice Christianity. In both stories, though, a balance seems to have been created between the old religion and the new. In "Snares," Margaret and Grandfather Nanapush attend the Catholic Benediction Mass; however, when they are attacked by the two young men for not signing their land away to the government, Margaret puts a Chippewa curse on them. One of the young men is so haunted by the curse, it seems he wills himself to die. In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday's grandmother Aho "was a Christian in her later years, but she had come a long way about, and she never forgot her birthright" (Momaday 8). He describes her praying as long and rambling, out of suffering and hope, but he does not speak Kiowa, so he is never sure just what she is saying in her prayers.

As portrayed in films and literature, Native American religious ceremonies and practices have been greatly diminished by the whites. American Indians have been



forbidden to carry on their heritage, and customs that shaped and formed the lives of their forefathers are not passed down and have become practically obsolete. A handful of Native Americans have conscientiously attempted to bring back the old ways, to learn the legends and history, to perform the dances, but it seems they lose more of their original religious practices with every generation that passes.

# *My Sister's Weapons*

by Phyllis Davidson

**M**y sister is beautiful. I've heard it all my life. "Your sister has the most beautiful long hair."

"Thanks," I said and wondered if they noticed that we both had the same ponytail and straight bangs. Is black hair all that much prettier than brown?

"Your sister should enter the Most Beautiful Eyes Contest."

"Yeah, I guess so," I said. And here's mud in yours, I thought. I suspected they thought her lilac fragrance was better than my honeysuckle, too!

"Your sister is just the sweetest thing. She is such an inspiration to us all."

I knew I would never be beautiful like my sister. She had flawless olive-toned skin; I had freckles. She had naturally straight teeth; mine were an orthodontist's worst nightmare. She had dark eyelashes and eyebrows; mine were invisible. Maybe I could have been sweet, but then, she had her weapons, and I had none.

My sister's weapons are long, shiny, steel tubes. They attach to her arms with strong metal bands that encircle her forearms like thick silver bracelets. The sharp ends are enclosed in soft rubber caps with tread on the bottom like ridges on the sole of an athletic shoe. They are like the metal extension stilts worn by the clown who visits Wal-Mart on Grand Opening Day to pass out balloons to the children. They don't bend and they look awkward, but both she and the clown wear them with as much ease and assurance as I wear my own legs. My sister's weapons are her crutches, and they are only half of the gear she must wear to walk. The other half is the braces she wears on her legs. The two full-length braces she wore as a child have been reduced to one full and one half-brace by the many painful surgeries she has endured over the years.

Brenda's ordeal with polio began when she was sixteen months old, and she spent many months at a time in hospitals, undergoing surgery and therapy. When the

University Hospital in Oklahoma City had done all it could for her, my parents learned of a Shriners' Hospital in Shreveport, Louisiana, which was said to be helping crippled children like her to regain even more use of their limbs. The March of Dimes provided expense money, and Sam Sullivan, a Durant politician, loaned us his blue 1955 Chevrolet for a trip to Louisiana to see the doctors there. They knew of new surgical techniques and offered hope of improving her condition, so she was left alone there while the rest of us went back home. After a few months, when the surgery was finished and the therapy completed, we received a letter in the mail, informing us that we could come and pick her up. This same situation was repeated so many times during her childhood that it seemed she actually spent more time in hospitals than at home. One might think that a child in this situation would come home expecting special treatment, but this was not so with Brenda. In fact, when she came home from a stay in the hospital, she immediately handed out special treatment in the form of gift-giving. She always came home with a large box of new toys which had been donated by Shriners and other philanthropic organizations to entertain the crippled children during their recovery. Instead of playing with the toys, she entertained herself by sorting them out according to which sibling she would give them to when she got home. She always gave away far more than she kept for herself. On homecoming night, she asked our mother to bake a chocolate cake, and after dinner, we gathered around the kitchen table and ate cake while she produced each toy from the seemingly bottomless box.

"Now, these paper dolls are for Phyllis, and this Bingo game is for Tim, and this coloring book is for Tom."

When Rosemary, our nearest neighbor from a half mile down the road, came by during one of our parties, Brenda even found a small pink doll for her. In this way, she offered her sacrifices on the family altar, perhaps in hope of buying her way back into the family circle, and so she was reabsorbed into our daily lives.

The crutches Brenda has now are quite different from the ones she had when we were children. Those were much smaller, and they were adjustable so they could grow with her. They matched the soft wood color of the desk our school janitor built especially for her. They were similar to the color of her little yellow jumpsuit with the dark stain from the oil sprayed on our school's wood floors. She fell down occasionally when the floors were freshly oiled. A cry of "your little sister fell down" would bring me running to see if she was all right and maybe to try to soak up a little reflected glory from this child who caused such a stir by falling down. Brenda's crutches and braces provided strong steel reinforcement for her weakened body, but they also, inadver-



tently, provided strong support for her spirit. The sight of the beautiful little girl in crutches and braces elicited frequent sympathy and fifty-cent pieces from strangers on the street as well as encouragement and preferential treatment from teachers and classmates at school. This created a feeling of acceptance and self-worth in her and caused her to work harder to try to accomplish as much as any other person. She became a reflection of the kindness and generosity which she received.

Perhaps those of us with strong, healthy bodies might benefit from a little handicap in our lives. When we are normal and healthy, people see no need to offer us positive reinforcement and encouragement. As a child, I always felt totally eclipsed by my beautiful and wonderful sister. As the last of twelve children, I'm sure I held little fascination for my busy parents. They felt it was unhealthy to brag on a child for fear of "making a fool out of them," so we seldom received praise from them. Even bringing home all A's on a report card was jokingly discounted as being "A for awful." Maybe they began to see things a little differently when the time came that they had only a couple of children left at home because my father turned to me one night as we were watching the Miss America Pageant on television and said, "Phyllis, if you were there, you could beat them all." I knew it wasn't true, but I've never forgotten that he said it.

I have called my sister's crutches her weapons because that is how I first thought of them when I was a child. She used them both offensively and defensively to make her way through a childhood shared with siblings who had been taught to treat her just like any other child. It was impossible to best her in a "hit-and-run" fight. The reach of her weapons gave her the last hit in all confrontations just as her indomitable spirit gave her the advantage in all comparisons. The reach of her weapons also touched, more gently, the hearts of many people who were vanquished by her cheerful, self-sufficient attitude. They first saw her weapons, but then they saw the brave warrior behind them. Hoards of admirers have paid tribute to her victory over polio and its debilitating effects. The mother of a 25-year-old man recently brought him to meet Brenda. He had received damage to his brain stem when he was repeatedly kicked in the head during a robbery attempt. After two years of therapy and rehabilitation, he was able to walk with the aid of a cane, but he felt he had nothing to look forward to in life because of his permanent handicap. His mother wanted him to meet Brenda, meet her husband and children, see her immaculate home and the many beautiful things she has created with her less-than-perfect hands, and observe her positive outlook on life. She wanted him to see the love and respect Brenda's friends and acquaintances have for her so that he might be able to see that a person's life consists of more than his body and himself.



As I look back over the years, I can see how my sister's weapons were emotionally and physically helpful to her, and I'm almost glad she had them. Who would want to trade places with one such as she, and yet, I often felt fiercely jealous of the abundant attention she received, which a normal child such as I did not merit. When I was a child, I thought as a child and I acted as a child. Now that I'm a woman, I'm ashamed.

# *Not Guilty*

by Kristi L. Kuslak

Equal and exact justice for all...These are the words etched in the old, gray marble, next to the effigy of the blinded Lady Justice, above the entrance to the courthouse. Those were also the words that had haunted me most over the last year. Maybe because I sincerely felt they had no true meaning. I had been raised to believe that justice meant fairness, but there was nothing fair about what was happening to me. How could I be charged with a crime I hadn't committed? What was fair and just in being prosecuted by someone I had considered my best friend for over two years? Would there ever be an end to this nightmare that was destroying my life? I had learned, the hard way, many of life's lessons, but none of them would teach me as much about people and my own emotional resilience as what I was going through now.

It had been almost one year to the day since the whole horrifying incident had occurred. We had passed through the glass doors of the courthouse three times in the last two days, only to be told there was still no judge available to hear my case.

The phone call came on Tuesday night; it was my attorney Doug. "We've finally been assigned to a judge, and you've been ordered to appear before him at 8:30 in the morning." As I listened to his voice, I felt a sense of relief come over me; there was finally an end in sight. At the same instant, my relief changed to fear, and I began to tremble with the anticipation of what was to happen over the next few days. "Krissey, are you there?" Doug's voice echoed through the phone.

"Yes, I'm still here."

"Krissey, I have to advise you. The judge has said that if you plead guilty now, he guarantees that you won't do any actual time in prison. Now, I know how you feel, but you know the system better than anyone else, and I gotta' tell you, I'd advise the Virgin Mary to plead guilty for a deferred sentence."

Doug was right. I did know the system better than the average person, which is why I was scared. I honestly believed there was very little "true justice" left in the world. But I knew I could not stand before a judge, take an oath to tell the truth, and then lie by pleading guilty to a crime I hadn't committed.

"Doug...I'll see you in the morning.... Let's finish the game."

It was a cold and rainy November day when I walked into the courthouse for what would be the longest two days of my life. We were early. As I sat there in the hard, wood chair at the defense table, next to a man who had been my friend longer than he had been my attorney, the events of the last year passed before my eyes in sobering detail.

Two years ago, I had been a receptionist in a law firm, but I had been able to climb the ladder of success pretty quickly. Within three months, I was made personal secretary and legal assistant to the senior partner in the firm and given my own caseload. We specialized in criminal matters, and I had a knack for finding evidence that was useful in advocating innocence. I was establishing myself quite a reputation as being a competent member of the judicial community. Nine months later, I was offered and accepted the position of bailiff for a district court judge.

For a year, I basked in the rewards of my new job: a thousand-dollar-a-month increase in salary; the best health-care benefits the State could buy; an array of new friendships; and acceptance as a member of these socially elite. Many of my evenings were spent at social events with my best friend Pattye, an assistant district attorney.

Then on November 23, 1991, a Friday evening, I was arrested at my home and booked into the county jail on charges of drug possession. Three hours and three thousand dollars worth of bond later, I was sitting back at my home, a glass of wine in hand, listening to Doug explain what had happened.

It seems an anonymous typewritten letter, which stated that I was dealing marijuana from the courthouse, was sent to the District Attorney's office. Subsequently, in the judge's chambers, two marijuana joints were found taped to the underside of my desk. Within 24 hours, I was fired.

Months marched by, and I was neither contacted about the incident nor charged with any crimes. The district courts did not even contest my unemployment nor did they bother to appear at the State Labor Board hearing, which determined that I had been wrongfully discharged. I began the job search process all over again. Utilizing the contacts I had made as bailiff, I began the long road of rebuilding my career and reestablishing my credibility. Day after day, the same thing: résumés, interviews, and business lunches. Then, on what would be my third interview with the same law firm,

the bomb was dropped in my lap. They had intended to hire me but, merely by accident, had discovered that charges were being filed against me. They were right.

One week later, I was officially charged and arraigned. Two months later, a preliminary hearing was held, and I was bound over for trial. After two continuances, neither of which by me, I was finally picking the jury which would decide my fate. Ironically, it had been one year to the day since it all began.

The courtroom was freezing cold, and no matter how the judge's clerk tried, the heater refused to respond. The jurors, bundled in long-sleeved sweaters and heavy winter coats, listened intently as my once best friend, Pattye, presented the case against me. There were only three witnesses for the prosecution: another of my close friends, the assistant district attorney, Jane, who had received the letter; Sgt. Danner, the arresting and investigating officer; and the crime lab chemist, who simply confirmed that it was marijuana. Pattye made me out to be a hardened criminal. The words flowed effortlessly from her mouth as if we had never even been acquainted. It was as if a knife was being shoved in my gut and twisted with each and every word. How could she forget our working side-by-side on community projects? We had spent a whole summer, helping teach illiterate adults to read, not to mention camping, fishing and motorcycling with our husbands. She was the first person to offer support when this all first began. Now, she was the one demanding the jury send me to prison.

Hour after hour, for two days, I sat, nervously listening to all the testimony. There were at least ten witnesses there on my behalf, but to me, it all seemed to run together like the chorus of a song that makes no sense and has no ending.

Finally, it was up to the jury to decide. The last 48 hours had seemed like a lifetime. I knew every inch of my chair at the defense table—from the four cracks in the seat to the initials RM LUVS KL carved recklessly in the armrest. Even though the heater never agreed to work, I had been covered in sweat through the whole ordeal.

It was after 9:00 p. m. when the judge's bailiff called us in for the verdict. I had counted every hole in the ceiling tile and paced over every inch of the floor while waiting. Now I was cold and covered in goose bumps. I had impatiently waited hours for the decision of the jury, and now I wasn't sure if my trembling legs would carry me to my old familiar chair.

We were instructed to rise as the jurors entered the room and then immediately told to sit down. I was shaking violently all over when I realized Doug was holding my hand. He squeezed it tighter as he said, "Relax. We've done all we can do. It's almost over." The room became completely still and compellingly quiet. As the judge asked the



foreman of the jury to stand and read the verdict, I felt my heart stop beating. I closed my eyes and held my breath as I listened to the foreman read the verdict. "We the jury, empaneled and sworn in the cause now before this court, do hereby find the defendant...not guilty."

Doug sprang to his feet, jerking me up with him, and encased me in his arms before I even knew what was happening. As I opened my eyes, I was greeted by the smiles of the jurors and a glare of pure contempt from Pattye. I turned towards the bench, oblivious to the words now being spoken, and noticed a wink from Judge Freeman's eye. It was that moment that yanked me back into reality, and I felt my heart beat again.

Pattye stormed out of the courtroom without a word. Her husband Steve, who had been awaiting the verdict with her, smiled and hugged me, but no words were ever spoken. We had been close friends once, but that was gone now. It had not mattered to her that I was innocent, only that she had not won the case. I was forced to face the reality that the friendship had been completely superficial to Pattye. I was nothing more than an outlet for some personal gain.

The judge ordered the D. A.'s office to reinvestigate the case, but there was never any real effort to discover who had set me up. Within two weeks, I was notified that the case was closed, and the State of Oklahoma issued me a written apology for their "haste in terminating my employment before the matter had been properly investigated." They also wished me well on my future career endeavors.

Well, the end I had waited so anxiously for had finally come. Now I could begin to heal all the emotional wounds that the past year had caused. At times, during the course of this ordeal, I had felt there was no way that I would make it over all the obstacles that were being thrown at me. As for justice, I still believe that it is far from being equal and exact for all. It becomes more a matter of good representation and luck—a flip of the coin, if you will, in most cases. They say you are innocent until proven guilty, but after all I was put through, I believe a better analogy would be that you are guilty until proven innocent.

# *Mother-in-the-Head*

*or Win the Fights You Have With Mom Even When She Isn't There.*

by **Heather Maier**

**I**t happens to me every time: two steps outside the door on my way to get the paper from the driveway and I hear her voice: "Come back here right now! You're going to ruin your socks!"

Even though it has been more than six years since I lived in Mom's house, I still have almost daily fights with her voice in my head. She nags me until I brush my teeth at night and warns me not to buy that generic brand of detergent even though it's a dollar cheaper. She scolds me for putting my elbows on the table and reminds me to sit up straight. "Mom" insists that I grab a jacket every time I leave the house, and she tells me to make sure I turned off all the lights. Once I thought I would move out on my own and be free of Mom—but now I know different. "Mom" will always be there, no matter how far I go or how long I'm away.

I would wonder if I was crazy if I didn't have friends who have their mothers' voices in their heads, too. My friend Stephanie's "mom" follows her around the kitchen. "When you cook, clean up after yourself as you go; then when you're finished, the kitchen will be all cleaned up," Stephanie's "mom" says. "And I do what she tells me every time," Stephanie confesses. "I always clean up as I go because I hear my mom saying, 'Is this box empty? Then throw it away! Don't set that dirty spoon on the counter! Drop it in the sink!'"

I've decided to call the problem mother-in-the-head, and I have determined that it is a universal ailment among women. No matter who you are or who your mother is, there is something that you do because "mom" just won't quit nagging you until you do it.

The first time I grasped the scope of mother-in-the-head, I was waiting in an endless line to the ladies' bathroom. I found myself there just a few months ago when I went to a play with my husband. Moments after we entered the crowded music hall foyer, I kissed my darling good-bye and told him I had to go powder my nose. I had stood in line for at least ten minutes when it suddenly occurred to me, just ten well-dressed women away from my turn, that I might be able to wait. The play would last only three hours, and if I found myself in dire need, I could always try again at intermission. But then I heard Mom's voice... "Better to be safe than to have to leave in the middle," she said. So, I took another step forward when a sleek-looking blonde exited stall number three.

As I watched the blonde run her willowy hands under the tap (only out of the corner of my eye, of course; "mom" told me not to stare), a new perception began to drift to the top of my consciousness. This girl had a "mom," too! Who else could have told her, "Always wash your hands blah blah blah." And then I wondered how many of the women standing in line were like me. How many were there because they had been conditioned by their mothers to have to go to the bathroom? Could mother-in-the-head, rather than any physical difference, explain why the line to the "Ladies" now snaked its way down the hall and halfway up the steps while the "Gents" room looked so deserted it might as well have been closed for renovation?

I had to gather more evidence to support my hypothesis. Although "mom" told me that it wasn't polite, I asked the woman who was standing in front of me, wearing the lovely cashmere sweater. At first she laughed, naturally a little shocked at my question, but then she admitted it. Yes, her mother had always told her to "go first," too.

While mother-in-the-head may be a nuisance, all of us who are cursed with it will have to admit that it has its benefits. Some of the advice "mom" gives me has proven to be very valuable. I have saved at least ten dollars by taking off my socks before I run out for the paper once a week. And thanks to the good dental hygiene habits enforced by "mom's" nagging, my last visit to the dentist (which was prompted by "mom's" voice, of course) resulted in the discovery of just two cavities even though I hadn't been to the dentist in over six years. Because of "mom," I'll never be stranded somewhere without a quarter to call home, and I will always have a jacket to keep me warm till my ride gets there.

But there is a downside to mother-in-the-head, too. "Mom" can keep us from ever completely enjoying the sweet taste of freedom. We might be able to bring it, ripe and juicy, to our lips, but we rarely get to swallow. My friend Stephanie laments that she



can hardly enjoy a movie at home because the “mother” inside her won’t sit quietly and watch the show. Her “mom” starts complaining—and always at the most pivotal moment—that the bathroom floor is dirty and that the shower needs to be cleaned. “I just keep watching anyway,” Stephanie says, “but the whole time I’m thinking, ‘See, Mom, I don’t have to clean up right now! I’m going to sit here and watch this movie whether you like it or not!’”

The worst case scenarios of mother-in-the-head, however, are caused when the wise advice espoused by “mom” has become obsolete or was never that wise in the first place. Megan’s mother, like mine, taught her that nice girls never call a boy. Megan was a nice girl—and she swears that it cost her the guy she loved. “I wouldn’t have married the man I did if I had been able to call a guy,” Megan said. She isn’t very happy in her marriage.

In *When You and Your Mother Can’t be Friends*, Victoria Secunda explores the many ways the internalized messages of childhood and adolescence affect the lives of women. “These ‘messages,’ these ‘voices,’ are repeated over a daughter’s lifetime in a maternal litany that shapes the contours of our lives,” Secunda says. How a daughter responds to these “messages” can vary from complete rebellion to absolute compliance, according to Secunda, but whatever the response, the voice of “mom” will undoubtedly affect the decisions a daughter makes—like Megan’s decision not to call her guy.

Growing up, I was the kind of dependable daughter who always called if she was going to be home late and never ditched school. I believe that those same admirable traits that then made me the model daughter account for my amazing vulnerability to my mother-in-the-head now. I hate to disappoint Mom even when she isn’t there to see what I’m doing; when I’m forced to choose between pleasing her or pleasing myself, my sense of loyalty goes on overload.

In her book, Secunda discusses the need daughters have for continuing to seek their mothers’ approval, even into adulthood. “We want to survive, but not entirely without her (our mother). We want to detach, but not defect. Because, like it or not, we are still very much bound up with her,” Secunda says. “Whether our relationship is strained or easy, hostile or amiable, we need her, if only in memory or fantasy, to conjugate our history, validate our femaleness, and guide our way.”

Looking at it that way, the truth is painfully clear. Your mother, as godlike as she may seem, doesn’t have the power to speak in your head; it’s you, putting her voice there because you need her. Although it’s your identity and your life that you’re trying to mold and shape, she is the one who put you together at the beginning. What she told you



and how you feel about it now are important guides for the decisions you'll make now and in the future. "In adulthood, the internalized mother ultimately blends with the daughter's sense of self-esteem," says Secunda.

I guess that means mother-in-the-head is terminal; for some reason, I'm not surprised. We sufferers are left with only one choice: we have to continue to fight with "mom." We have to be ready to stand our ground when "mom" is about to make us do something that we know isn't right for us or stop us from doing something that we know will make us happy.

The next time I hear Mom's voice in my head, I'm going to be ready (like the rebellious teenager I never was) to stamp my foot, put both hands on my hips, and shout, "You can't tell me what to do!" Maybe "mom" will win our argument if her advice is the valuable kind; I'm really not that hardheaded. But if she can't defend her point well enough, well, then, that wild teenager inside me will just get her way.

For today, I'll start with little things (like leaving my jacket at home on a promising sunny day) just to help build up my "mother" resistance. That way, when "mom" isn't right, it won't be so hard for me to do my own thing without her blessing. Learning to make decisions that go against the pre-recorded messages of my childhood will be tough, and acting confidently on those choices will be even harder, but with time (maybe fifty years), it's got to get easier. Just wait; the next time "mom" tries to discourage me from taking up snorkeling lessons or going skinny-dipping, she's going to be in over her head (not that I've ever considered any of those hobbies—at least not seriously—yet).

# District 109

by Gerald Bennett

In a large valley between two ranges of sand hills, a one-room schoolhouse stood. It represented District 109 in Cleveland Precinct of Cherry County, Nebraska. This school was twenty-eight miles out in the hills from the closest town which was Valentine. Besides education, this was where people voted, went to church and Sunday school classes.

There wasn't a tree in the schoolyard, just a small barn, two outhouses, two swings, a chinning bar, two teeter-totters and an old cast iron pump with a long handle. From this old pump, we would get a bucket of water every morning and place it on a stand just inside the door next to an old granite washbasin. A large hand towel hung from a nail in the door frame. Lined up like soldiers were our individual tin cups hanging by their handles on nails driven into the wall. The bucket was also where we got the water to wash our hands after a trip to the outhouse or before eating lunch.

The teacher and one other pupil had store-bought lunch boxes, but most lunches were brought in brown paper sacks or, in my case, a gallon Karo syrup bucket with a wire handle. One of the highlights of the day was to make a trade with other students for something that looked better than what your mother had packed for you. Sometimes it took a lot of negotiating to make a swap, but nobody pulled a gun or knife to get what they wanted. If a trade couldn't be made, you were just stuck with what you had brought.

There was no electricity, and the heat for the school was furnished by a large "pot-bellied" stove that stood in the middle of the room. This stove was black with shiny silver legs and a silver door where you removed the ashes. It had an opening in the top where you could put a four-foot piece of broken-off fence post. When several pieces of wood were put in the stove, the fire would turn its middle a cherry red. It had no thermostat, only a damper in the stovepipe to control the heat. When the stove got too

hot, the desks would be moved back, or closer when the heat died down.

The room was thirty-foot by thirty-foot, with three windows on the south and three on the north, and a six-foot by six-foot entrance on the east side where we left our overshoes and coats in the winter. On the west wall, above the blackboards, hung a large American flag to which we pledged allegiance every morning before class. On the north wall was a big clock with a pendulum that made a loud ticktock sound that could be heard all over the room; there was also a picture of Abraham Lincoln. On the south wall was an unfinished portrait of George Washington and a piano that the teacher played when we had sing-alongs.

In front of the blackboards stood a massive desk. It was made of wood with a long center drawer and three drawers on each side. Sitting on the corner of this desk was a large brass bell with a black wooden handle which the teacher used to call us in from the yard when classes started. Next to it was a wooden yardstick that was used as a measure, a pointer, and sometimes as an instrument of discipline.

It was at this school that I started my education in 1937. That year our teacher was Zetta Tate. She was a large woman, about six-foot tall, but she sometimes looked much taller to a six-year-old. Miss Tate, who was in her mid-fifties and combed her graying hair back into a bun, had more hair on her upper lip than Fuzzy Stilwell, the local trapper. She boarded at our house, so I had to walk to school with her in the mornings. When she walked at a normal gait, I would just about have to run to keep up. We lived a mile from school, across the valley to the northeast, and, in the wintertime, she would try to go almost an hour early and get a fire going so the building would be warm by the time school started for the day. If it was still too cold, we would all join hands and sing and dance around the stove until the room was warm.

She did not have an easy task. She taught kindergarten through the ninth grade in this one room. In 1937, she had three ninth graders, two eighth graders, one in the seventh grade, two in the sixth, two fourth graders, one in the second grade, and Bud and me in kindergarten.

Bud, my best friend, was a skinny little kid who always wore a white T-shirt, blue-and-white striped bib overalls, and brown lace-up shoes. That was all he had since the Vaughns were a very poor family, just getting enough food to eat and clothes to wear. His dad was a hard worker, but times were very tough. Bud and his sister rode to school on an old white horse they called Joe. They had two miles to ride and rode even in the winter when the weather was bitter cold. Sometimes it would be ten degrees below zero. Their folks would bundle them up, put them on Joe and he would bring them to school.



In the evening, Miss Tate would do the same, and the old white horse would take them home. From the time they went over the first hill, about a quarter of a mile away, their parents wouldn't see them or have any idea if they made it to school until they came back in the evening as the school had no phone and they had no phone at home.

Bud sat at the desk just ahead of mine. One day I had taken a pocketful of peanuts to school with me, and I had shared them with him during recess. He put some in his pocket, and he decided to eat them that afternoon during school time. After sneaking a few, he took the shells and threw them under my desk. Miss Tate saw him do it and said, "Jimmy, (that's what she called him) come up to the front of the room by my desk." When he got to the front of the room, she said, "Have you been eating peanuts?"

Bud hung his head, shuffled his feet and mumbled, "No, ma'am."

Miss Tate took him by the shoulders, raised him up off the floor and gave him a shake like a rag doll. One of his shoes flew off. She set him gently on the floor and said, "Next time you lie to me, I will shake you until both socks fly off!" All of us in the room had witnessed this, but we had our noses buried deep in our books and pretended that nothing had happened. It was a lesson we never forgot. From that day on, we had respect for her authority. It wasn't fear of her because we knew that if we did right, we had nothing to worry about.

Under Miss Tate's supervision, Aubrey Lord, a ninth grader, who had failed two previous grades, passed with flying colors and went on to high school. He was almost as big as she was, but never once challenged her authority.

This teacher went on from our little one-room school to become the county superintendent of Cherry County. She helped to mold the education of students for many years to follow.

There are many memories that come back to me of times gone by, but some of the most vivid and long-lasting started at the one-room school across the valley from home.



# *The Kindest Road\**

by David Foote

When someone we love dies, the hole torn in the fabric of our lives leaves a vacuum. This vacuum pulls us down any number of roads that come with such a loss. We are alternately tortured with guilt, lost in grief, or caught up in bittersweet remembrance. It is this last road that is kindest, both to ourselves and to the memory of our beloved.

"The Desk," a short narrative essay by Alondra Dallaly, allows us to share the author's feelings as she sorts through her late grandfather's belongings. Though occasioned by death, the essay does not examine grief or guilt. Instead, Dallaly takes us along on a journey of discovery. Her search through his desk becomes an exposition of his life.

Dallaly's setting—her grandfather's desk isolated in a pool of light in a darkened house—serves to focus attention on the desk as an important analogy to her grandfather's life. She makes the intent of her analogy clear in the opening paragraph when she describes it as "a fitting memorial." The single physical setting is appropriate, both because of the brevity of her essay and because of its effect in focusing attention on the desk as an icon. The atmosphere is set by the single lamp in a darkened house; it seems peculiarly well-suited for examination, almost like a slide under the single-point illumination of a microscope. The small amount of time involved—one evening—stands in contrast to the journey of discovery made while never leaving her grandfather's chair.

The tone and point of view adopted by Dallaly make for a pleasant reading. Reverence for her grandfather mixes well with wry amusement at his stock of girlie magazines and his plethora of great and lasting loves. The first person point of view seems to be the only workable one for this particular story.

The symbolism of the desk, with its dovetail joints and balanced drawers, works well. It helps fill a picture of her grandfather's well-polished life. It might have been better, though, if Dallaly had chosen words that fit in better with her analogy than those of her last sentence: "We are many personalities, sewn together, sharing but a few facets with each person we meet."

Dallaly's plot, necessarily simple, first reveals her grandfather's life to us a drawer at a time and then introduces us to some of the women who peopled his life. It moves from the familiar, as she examines his degree and trade journals, to the new and surprising as she discovers *Playboy* magazines and takes calls from his many female admirers. This progression fits in well with a journey that takes her to new understandings of her grandfather and human beings in general.

Dallaly is truly privileged to have had such a valuable source of memory and revelation about her grandfather's life. Any of us who experience such a loss would do well to follow her path. When troubled with regrets or hungry for their presence, we should search for that which will evoke their memory and try to find comfort in an understanding of the qualities that won our love during their lives. It is the kindest road.

\*David Foote wrote this essay in response to Alondra Dallaly's "The Desk," an essay which appeared in the *Absolute* '93. "The Desk" is reprinted following "The Kindest Road."

# The Desk

by Alondra Dallaly

It wasn't a very large desk. It was well made. Leather top, hardwood, chestnut colored, with dovetail joints on all nine drawers (four each side, one top/middle). It had been in the same place, in the same house, for over forty years. Sturdy, reliable, unassuming. A fitting memorial.

As a child will absent-mindedly share what is heard on the school playground, I once repeated some kind of racial slur. That was the only time I had ever seen and felt his anger. The disapproval in his eyes burned a mark in my soul. His sharp words shaped me into the liberal-minded person I am today. Years later, I wrote him about that time. Being grown up now, I needed to let him know that he was the one responsible for getting me there. A few weeks after that letter, he responded by asking me to be his executrix when his time came. His time did come (too soon at 73 years), and I sat before the desk; except for the goose-neck lamp shining down on it, the house remained in darkness. I took hold of the tarnished brass handle.

Folded in thirds was his Master of Arts degree from Juilliard School of Music, 1938. Back issues of the *Associated Musicians of Greater New York/American Federation of Musicians*, Local 802, the latest issue being 1990. He had "quit" the business in the early sixties, or so I had thought. Under the Arrangers and Copyists listing, I found his name, address in Dallas, and telephone number. It was also in the Los Angeles Local 47, and Las Vegas Local 369 directories.

The next drawer held several manila file folders. Each contained clippings from magazines and newspapers. One filled with political cartoons, Republican bashing for the most part. Another held lobbying materials for the passage of the Brady Bill. And one marked *Dallas Times Herald* was a collection of the many letters-to-the-editor he had written over the last ten years. "To the editors: With the right music and lyrics and

good staging, we could send our city and county tax departments to Broadway and have the comedy hit of the season.”

I was lost in the stories of his life when the phone rang, returning me to the present. She had not expected to hear my voice. Immediately her words became shaky and weak. She told me how they always spoke on this night each week, for an hour or more at a time. Written one another for many years. They had loved like no others had loved. She lived in Van Nuys, California. It was sad to have to tell her that he was gone now. Thirty minutes later, I replaced the phone in its cradle and returned to finding the business papers I needed to complete the job he needed me to do.

The next drawer contained an incredible assortment of noise-makers and gadgets. Key chains that made death ray sounds, like video games. One simply sounded like a cellular phone's ring. (I like to use that one when I need to get off the phone in a hurry. ) A black box that when a coin is placed in the slot, a glow-in-the-dark hand creeps out and quickly snatches it back in. During the third try with this childhood favorite, the ring of the telephone took me, instantly, from seven years old to thirty. She was calling from Marina Del Rey, California. So sad to hear about his passing; theirs was a love like no other. They usually spoke on the evening before this, but she had not heard from him and had begun to worry. She had just received a letter from him the other day. Forty-five minutes later, I hung up the phone.

The third drawer was hard to open. I thought it could have been the humidity that had swollen it shut. It opened, after some effort. An impressive collection of *Playboy* magazines filled it to the top. What had caught the drawer in the first place was “*Playboy* Presents 50 Beautiful Women,” 1989, opened to page 46. Vanna White: sporting a black lace bra and garter ensemble, backside to the camera. How long had the phone been ringing when I closed my mouth. She lived in Bellmore, New York. Amazing, but true, the widow and the widower had found love in their later years. Health and distance kept them apart physically, but each week they would talk for an hour or so. She had received a beautiful post card from him that very day.

I began to see the different parts of his life take shape. I realized this was not a simple old man who sent me pretty cards for my birthdays and Christmas. His naive granddaughter was maturing quickly. Under the *Playboys*, I found his diary for 1985:

“Feb. 26: Stained house. Mar. 14: Pitch gets fixed. Mar. 19: Swallows return to Capistrano. Apr. 16: 1st McDonald's-Des Plaines, Ill. 1955. May 26: Evangeline broke leg!! Jul. 28: Rudy Vallee's Birthday, sent card. Aug. 9: Richard Nixon resigns 1974.”

The November 13 entry began with the same straightforward statements of fact:



“1805: Frankfurter invented;”....beneath that, “Dinner at Fairmont Venetian Room 7:00 pm with Ella Fitzgerald.”

I looked at the phone, expecting the ring; then having to tell the world's greatest female jazz singer that the love of her life had gone to heaven the night before, and that's why he hadn't been able to call that afternoon.

The bottom right-hand drawer held the summary of John Hugh Thompson, Jr.'s life. A large brown leather album contained hundreds of photographs. Studio photos of him when he was with Columbia Pictures, photos of the family throughout the years, and then each lady he had made to feel so wonderful had several pages dedicated to her alone. And I thought I was the only woman in his life after Mom and Grandma were gone.

For the rest of the evening, I kept the album on top of the desk, putting names with the faces each time the phone rang. I told Evangeline that I loved the red sequined evening gown, but what a shame she had that clunky cast to contend with. I let Marva know that her newly decorated home was “stunning; John had always been partial to Art Deco design.” And when Lucia telephoned, while I looked at the engraved invitation carefully preserved in the album, she captivated me with her stories of her 80th birthday party in the Bahamas. Before each conversation ended, addresses and phone numbers were exchanged. I stay in touch with all of them now.

The desk now sits in my study, contents intact, reminding me that we are so much more than what one may believe. We are many personalities, sewn together, sharing but a few facets with each person we meet.

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