Whatever It Is,

It Should Be a Metaphor!

Connecticut Writing Project
Summer Fellows
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by

Members of the Connecticut Writing Project
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Circles
by Kathy Uchmann

The moonstone ring was my grandmother's. It's mine now. It was a birthday gift to her from my grandfather, her 28th birthday. The ring is nearly ninety years old. The gold is smooth and delicately soft. The shaft slender - ninety years worn away. I don't remember seeing her wear the ring. Her hands were knarled and bent, the knuckles swollen with the hardships of decades, and the ring would not have fit well - by the time I was aware - on her finger. She would often rub her hands to ease the ache of all her years. My mother wore the ring before it came to me.

My grandmother was almost ninety-one when she died. She was sixty when I was born, and was a vivid part of my growing up, a strong, proud woman, part of my life for thirty years. A part of my life even now. She was a tiny lady. I was as tall as she before I was ten. Little, white-haired, and a bit wobbly, her left eye was blind - a cataract. Her right eye was sharp beyond vision. She saw and knew all. To steady herself, particularly in later years, she sometimes used a cane, an extension of her own pokiness and prickliness. Crusty and independent, she had no trouble bestowing approval or disapproval, emphasizing her positions as emphatically and surely as her cane found safe purchase in her determined comings and goings. The prickliness. There was much more to her than this, and yet...

When my grandmother was five, her father gathered his young family and went West, with so many others, staking his hopes and dreams in a Western Kansas homestead. As the oldest of eleven children, many of the household and livestock chores fell to her. The sister next in line was the one responsible for helping with the babies, for my grandmother usually made them cry, being generally impatient and determined. My grandmother grew up attending one room schoolhouses on the prairie. To her sorrow, her formal education ceased at the end of eighth grade, but firmly established within her was a love for, and a way with words. While I was growing up in Texas, she lived in Oklahoma. When she was with us, she always read to us - letters, stories, books - crying easily at the least hint of sadness. When she was away from us, she wrote copiously to friends, round-robins to the large family, and, most important to me, she wrote to each of us. And from the time I was five or six until she died, she and I corresponded regularly.

Stubborn. Independent. Opinionated. Controlling in a way. You couldn't do anything for her. Frugal to a fault, from the hardships of the prairie through the Depression and Dust Bowl, she had a strong no-nonsense Methodist ethic. THINGS had never come easily, and she had to accept the frivolity of many material possessions. Old clothing was crocheted into beautiful rugs. My sister and I would lie on them, flattening the lumps and bumps of their newness to find and recall last year's favorite dresses and memories. The water heater was lighted just before bath time, or just in time to do the laundry or the dishes. Greeting cards were saved and pictures recycled. The greetings were always her own wonderful inventions. Her diet was basic and essential, though there was always room for ice cream to "dribble between the cracks."

She and my mother didn't really get along. Even now, my mother, herself almost eighty, feels she was badly treated by her mother - that as the only daughter, she was the least favored, that my grandmother was harsh in her criticism, that a great deal was expected - expectations to behave in a
"reputable" fashion so that the "honor" of the family would in no way be besmirched, while her brothers - one eight years older, one eighteen months younger - were allowed to pursue their youthful antics. Her younger brother, in particular, was the apple of his mother's eye and could do no wrong. My grandfather as well felt the pain of her sharpness, according to my mother. I felt none of this.

My mother's vision of my grandmother is her very own, coming from places impossible for me to know. Yet, in spite of the harsher perspective my mother brings, both she and I recall and cherish in the same way the strong and determined individual who was my grandmother. These recollections are more than just her memory. They are my grandmother's legacy to my mother. I know my mother's own strength. It is the strength of her mother - that prairie wisdom of the very essence of life, the grit and determination, the strength of body and of character and of conviction, molded to herself by the unique hands of her experience and with a kinder touch to her daughters than she had known as a child.

I wear the ring on my hand now - their ring. As I reminisce, the obscure and shadowy images within the stone are at times as illusive as the shape of the stone is sharp. I think of the daughter who will wear this next, Rebecca, and look ahead to understand that her own daughter is defined in a special way as the wearer after that.

I ponder the circlet of the ring on my hand and think of what we take with us; of what we send ahead and leave behind; of what we find when we look back; of all the years entwining.

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Today,
One is in Colorado
And the other is in love.
I am imagining disasters.

Once, on a holiday,
We all drove to a lighthouse
Late at night, got out and
Climbed a hill,
Where they danced
In and out of the blinding beam
(I was sure there was a path)
Shoving and squealing as they did
At that age,
The ocean soft below them.

Next morning we went back
In the red and yellow light
To find the cliffs they'd danced on,
And I saw with horror
Just how far below it was.
Frozen:
No rail, no fence,
No twig to grab.
Just rock
Then no rock.
Immense pounding distance.

Cliffs belong in the dark,
Perhaps. Better not to know
When our children disappear from sight
What's down below them.
Better we hear the ocean on the rocks
Only as distant music
for their lovely dance above.
Charlotte
by Christine Lorenzen

"Charlotte!" a voice called.
Charlotte stirred. The blankets felt heavy on her as she aroud from sleep.
"Charlotte!" the voice called again demanding attention. "The day will be half gone soon, and you're not even out of bed yet. Now hurry and get yourself washed up and dressed. I need your help in getting things done 'round here."

Charlotte reluctantly threw back the blankets as she sat up in the bed. Lizzie was sound asleep next to her with her blond hair sprawled across the pillow. No need to wake her yet Charlotte thought as she sat there, her eyes still glassy from sleep and puffy from crying. Not that she had slept too much through the night. For most of the night she had tossed and turned and sobbed as thoughts of the events from the previous day churned in her mind. Through the window, the pink light of morning filtered through the gauze curtains, but Charlotte's heart was too heavy to notice. All she saw were the gray and black shadows tucking around the room.

"Get a move on girl!" the voice came again.
Charlotte didn't answer but slowly she washed herself with the remaining water in the washtub, and then dressed herself. Her hair was still in the braids she wore yesterday, so she undid them and began to brush her long, fair hair. The brush pulled on the snags but Charlotte was too numb from her sorrow to care. She looked around the room. It was her room. Hers and Lizzie's. How could they expect her to leave.

"What is it you want to do?" Charlotte kept her eyes to the floor. She couldn't look at her mother.

"Mrs. White gathered up her apron and wiped her hands on it. She could see Charlotte's face was swollen from the crying she had heard through the night.

"Charlotte," Mrs. White hesitated. "There was no choice. Please understand.
Charlotte wanted to hear more. She wanted to hear why there was no choice, and why they had to leave.
When Charlotte returned with the full water bucket, Mother was nursing the baby. He was wrapped in a little blanket and snuggled up close in his mother's arms. Charlotte wanted to snuggle up next to her with her blond hair sprawled across the pillow.

"But mother..." Charlotte began.
...But mother nuthin'. Your father has already signed the contract and so there's nothing to be done. You must go, Charlotte. I know it's hard for you, but you will be helping us and that's what we need. You're almost a woman, you know. Not a little girl any longer. We need to be able to depend on you for this. And every day that you're gone will be one closer to when you come home. Of course we'll miss you my girl. The thought of sending you away is hard enough. I don't know how I'll manage without you around here to help me. But somehow I will, and you will too. You'll see. It will all work out right in the end Charlotte, it will."

They stood there, mother and daughter, heads bent together, their grief mingling in the tears spilling onto their joined cheeks. Charlotte was tense and her body quivered as she held onto her mother, afraid to let go. While Mrs. White caressed Charlotte, she grasped for things to remember her by: the scent of her hair, the slenderness of her young body, the feel of her head cupping into her shoulder, the warmth of her breath on her neck. It wasn't fair, Mrs. White knew, but she could see no other way.
"Let's get busy on these dresses, Charlotte. I want you to look beautiful when you go," she said tenderly.

If Charlotte had been given the dresses by Mrs. McFadden for another occasion she would have been ecstatic. The only time she got something new was if one of mother's clients was getting rid of something old and exchanged it as payment for sewing. But these dresses felt like Judas' silver coins and that she was the betrayed. No matter how beautiful they were, Charlotte could not enjoy wearing them. It was Mrs. McFadden's brother who was taking his family to Australia. It was his wife who insisted they have a girl to travel with them to help them care for their children. It was Mrs. McFadden who suggested Charlotte as that girl. No matter how lovely these dresses were, or how much she needed them, Charlotte...
Charlotte stood while Mrs. White pinned the shoulders and bodice, carefully marking where the new seams were to be. Mrs. McFadden was considerably larger in the bosom and Charlotte looked away as her mother adjusted the darts. At another time they would have laughed at the difference, but today they were silent. There was no laughter.

"You'll look so grown up in them," Mrs. White said, but they did not look at each other. "Your father will love to see you in them..." she stopped. She couldn't finish her words. The few moments of silence screamed in their ears. "There's something I want you to have before you go, Charlotte, and well, it seems like a right time to give it to you now." Charlotte looked cautiously at her mother. Mrs. White took a small cloth bundle from the pocket of her dress. She took Charlotte's hand and pressed it into her palm, then clasped her own hands around it. She looked Charlotte in the eye, then to the bundle. "It was my grandmother's locket," she pressed her lips together to keep the sadness from escaping again. "I want you to have it so that when you need to remember how much we love you, you'll have part of us there with you."

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Eleven slight depressions of my index finger and I am there. The phone on the simple white ledge rings. I can feel the coolness of the hall in the house my grandfather built. High up over the phone are the mounted deer antlers which frightened Edward when he was there and we visited. To him this space was a terrifying gauntlet of ghosts, but to me it was a bridge, one of the seams between my two identities. The repeated short European buzz gradually breaks up my vision; no one home. Then, silence. A connection is made. Across thousands of miles, Jiri's thick baritone drawls, "Moukovi."

"Tady je Anicka!" Saying it I realize that I am smiling broadly as I break into that other world, recording the words, changing the way I move my lips and tongue. "Jak se mas?"

"Everybody's absolutely splendid. They got back from Liberec yesterday."

"I didn't expect to get you, Jiri."

"But Anicka, it's dinner time!"

I feel foolish, because of course I know it's two in the afternoon. Ola would have had the midday meal set out on the table at one. He must be finished by now.

"Do you want me to get Vali?"

"Yes, thanks. It's marvelous hearing your voice."

He's gone and in a moment, my sister's voice projects into my ear.

"Hi, Ann!"

My eyes flood with tears I can't immediately explain. I wish I were there. Just the normalcy of the conversation is astonishing. So much has happened between here and there, now and then.

A child, wrapped in blanket, held in a man's arms. The man talks soothingly, gently, into a fevered ear close to his bristly cheek. Ruda is telling me that he does not want me to miss the fun. Acrid smell and smoke fill the air over the freshly dug pit in the ground. Potatoes are being baked for all the cousins and neighboring children. Uncles do that: they think of exciting ways of accomplishing everyday things. And they can overrule parents who have decided what's good for you. No bed this afternoon.

The wooden wheels of the pink wicker doll carriage jerk and stall over the uneven flagstones alongside the stucco wall leading to the side door. The little girl, blond curls already drooping, wearing a pinafore starched against the hot summer day, grips the handle in the fury of a tantrum, and rams onward. I stare aghast at my children strewn across the dry grass.

Held in my father's arms this time, I wave obediently to the tearful faces. The women in broad brimmed fedoras cocked at fashionable angles stand at the fence, waving back. I turn to gaze over Tatí's strong shoulder at the silvery airplane. We're going to America!

I grew up in the warm intimacy of a tiny family island. All around us mothers and children waved goodbye to fathers who were transported to city offices by scheduled trains. My father went with them, but I knew we were different, not part of the club.

First, there were the accents. I loved the rich, rumble of my father's words. Nothing entranced me more than Mami's sweet tones reading from the gold covered Zlata kniha of fairy tales. As I grew older, I began to recognize something harsh in their voices. Was it the "r" drilling somewhere at the top
I began to see the annoyed glances in faces of workmen forced to listen because it was a job. I did not let myself think about this as I went about the business of learning all the teachers had to offer. Like a puppet, I let them decide the script and then applaud the performance. I felt good and totally accepted.

At home I also felt comfortable. Saturday and Sunday were family days when we went on extended outings with carefully packed picnics folded into the wicker hamper. I learned about the history of my new country, stopping at roadside plaques and historical houses. I learned about plants and birds at Audubon Reservations and the Bronx Zoo. Once or twice a year my father, casting caution to the wind, ignored the fear of polio, and we scurched ourselves in the sun at Jones Beach.

We grew up and they grew weary, the weeks punctuated by translucent envelopes bearing news. Good news, sad news, I always knew as I carried them upstairs to Mami. She wept bitterly while reading the black bordered ones. Later, the tears wiped into a large white linen handkerchief, she ruffled through the small box of photos, selected one and leaned it up against a flickering votive candle. I had forgotten those eyes which had smiled down on my blond curls and grew impatient when my mother showed me pictures of mustached men and stout women. I wanted to go out and play in my real life.

My real life. The other children galloped around in the dusk, playing hide and seek, finally calling ʻollie-ollie-in-come-freeʻ as the evening darkened. Tati said I couldnʻt run with them. Pressed by my worries, he finally answered: hadnʻt I noticed that they werenʻt like me? I knew they did not live crowded as I did in a one bedroom apartment. What did he mean? Later I realized they were the ones who challenged teachers, climbed lamp posts during a drunken binge, broke the window at Aspinʻs newsstand. Their mothers entertained a series of boyfriends, even while their salesmen fathers travelled to peddle jeweled crucifixes. We were all poor.

My father put Majda and me to bed at night. Tired, he lay on the third bed, my sisterʻs, and began the magic. His voice and his imagination transported us to darkest Africa, rescuing damsels in distress with Tarzan at my side; to the Oregon Trail, where we frantically drew up our wagons to withstand the Indian assault; to Chilean mountain paths, unexplored by white men. In the moonlight I traversed Moravian hillsides guided by silhouettes of ruined castles and hid myself behind Persian carpet bales to better hear the whispered scheming of Arabian bandits. Those bedtime stories, the reading list of an adolescent boy learning English, were the television of my nights.

In between fantasies Daddy told about playing with cousins and his sister in the garden of the grandparentsʻ tanning factory. The small gauge railroad tracks transported the children from station to station: San Francisco, Chicago, Grand Central Station! The mill stream was suddenly straddled by a grandparentsʻ tanning factory. The small gauge railroad tracks transported the children from station to station: San Francisco, Chicago, Grand Central Station! The mill stream was suddenly straddled by a small square window. She crushed me before her. Her excited voice breathlessly talked a compacted history lesson, as leaning forward to see out the small square window, she crushed me before her.

“Their is Hvezda on the hill.” I knew well the legend that the Czechs were awaiting the day when they would again be liberated from oppression by the mythological figures of the Czech Bretheren who waited in its deep caverns.

Rows of red clay-tiled roofs came into my narrow field of vision as we circled for a landing. “That’s where the Germans detained the men when…,” her voice moved up with excitement. “See that chapel? You can see it from the end of our street!”

The shrieking engines of the plane nearly drowned out her words, but my heart was throbbing too. Then I felt the gentle bump as the plane set down on the field. The motor accelerated briefly and then subsided as we taxied down the runway to my family.

Until I heard the voice of my uncle, felt the touch of my aunt, looked at the familiar planes of Ola’s cheek, held the hand and looked into the face of Milunka’s four-year-old son, I was adrift. Now I have two homes. But, when I am here, I always feel that someone is missing. Over there, I am incomplete too, always wishing to join the two realities. Travel helps, and so does the miracle of the phone.
Jamilas Essay
by Jenny Shaff

"Jenny!"

"Eric!" I yell back. It is our little way of greeting each other over the phone. It is our little way of announcing presences. What he does, I do. When he yells, I yell. It is our own little way, with me answering back equally loud and yet reflecting like an echo—not beginning like a scream.

"Come to my place and I'll drive out to the V.F.W."

"Do you know where it is?" I ask.

"Dude!"

"Do you know how to get there?"

"Dude!"

"I'll be there at 11:30 so we have extra time in case we get lost."

"I know how to get there."

"You don't know Plainville."

"Tyler lives in Plainville."

"You've only been to Tyler's house. You don't know how to get to the V.F.W."

"I can get there."

"Yeah. I'll be there at 11:00."

"It's not going to take an hour and a half to get to Plainville."

"11:30."

"12:00."

"11:30."

"12:00."

"11:45."

"11:45."

"11:30."

"11:30."

"12:00."

"11:45."

"11:45."

"I'll be there," I say and hang up the phone with no "goodbye," "see ya," or anything. It feels cold to just hang up like that, but that's our own little way. Neither of us are little. Our voices aren't little either. Combined, our voices could probably be heard over a tornado. Combined, our voices could scream out nuclear warnings. Combined, our voices could change the world, or something dramatic like that. There isn't anything about us that is little except our way together. Our way of being together is small.

Since I can't wear jeans to the V.F.W. scholarship luncheon, I put on my gray dress. This is an occasion where one has to wear a dress, so I have to wear my gray dress that does everything a gray dress should. It takes in the world and reflects nothing. I put on the required bits of make-up, try to fluff up my hair, and become almost unnoticeable. In the hall I step quietly over a sleeping cat and grab my purse. One of my housemates is sleeping; the other silently waves me out the door.

As I drive up the highway ramp, I try to go over Jamila's essay in my head. When I find a good radio station, I let my brain drift back to Jamila and I realize that I don't know how she feels about her V.F.W. "What it Means to Be an American" essay. I remember sensing her energy in her first draft. When I told her she won the school contest and could now compete in the statewide contest, she smiled. She didn't jump or waste energy, she just said, "Thank you," and smiled. Her eyes didn't sparkle and her hands didn't betray any inward amazement. Jamila just was happy. Jamila just was. I don't know how long she worked on revising her essay. She told Eric, the social studies teacher, that she went home and meditated on it for a while and the next day it came back pretty well done. That was Jamila's way. Eric and I read her essay over some beers at the Pub and discussed its attributes. Eric told me he really wasn't good at judging essays. I was the English teacher so that was my job. I would have final say. I remember thinking that he was just shirking his duties as one of the "advisors" for this contest. But looking back, I realize he wasn't shirking anything. He was letting me decide and I decided Jamila's essay was good. Since Eric and I were still considered the "young" teachers at East Hartford High, we did things like help kids with essay contests, get involved, and go to scholarship luncheons at the V.F.W. on a Sunday.

When I arrive at Eric's apartment, he is outside waiting in a snazzy sport coat. "I've got news," he says.


"That's your news?"

"That's my news. I really like that."

"Your news is that you like my jacket."

"I don't always like your jackets."

"I don't always care if you do or do not."

"Is it new?"

"It's new."

"Should I publish, you think?"

"I think you're nuts. Hey, take my parking spot when I pull out." I am still in my car with my window rolled down for our quick repartee. I roll my window up and turn to park as he pulls out into the street. I lock my doors and jump out to run to his Volvo. It is starting to sprinkle, but feels like it will really rain soon.

"Jenny, I got in."

"Yeah, I'm in," I shift in my seat to slam the door, pull my dress straight under my coat, and reach for the seat belt strap.

"No, I got into law school -- NYU." I turn to look at him still clutching my seat belt unhooked in one hand.

"You're going to law school," I echo. He shifts into third gear to pick up speed.

"Yeah. I'm going in September. I need time to let people know, though. So don't you know...just don't tell anyone else yet. I have to tell them." I'm staring at him and I know this is making him nervous so I let myself speak. But I speak from my heart so he is still uncomfortable.

"Well, Eric...I'm happy, really happy for you because I know that's what you want to do. You know, we've talked about that. That's great. I know you can't stay here and teach. You want to be a lawyer...and...that's great. That's great, you know...Hey, congratulations. But I'll miss you. I'll really miss you." He stares ahead at the highway signs and I breathe out because I've actually said something meaningful that I won't take back with a joke. This throws him off. I know. So he changes topics and fills me in on what is happening with Jamila. She has her tickets for her mother, father, and brother. They will all be going to the luncheon so we should save seats for them is if we get there first. We should all try to sit together. We should all try to be together. We should stay together, but my mind has already drifted to New York City. I try to focus on Jamila's family, but all I see is Eric in a small-windowed studio in Brooklyn with a cracked bowl of subway tokens by the door and a worn blue sweatshirt hanging on
a nail. I see him spread out on his couch with a huge, complicated law book in his hands and cockroaches scurrying at his feet. His waist is thin from bad food and his face puffy from too much beer. He has my phone number scribbled on a scrap of paper in the drawer by his phone, but there are so many phone numbers on it, he barely remembers the area code for Connecticut.

"Look for route 39.

Route 39," and my eyes drift out the window through the rain to focus on street signs. Jamila talked about streets in her essay, or was it neighborhoods? Her essay said something about her life as an African-American young woman living in East Hartford. She wasn't suddenly "the youth of America" or "tomorrow's future." She was Jamila, with Jamila's dreams, fears, loves, and ambitions. She had written about working at the day care center and talking to her grandmother. She had written of her dream to be a pediatrician and her desire to have her neighborhood be safe. Thinking about it in Eric's Volvo, I realized some of her images might have been drawn from MTV rap videos. I doubt that anyone has ever fired bullets at Jamila, but they've fired bullets at someone and Jamila knows this. Because I am lost in Eric and Jamila's dreams, I don't notice the "Welcome to Plainville" sign. I see Jamila bending over a small, scared child. She wears a white lab coat, stethoscope and a solid smile. Her presence alone calms the crying child even before the hand reaches the forehead to check for a fever. The eyes go over the child to the tired mother, then Jamila calmly says, "We can help you if you don't have insurance. He will be fine. It's the chicken pox so let his day care know...but really, he will be fine..."

"There it is."

"Route 39," I ask. I missed the sign or something. When we pull into the parking lot we have trouble finding a spot. It's already so crowded that as we hand our tickets to the woman in the foyer she heads off to take us to specific seats. "We're, ah, we're waiting for our student and her family. Can we save seats for them?"

"Can you see them here yet? We're starting soon." Eric and I shuffle past the other ticket holders to peek into the quickly crowding hall. We know immediately that Jamila isn't there. Nobody who looks like Jamila is either. Everyone in the long rows of rickety chairs is as white as the disposable tablecloths covering the tables. Jamila and her family are not there. I am silent. I begin the afternoon with a lack of appropriate words. I can't turn to the sister of the Order of the V.F.W. wives and say, "Jamila's black."

"Worse, we were recognized as the two educated liberals that we were. But he did fine."

"Yeah, I went over with his man talk. I was sure we would get tossed out of the bowling alley bar once he did this before in sports bars. He's got that manly conversation down. I remember the first time he..."

"And Jamila picked them up. I guess she just called and assumed..."

"Assumed?"

"And Jamila's not here yet." He's bending his head down a bit because of his height and the noise of the hall.

"Well, it's going to start in a minute. So you'll have to sit here," and she points to two seats across from each other by the door. "There are empty seats!"

"We're from East Hartford. Our student is Jamila Thompson."

"East Hartford? Well, you're not a finalist!"

"A what?" I poke in.

"A finalist. I mean we're welcome to be here, but only the six finalists need to be here. They don't know who the winner is yet, but the finalists all get something. They sit up there at the front table. Over there. Here you go. You can sit here." She's off and Eric and I are left squeeze down the crowded rows to our seats. We say nothing till we sit and mull a bit. We look up at the same time to sigh together

"And Jamila's not here yet."

"Oh, East Hartford! Great place! Pratt and Whitney. Good place - East Hartford!"

"We're from Bethel, her wife chimes in. "Did you tell them, dear?"

"East Hartford - great place! It's great you teachers come to support your student. Is he up there with the gang?"

"No, Eric smiles his cool-guy smile and begins explaining the Jamila story as I tune out. I've seen him do this before in sports bars. He's got that manly conversation down. I remember the first time he did this and took over with his man talk. I was sure we would get tossed out of the bowling alley bar once we were recognized as the two educated liberals that we were. But he did fine."

"Jameela. That's a different name."

"Oh jeez," I cover my forehead and prop my elbow on the table. "Oh jeez."

"Hey! What's the problem here? Can't have any sad faces here," the man next to Eric elbows his way into our conversation with a big G.I. smile and a twist of his hearing aid. "I'm Jack Paxton. From the Bethel branch. How ya doing?"

"Hi. Eric Ferris. This is Jenny Rosen. We're teachers..." Eric begins the story while I scan the entryway for signs of Jamila.

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"Jameela. That's a different name..."

"I pour a glass of water from the plastic pitcher on the table. Then I pour one for Eric. "Oh dear, pass that water, please," then I'm pouring water for the men on both sides of me.

"We're from East Hartford," and the introductions begin again.

"Hey Charlie! This here Eric is originally from Vermont - a skier!" Eric smiles as Jack puts his shoulder. "Bet you never heard of the 75th Infantry? Hey? We were skiers let me tell you that..." And Eric is listening to World War II stories of the Skiing Infantry. I spot Jamila and her family just as the first speaker stands to do the Pledge of Allegiance. In the confusion Jamila's waves to me, but is
quickly escorted to a back table and I'm stuck rising with the crowd to place my hand on my heart. When the pledge is over I eye Eric and we move to go talk to Jamila but everyone is still standing so we're blocked. Before we have a chance to say, "Excuse me," the national anthem begins and we have to turn back around and sing. I know the words. I even know the alto part, but I'm distracted because I want to talk to Jamila. When I mess up the words, the man in front of me sucks his head sideways as if he's about to scold me, but he doesn't. When everyone finally sits, Eric and I scramble past folding chairs and over to Jamila's table. We're about to jump in with the story when Jamila gracefully pauses us to introduce her parents and younger brother. Eric and I are like two of the Marx brothers about to tell the Duchess that her daughter is in love with our normal brother except that we can only communicate with obnoxious horns and flying pies. We're comic. Jamila is ballet. We're slapstick and Jamila is pure grace. She accepts the bad news with a nibble on her lower lip and a few nods. She turns to make eye contact with her parents, then looks back at us with, "Well, we're here. We'll stay for the presentation. I'd like to hear the winner read," and she smiles. So we smile, but we're embarrassed. We're the adults here and we didn't take care of things. Since there's no room at Jamila's table, we shuffle back to our old table.

"Hey! Vermont's back! The skier. You ever ski Mount Tom?"

"Oh yeah. That's nothing..." and Eric is back in the man talk while I pass the vegetables with a sheepish smile. We eat within this onslaught of man-talk - skiing, guns, football, and war history.

"He was seventy-three years old and blind as a bat, but - you should have seen him ski! You should have seen him! They don't make men like that..." I'm listening to bits because Eric is carrying the conversation with enough "you bets" that I'm not needed. I glance over to see Jamila wiping her brother's mouth with her napkin.

"Pass me some of that cream roast, dear, if you please," and I'm called into service again. The program really gets going when the members running for various offices get up to speak. They are all introducing each other and thanking America for being so wonderful. When they finally announce the third place winner, I'm sipping bad coffee out of a plastic cup. Eric is full into his Civil War bit, but he sure looks clean. I can't look back at Jamila as they drum up excitement for the first-place winner. When the presentation is over and Eric and I have been polite enough, we burst out of the doors and scream in the parking lot. We're not loud enough for people to notice, but we need to relieve stress. We run in the rain to his car and jump in. "You were a good talker back there."

"Well, you know, I'm the man and you're just the chick," and we laugh. Then he adds, "I can't wait to go to law school. I just can't stand this anymore." I nod and look out the window but I don't see the rain. I see Eric the lawyer at a working lunch with a client. He is laughing at a joke while raising his forefinger for the check. The waiter wears a white shirt and bow tie as he places the leather folder on the cream tablecloth. Eric pulls out some sort of gold card and smiles to his client with that man smile that says, "I'll protect your company. I'll protect your money. I'll protect your power and I'll be just fine."
Friday, around 7:00 P.M.

Keenan O'Leary laid on the guerney screaming, "Kill them bugs! They're falling off the ceiling! Get them off me!" His voice raised to a feverish pitch as he strained against the belts that held him down. "Calm down, man," the orderly warned as doctors and nurses looked up, their ministrations to other patients interrupted. Slowly, O'Leary began to wail, a low plaintive sound that gradually rose in pitch and volume until the walls of the emergency room reverberated with the sound.

"Can someone shut that man up?" an angry voice snapped.

O'Leary opened his bloodshot eyes to see the orderly's face peering down into his. "You God?"

he asked the face.

It laughed. "I've been called a lot of things, but that's usually not one of them."

"You the devil then?"

A chuckle. "No, not that either."

"Then I'm not dead?"

"No," the face replied. "You're very much alive."

Suddenly a whoop rose from the depths of O'Leary's wizened body. Angry mutterings rippled across the room. O'Leary's eyes quickly scanned the area, savoring the interruption.

Suddenly a familiar voice intruded. "Well, Keenan O'Leary! How are you doing, my friend?"

He turned to the orderly. "I'll take care of this man."

Shining a light into O'Leary's eyes he questioned, "What brings you here today?"

"Seein' bugs, Doc. They're crawling all over. There! See!" He slapped fiercely. "Missed, damn it."

"Keenan, last time you were in it was rats, and the time before that it was elephants or something."

"Pink ones," Keenan replied sheepishly. "Not very original, huh?"

"I can't admit you. You know that, don't you?" The doctor's voice was dead serious now.

"Ah, Doc, it's cold out there!"

"I can get them to send up a tray before I discharge you," the doctor hesitated, looking questioningly at Keenan.

"Naw, never mind. Unbuckle this thing will you?" He pulled impatiently at the belts that still held him to the guerney.

Keenan stood up slowly, tightly grasping a tattered knit cap. Reflexively, the doctor stepped back, overcome by the stench of whiskey and despair.

"How about a cab? Can I call you a cab?"

Keenan laughed deeply. "Now where would I go in a cab?"

"The shelter? I could have it take you to the shelter."

"Been there already," O'Leary muttered. As he shuffled along the familiar route to the discharge desk Keenan O'Leary called back over his shoulder, "See ya 'round, Doc."
Footsteps in the basement, stomping off snow-covered boots.  
"Dad's home!" I hollered and raced down the stairs.  
There stood my father in ice-encrusted overalls  
his blue parka emblazoned with the emblem:  
Ohio Water Service,  
the letters now hidden beneath a frosted glaze.  

"You didn't know that your old man was really  
the Abominable Snowman," he said  
as he stripped the snowy cap off his silvery head,  
Red-faced from the wind,  
hair plastered down with sweat.  

"It's nearly midnight. We waited up for you."  
I shivered and rubbed my arms a minute.  
"All that snow and wind out there. We were worried."  
I hung his snow-covered coat by the door to defrost.  
Then looking closely, I observed  
his bushy snow-capped brows.  
"Dad, you've got icicles on your eyebrows."  
I pointed and waited,  
ot sure if I should laugh or cry.  
His gaze turned upward at the spears of ice.  
Then with the back of one hand  
he swept them away in silence.  

"Your old pop's a popsicle."  
He laughed and I sighed.  
Then I too had to laugh when he did his Stan Laurel smile  
and stood his frozen overalls upright on the marbled tile.  

Then I hustled him off to the warm kitchen upstairs  
to pull on his worn woolen slipper socks,  
to prop up his feet and relax in his chair,  
to sip Mom's fresh perked coffee  
and complain about his old yellow backhoe  
and broken water mains  
and midwinter storms  
and to hear us say  
how good it was  
to have him come home.

Memories never die. They may lie in one's subconscious as puzzle pieces, waiting to be put together.  
I still vividly remember that Saturday afternoon six years ago. The phone rang innocently enough. It was my father. A chill scribbled through me.  
When you live 3,280 miles away, phone calls during the middle of the day are always suspect. Like the "midnight call," an alarm sounds.  
"What's wrong?" I inquired.  
Silence...that prolonged moment.  
"Not to worry," Dad strongly assured me. "I have cancer, but with chemo and radiation, I have at least a year, maybe five."  
After talking to Dad's doctor and hearing not quite the same optimistic message, I was off to Seattle. My husband and children were safely tucked in with the assurances of friends and family. I needed to be the daughter again.  
The days ahead were agonizing for me. The hurt seemed unbearable at times. My heart was being wrecked, sliced, and devoured simultaneously. I was frightened.  
Dad had a more sanguine attitude. He seemed almost a happy man at times, seeing what I couldn't through my grief...finding the ordinary extraordinary, the pleasure of little things. He gave me his gifts.  
As Dad's body grew more fragile, his spirit gained strength, direction, and purpose. As I witnessed his physical demise, I experienced his soul's vitality.  
During those last three weeks, Dad continued to share his gifts...the panorama of his life, the many facets of his personality. We spoke about what he saw and how he felt; he listened as I told him about David, the children, my hopes, and my fears. It was our catharsis.  
How gracious of him to allow me to walk those last steps with him. Tubes, medicine, incontinence...the disease took its toll...radiation, catheterization, chills, bed baths. His dignity continued to be reduced, and yet, in him I saw the greatest dignity.  
Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. I used to think Jesus had performed the ultimate, magnanimous act. My Dad allowed me to love him. His was the act of magnitude. Giving was easy.  
Old revelations, new realizations.  
On August 23, 1988, Dad was freed from the airless tomb that had encased him. Freed to begin his new life, belonging to everything, in a place where the sun continues to warm us both.  
Beginnings and endings...the ultimate gifts we can share.
When You Wish Upon A Star
by Joy Marsella

At 3:00 p.m. the noisy buzzer sounded its happy message and children squirmed excitedly in their seats awaiting the cue. "That's all for today, children," Miss Pierce called out when she heard the familiar rustlings, "class is dismissed. Have a safe holiday!"

The students yelled back quick good-byes as they grabbed their backpacks and lunch boxes and ran to catch their busses. By 3:02 p.m., Eleanor Pierce sat alone at her desk in her silent classroom faced with the very real prospect of solitude. During the Christmas holiday, she managed to find a job wrapping presents at the mall gift center. Her February vacation found her baby-sitting at a ski lodge in Vermont. For this Spring vacation however, she had been unable to find any job to occupy her time and was now faced with the unpleasant reality of being entirely alone for a whole week.

Eleanor was the quintessential "school marm." Her dress was conservative, her glasses thick, her long hair neatly kept and tightly controlled. She was efficient and dependable to a fault. She was also very nervous and not prone to impulse or adventure. She had lived with and cared for her elderly mother on her own for most of her thirty-seven years. This left little time in her life for friends or a social life. It left very little time for herself.

When her mother passed away last August, she left Eleanor her house, her cat, and her cabin on the lake. Eleanor boldly sold the house and bought a small condo close to school. The cat disappeared just two days after they moved into the new place. She hadn't been to the cabin on the lake since she was in elementary school, and sitting alone in her silent classroom, she began to think about why.

The cabin, on Lake Sebago, came to her mother's estate from her father's side of the family, originally belonging to her grandfather whom Eleanor never met. Her father, Joe Pierce, inherited the cabin and surrounding lake property as the sole male heir in his family. Eleanor could still picture him clearly in her mind. Joe Pierce was a kind and gentle man. He had warm, blue eyes and deep dimples in his cheeks that took away all your inhibitions when he smiled at you. Eleanor and her father were always very close.

As an only child, born late in her parents' life, she was adored and cherished by them both. Unfortunately, Eleanor's mother, Beverly, became very sick after the pregnancy. Doctor's told the family that the late pregnancy had led to many complications and Beverly was constantly in and out of hospitals while Eleanor was growing up. Joe did his best to make up for that by spending lots of time with Eleanor. They would read and play together. Joe taught her to climb trees and Eleanor taught him to play Barbies.

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They would spend every vacation at the lake house, swimming, fishing, playing games, and staying up late at night to count the stars and make secret wishes. Her daddy always told her that if she "only closed her eyes tightly and wished hard on the brightest star she saw, all her dreams would come true." If only Eleanor had known that her father was sick she would have wished on the stars to see her again. After high school, Eleanor attended the local college and earned a teaching degree. She and her mother lived modestly and, with Joe's life insurance and Eleanor's salary, they were able to make ends meet.

While Eleanor had done an excellent job of taking care of their home and her mother, she had never had much of an opportunity for a life of her own. These past eight months, since her mother's death, had been both liberating and petrifying. She finally had the freedom to take care of her own needs and her own dreams, but it had been so long she wasn't sure where to start. Selling the house had been a big step. She found living alone in the house very difficult after sharing it with her mother for so long. She thought being alone would be easier in a smaller place, and it was for the most part, except on the weekends. So Eleanor took a volunteer position at a local children's hospital every Saturday and Sunday, reading and playing with the patients in the cancer ward. During school vacations she filled her time at her part time jobs and thought herself very content.

Eleanor was thinking about this very thing as she drove home from school that day. She was still thinking about it as she ate a quiet dinner alone at her small butcher block table, in her small, white kitchen. This very first night, of her very first vacation alone, Eleanor, sipping a glass of white zinfandel, stared out the window into the black night and changed her life forever.

It was so bright that at first Eleanor mistook it for a plane of some sort, but the longer she stared, the brighter it grew and Eleanor realized it was a star, the likes of which she had never seen. She wasn't sure how or why, but at that moment, Eleanor was drawn back in time to summer nights at the lake with her dad. She remembered his promise about dreams coming true and tightly closed eyes and she felt this star was her chance to make a difference in her life. She closed her eyes tightly and wished as hard as she could on that brilliant star. When she opened her eyes, the star was gone and she was the same. Disappointed, she finished her wine and went off to bed, chastising herself for believing in the silly things of her childhood.

A noisy telephone ringing woke Eleanor with a jolt. Slightly foggy from last night's wine, she had a hard time understanding what the stranger on the other end of the line was telling her. Apparently, there were some large, outstanding medical bills and the lawyer in charge of settling her mother's affairs was advising her to sell the lake house. "That property is worth a fortune and your mother told me you hadn't used the cabin in almost twenty years," he was saying. Eleanor showered and changed quickly, trying to sort out the information he had given her. He had taken the liberty of contacting a real estate agent who said she'd have no problem selling the property and wanted to meet with Eleanor as soon as possible. Happily, she now found herself with plans for her vacation. She decided to go down to the lake house and meet with the real estate agent. She wasn't sure what she wanted to do about selling the place, but she resolved impulsively to figure it out once she got there. Packing quickly, she was on the road in her VW Bug before 9:00 a.m.

Around noon she was pulling off the highway and onto the main road that wound down to the
lake. She stopped at a gas station to call the real estate agent and arrange a meeting time. After agreeing to meet the agent at 5:00 p.m., she filled up her tank and headed to the cabin. She had a very strange feeling about going there, which she just attributed to how quickly she had made the trip. The road leading to her cabin was thickly overgrown with weeds and brush. She had some trouble navigating her car through it all, but within minutes she was standing in front of the cabin that overlooked the crystal clear water of Lake Sebago. Eleanor was overwhelmed by the beauty of the lake and the memories it evoked, which is why she didn't hear the man when he called to her. "Hello, I said. Can I help you?"

She knew he had spoken and that she should reply, but she was momentarily frozen in this place. In front of her was an intriguing man, with deep blue eyes, a radiant smile and those dimples! He reminded her of someone. Suddenly, Eleanor wished she had paid more attention when she dressed this morning. She hadn't even had time to put her hair up. She knew she was fidgeting with it now as she spoke to him self-consciously. She introduced herself and then, as if they were old friends, told him all about the lawyer's call and the real estate agent and her father, Joe. "It was his cabin. He used to bring me here every vacation and we would swim and fish and count stars..." Suddenly, her voice trailed off. He was smiling at her. Why was he staring at her she wondered? Why was she so captivated by that smile?

The man's name was Bob. He owned the place next to hers. He told Eleanor that he had been looking after the place and trying to keep it up since he moved to the lake six years ago. "The way our property lines touch, I kind of felt like it was my duty to watch over this place as I would my own. I felt sorry for it, such a beautiful place with no one to love or take care of it."

"That's why I'm here," she heard herself say, "and I can't wait to get started cleaning the place up." What was she talking about? Why did she say that? She couldn't stay here, she had her job and her condo. Could she? Bob was talking to her again. She heard only words and phrases. She nodded laughing and tossing her hair. What was happening? Her mind was racing with all the possibilities that had just opened up before her. She wasn't sure of anything but the magic of the moment.

A car pulled up and momentarily broke the spell. It was the real estate agent. Bob was standing very close to Eleanor now as the three of them moved into a conversation. The words flew from Eleanor's mouth before she knew what was happening. "I am sorry I made you come all the way down here," Eleanor began. "It's the oddest thing. I haven't been here in a very long time, but suddenly I feel like I'm home. I couldn't even consider selling this property, but I do have a condo I could use your help selling."

The real estate agent took down numbers and addresses. They agreed to meet next week to go over the sale of her condo, the agent assuring her the sale of which would be enough to cover the medical bills. Eleanor was waving goodbye.

She was standing on her porch overlooking the lake. The sun was just beginning its descent from the sky. Bob, still by her side, was saying something about dinner and smiling at her. She smiled back. Eleanor didn't have it all figured out, but she knew this was her chance. She had wished for happiness in her life and she knew, somehow, she had just found it.

After dinner Bob and Eleanor walked along the edge of the lake as they would do many times in the next twenty years. "Look at all the stars," he remarked still smiling at Eleanor, "it's a perfect night for dreaming." Eleanor looked up to the sky and saw her special star from the night before had returned once again. She believed she understood now. "Thank you, daddy," she whispered, as Bob took her hand.

Families give meaning to structures. Houses stand as only frames and material, but with family they are alive and have character. In 1952, the "Big House" took its first breath of life as my grandparents, George and Louise, crossed the threshold followed by their grown children Richard and Joan. The "Little House" was born one year later with the anticipation of a growing extended family.

The understated but inviting houses with rough weather worn shingles and eroded white trim are settled on a one acre lot on Ninigret Pond in Rhode Island. The houses seem to be the final stop in the life of collections of tired but comfortable couches and easy chairs, mismatched plates, dinner forks and spoons, and painted tables and kitchen chairs. Walls are spotted with camp crafts and photographs, even a signed picture of Art Carney, who rented the house while he was doing summer theater in a nearby town. Although the amenities are not meant for luxurious living, they welcomed relaxing and conversation. The dining room at the Big House has a table large enough to always fit one more person who was late coming home from the beach for dinner. The porch has the kind of rockers that put your mind and soul at ease when you settle in, and the big piazza has a seemingly endless number of chairs all facing the center of the room so that you never have to turn to look at someone during a conversation. Everything in the houses are familiarly propped in the same places year to year, just as the occupants expect they will see as they pursue the scene for the first time each summer. This in itself is comforting and reassuring. It is a gathering place for our family. There is always room enough for everyone to stay. The walls are thin and at night the houses take on a camp-like atmosphere where giggles and whispers can be heard from room to room and from house to house.

The property is edged with mature maples, honeysuckle, wild roses, and sea grass. The lawn in front slopes gradually and then drops to a cut edge where the toddler-height seawall trims the small beach that grows to Milk Bottle Point at the very end. On a perfectly clear evening the view seems to widen to see Montauk Light to the west, Narraganset to the east, the dancing lights of Block Island straight off the porch, and the dunes of the barrier beach on the other side of the pond. This expanse always made, staying up late to talk, eating fresh peach ice cream from Main's, and watching the fireflies or the lights of the boats on the water.

The most significant memory on my list is shared by only one other. The heavy August air had surrendered to a cold front in the middle of the night and I woke to a spectacular thunderstorm. My sleep
had been disturbed by the rushing rain and I could hear Mimi in the kitchen shutting windows. I gave in to the commotion of the storm and strolled out to the porch where I found my grandmother in her denim housecoat sitting in the dark. I too unfolded myself into one of the hunter green highback Kennedy rockers that faced the picture window and nestled into the pocketed caned seat, smooth, timeworn and grayed. Mimi fixed us a "thunderstorm snack" and we dipped graham crackers into mismatched souvenir tumblers of ice cold milk. We each attempted to time the dunking with the rhythm of the array of persistent flashes of lightning. We commented on how we needed the rain, how much lightning there was, and that this was undeniably the only place to really experience a good thunderstorm. A spell of silence and contentment fell up upon us.

Mimi was 88, the same number as her Rhode Island license plate number that was once her father's. As the storm settled in Mimi began to recount some stories from her past. She revisited her days of courting my grandfather, how they married and started a family, and how they had been fortunate enough to find a spot like this to build their summer house. She said that the first time she met my grandfather she knew he was going to add spirit to her life and that the first sight of this plot of land had been almost like a promise of good times to come. The storm then gave way to a steady shower of rain and Mimi and I headed back to bed touched by thoughts and reflections. I couldn't help but think while trying to get back to sleep that my grandmother was reviewing her days and that I was the audience to a rarely told story.

The following January Mimi died at the age of 88. That was "her number" we all remarked. I believe that she knew that night of the storm that she would be leaving soon, she almost chose to; permitted herself. Exactly one year to the day she passed away I dreamed of her at the beach sitting there in the rocker with her housecoat on. We both knew she had only come for a visit. We only had time for a brief chat. I asked her how she was, how she was feeling. She claimed she felt very well and after a pause and a slight giggle added that she had met the most wonderful man. The two of us exchanged a brief chat. I asked her how she was, how she was feeling, She claimed she felt very well and after a pause and a slight giggle added that she had met the most wonderful man. The two of us exchanged a brief chat. I asked her how she was, how she was feeling. She claimed she felt very well and after a pause and a slight giggle added that she had met the most wonderful man.

Forty-three years after George and Louise built the place where a family's heartbeat would sprout new life. We hold in safekeeping all the days we filled with our own spirit just by being a family there.
As his teeth came in, I decided he should have every squirrel's favorite food. We bought shelled Diamond walnuts for him and he attacked them with zeal. He did not consume them in those early weeks, only shredded them and left nut crumbs all about. After a month had passed, Max's tail had become a thin, soft plum. He was covered with lustrous fur delicately colored grey and white, and touched with sable and cinnamon. My own health was visibly improved. My parents decided that since Max was a bit older I could get back to doing what they valued most, working.

I worked some evenings and each weekend at a local antique shop. I enjoyed the atmosphere of its dimly lit, cavernous old rooms. Among the bulky Victorian furniture, the silk vintage dresses, and partial sets of old china, I was at ease. Max slept, curled up in the pocket of my flannel overshirt as I worked. If I accidentally pressed a glass lampshade against that pocket as I polished it, he would emit a rash of critical chatter clearly giving me hell. More than once, as I waited on a customer, they would let out a horrified shriek as Max's rodent head popped unexpectedly out of my pocket.

Max's diet gradually shifted to all solid foods: sunflower seeds, vegetables, fruits and nuts were consumed in copious amounts. They took a little preparation but I was now free of the bottle routine. Mother's annual buying trip for my Grandfather's five-and-dime was at the end of April. The trip to Hershey, Pennsylvania was to be a mother-daughter event that year. Max was old enough to stay at home with my brother and father. When Mom and I returned, Max was well and they assured us everything had gone smoothly. Days later, Mother found a few bits of chewed biscuit among her best flow-blue on the plate rail high on the kitchen wall. Investigation revealed further evidence that Max had had the run of the house during our absence, doing his high wire act freely and without supervision. When asked about this, my brother and dad feigned ignorance while smiling sheepishly.

On warm May days I brought Maximillian out onto the lawn. His delicate nose sniffed the ground as he selected tender shoots of grass for nibbling. Plump and inquisitive, he frolicked about, running away a bit and then returning to climb up my side onto my shoulder. His chatter had many qualities, one version was an obvious greeting sung into my ear each time he came back. Soon, Max was able to go out on his own for gradually lengthening periods of time. He learned to ask to be let in or out by chattering near the door.

By the time the tutor was sent from the school, Max required little care at all. At this point, a bit bored with my free time, I was eager to catch up on my studies so I could return to school before the prom. Mr. Amkraut, my New York-accented algebra teacher, initially arrived bearing my books and assignments, and then came for an hour or so each afternoon. He was a strange man, none too personable, and did little actual tutoring at my house. He occupied himself in other ways such as bringing his fishing pole in with him, pulling out all the line, then meticulously reeling it back in while I worked.

He smoked cigarettes without asking, balancing the burning butt on the edge of the kitchen table, letting the ashes fall onto the braided rug. Although he was not helpful, he was not overly distracting either. One afternoon, he was balancing his checkbook as I was deep in concentration on an English assignment. Upon hearing Max hanging on the front screen door chattering to gain attention, I absently mumbled "hello", crossed the floor, and opened the door. Max sprang around it to leap onto my shoulder, settle against my neck, and sing his usual greeting into my ear.

As I returned to the table with Max perching like some curious parrot, I caught sight of Mr. Amkraut's pale face, disbelieving eyes and open mouth. He choked and lunged up out of his chair, sending his hank statements scattering around the room. He regained control of himself, collected his papers and took a seat at the far end of the table, shaking his head and muttering softly.

Not long after that, Max's absences stretched overnight. He returned less and less frequently. Once, in the woods, I saw him leave the company of other squirrels to run up to my shoulder and perch next to my ear. I had hoped Max would grow up to be a regular squirrel and go out into his world to be independent of me. Isn't that every mother's wish? I don't recall the last time I saw him for sure. Though it was fifteen years ago, my family still refers to every squirrel at our birdfeeders as "Max," and they are all welcome.
Belle

(Life's Little Instructions Book)

(excerpt from a longer piece)

by Mary-Jane Bazda

Belle was a vibrant, energetic, and young seventy-one years old and about to embark on the most challenging adventure of her life. She had lost her husband, her best friend and lover, six years earlier to a heart attack. Always active, living life in full color, she continued with her volunteer work, the Red Cross Board of Directors, the Hospital Auxiliary, AARP, and the Senior Center to name but a few of the many organizations that benefited from her cheerful voice and knowledgeable skills gleaned from a lifetime of working in a service-oriented environment. As a matter of record, she was recognized as Manchester's Mrs. Senior Citizen of the Year in 1987, for her many volunteer efforts. Never wanting to be a burden to her children, a true survivor of whatever life threw her way, and over the years it did have its peaks and valleys, she continued on enjoying friends, babysitting for her grandchildren and being a safe harbor, in any storm, for her family. She was always there with her unconditional love, support, and yes, even unsolicited advice.

Belle's grandchildren thought that she was the smartest woman alive, a veritable fountain of knowledge, and called her for all types of information. They'd call her for the best route to wherever they might be traveling as she had been everywhere and always knew the shortest and most direct route. They called about the weather because she never missed the daily news and therefore always knew the latest forecast; or, she would call the children and tell them, that with the windchill factor, it was going to be thirty below zero and they had better "dress warm" or risk frostbite. It was a standing joke that if her car was in front of the house as they walked home from school, rather than risk a lecture on the necessity of dressing properly to ward off colds, they would stop and put on their hats and mittens before Grandma caught them, although they couldn't do much about their forgotten undershirts. Chris often called to tell her that he just shot a thirty-five for nine or had an assist in hockey; she would take him driving in Big Belle, her yellow Bonneville, when he was first learning how to drive. MK called Belle every morning just to chat so that she wouldn't be afraid while passing the time before having to leave for school. Belle held so many important roles in the lives of these children, freely dispensing her advice on every subject known to mankind but always with that unconditional love. They knew that her bark was much worse than her bite and that they could count on her for almost anything, including letting them in the house when the key, hidden under the window sill, had somehow disappeared and they were suddenly locked out.

Belle was a feisty old broad who was direct and forthright; no veiled commands for the tour director as her husband affectionately called her. She had a certain zest for life from singing "Hello Dolly" in Cavey's lounge to wearing those crazy Christmas ball earings that lit up by battery. She had a great sense of humor and never missed an opportunity to swap the latest joke. She dressed in style and her apartment was beautifully furnished with a lifetime collection of cherished pieces from family photographs lining the walls to her cherry hut filled with antique Fleu Blue. Belle had worked hard and she played hard, attributes that most would do well to have. Life seemed good. And then it started, little by little, a change in lifestyle, so great, that no one, certainly not her family, could ever begin to imagine.

Burned by the flame

Is the draw so strong
She must flutter about
Only to singe her wings

Again

Brilliance and passion glow
Within
There lies potential

To soar
This is the summer of Will's garden, the Japanese garden that will forever define our yard. Massive stones have been inched into place to create wide steps. A huge granite mushroom of rock upon rock marks the center where the stone paths meet and cross. Will went to the woods and brought back carpets of moss to line his banks. Erosion was a secondary concern to the texture, color, and atmosphere being created. He is emphatic about what does, or doesn't fit.

Will was always the most persistent of our children. "Why don't we do the coloring later?" I might suggest. This delay tactic did little good if Will really wanted those Crayolas. I always thought this persistence would serve him well. In a world of shifting sand, there aren't many who recognize what they want and hold on until they have it. So it has been with his garden. Well-meaning suggestions have been met with quiet refusal. The Japanese maple and dwarf evergreens are planted in a pattern pleasing to Will.

His second-grade teacher wanted to have Will's head examined. "Sometimes he's just not with us," Mr. Galente told us in the PPT meeting on the day he suggested a neurological workup at Farmington, a PEDAL, it was called.

My husband's quick response, "Maybe it's nicer where he is," put an end to that discussion ten long years ago.

Today was the end of the ferns. Will dug and arranged dozens of them along the backdrop of his garden. Tall, bright, green, lacy ferns in some places and small, dark, Boston ferns in others add a cool flow to the borders.

Now there are only finishing touches to be done. The stones to cover the flat area will arrive next week. They will be raked, in Japanese style, to create a contemplative design. I suspect Will already has a pattern in mind.

His strong back has worked all summer with a vision of future delight. The beautiful Japanese iris Will planted as the mainstay of this garden won't bloom for us until next June.

It's pretty much the same with Will. In a few weeks he'll head for Iowa and all the excitement that college holds - new friends, adventures, challenges. When he returns in the Spring, his garden will not be the same. There will be buds on the iris, new growth on the evergreens, a changed landscape, filled out, defined, and, no doubt, more beautiful.

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Growing
by Mary Martin

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Who Am I?
by Cynthia E. Wysocki

In my classroom

Around 8:00 a.m.
Many different students

Arrive, some more ready for the day
Than others.
Each of my students
Achieves most when I give them
Choices, choices in activities and topics.
Here my students
Encounter a variety of
Reading and writing
Assignments with much enthusiasm.

Lessons occur
Every minute I
Allow for cooperative groups to
Run in the classroom.
New friends are made,
Exciting lessons learned, and
Relaxing conferences between students are held.

All cooperative learning

Results in
Exemplified motivation in all of our subject
Areas!
Don't be fooled, though,
Every student must take
Responsibility for the success of the group.

Always allow

Thinkers to write
Having already made their own meaning
Individually.
Now a teacher can see that students
have learned when they
Know how to apply meaning to their
Everyday
Real life!
Also, a teacher must always
Write and
Read.
It is so important for a
Teacher to
Experience being a positive and enthusiastic
Role model for his or her students.
When I was young, I enjoyed summers at the beach. These were wonderful times, shared for the many years with members of my family which included: two parents, one brother, one set of grandparents, three aunts, four uncles, three cousins, and three dogs of various shapes and sizes (the dogs, I mean). But let’s move along.

As soon as school got out, we’d pile into our green and white Chevy station wagon. Restless with the thoughts of leaving home for eight weeks, the “check list” soon began.

“Did you close and lock all the windows?”
“Yep!”
“Did you remember to stop the mail and newspaper?”
“Did it yesterday!”

“Who remembers packing the box of sheets, pillows, and towels?”
“I do. I’m sitting on that box, Mom,” my little brother Bobby could be heard as he adjusted from an uncomfortable position on the box.

Since the old Chevy traveled at speeds between forty and fifty MPH, the fifty miles down to Old Saybrook’s Cornfield Point section seemed to take hours. There were the usual stops for the necessities: getting gas, walking the dog, eating dinner, (usually hot dogs sold by the roadside in Colchester).

Sometime that evening we’d all arrive, one by one, cars packed tightly to the point of overflow with a beach chair, golf clubs, or fishing pole projecting out of the window. The first arrival would pick up the key at the rental office and open up the cottage to another season of sunshine, salt water, and sand, plenty of sand!

After spending three previous years at the “big house” each person would help unload the cars, carrying armloads up to their “designated” rooms. The second floor included four bedrooms and a small porch. I shared the porch with my brother and cousin, Steve. My two “older” cousins, Karen and Sandy, had their own room in the back of the house. They were teenagers, prone to rock n’ roll music which blared from their stereo at all hours. Teen magazines, soap operas, and boy watching along the beach were part of their summer pastimes. Mom and Dad had the second room on the right just past the bathroom. A spare bedroom at the end of the narrow hallway was used when other aunts and uncles arrived on weekends. Each bedroom was sparsely decorated with a dresser and mirror and of course the iron bed that squeaked.

Those who preferred the first floor accommodations spent the summer nights on bulky mattresses in the sunroom or in sleeping bags lined up side by side on the huge screened-in porch. The dogs roomed with their respective owners, for the most part.

As you entered the cottage from the side entrance hall, you came upon the second bathroom which included a sink and a toilet. A step up brought you into the kitchen with its bright yellow walls and lime green ceiling. There was modest table with benches in the corner and above a double white sink, a view of the clothes line out back. The room off the kitchen was the dining room where an endless oak table was surrounded with bulky wooden chairs. When the need arose we could manage up to sixteen at that table for a typical Sunday meal of spaghetti, a great meal for a crowd!

As we settled into our summer mode, our individual interests appeared. Dad worked at a day camp in Old Lyme five days a week. Uncle Art and Uncle Pete spent many hours on the Fenwick Golf Course, which gave their wives, Angie and Ruth, the opportunity to engage in their favorite pastime - sun bathing. Uncle Al, on the other hand, preferred relaxing out on the rocks, fishing in peace and quiet. His wife Barbara, enjoyed the luxury of sleeping ‘til ten. Although the daily duties of making meals, clearing the table, and doing the dishes was scheduled on a revolving basis there was of course the weekly need to do laundry and grocery shop. It usually took four people to accomplish these tasks, as there was a need for four shopping carts and an equal number of washers and dryers at the local Laundromat.

Although each summer was unique, this one would provide us with laughter for many years to come.

The morning began in a normal manner. Uncle Art was first in the kitchen, starting the coffee and making his usual breakfast of toast. Dad could be heard running water as he shaved upstairs. Uncle Pete joined the “first breakfast wave” and had his second cup of coffee while flipping though the morning newspaper. Soon the first wave was done and the second was sure to follow. Dad would trot as he drove out of the small driveway. Uncle Al would wave as he left for the rocks and Uncles Art and Pete would whistle for Barney, a schnauzer, to jump into the backseat for the drive to the golf course.
Today
by Patience Bonner

Here I sit in a rectangular paneled room
Threatened by pillow-cushioned chairs
Hosting anxious writing students.

The sun is retiring
as I look outside the dusty, grey-lined window panes.
Beyond the windowpanes,
Shady green-leafed trees stare back at me
As if to say,
"I'm breathing, how about you?"

How about me, indeed, I wonder.
How about me?
I've just spent the last two weeks
In a frenzy of activity.
I completed report cards, cumulative records,
end of year parties, sad farewells,
emptied my classroom,

Relieved only to clean up my house,
pay bills, attend church meetings,
and thank God for the energy to accomplish
these things,
While simultaneously begging God
for additional energy to
study for my writing fellowship,
pack my bags for Alabama,
play bridesmaid in my cousin's horrid wedding dress,
fly back north,
a night before my writing program, to
unpack, repack,
and attend the state-sponsored writing project.

I now sit as a wet sponge,
nearing saturation.
I caution any patrons nearing me,
As I cannot account for the aquatic explosion
Which will assuredly ensue,
If I absorb one more thing!

And strangely enough,
Despite my precipice threshold,
I thirst for the writing elements,
which will release my mind,
And quell the threatening deluge.

In answer to the question,
"Am I breathing?"
No,
But I will breathe,
Once I squeeze out all this stuff,
And air my thoughts.
Envy's Cruel Delight
by Paula Kuenzler

Motherly Anne holding her newborn baby;
Pretty Kate getting the only seat next to Dad;
Strong Marie overtaking me in the race.

Depressed and resentful;
Hurt and Angry;
Anxious and Obsessed

Lost Affection;
Lost Attention;
Lost Recognition

Bummer!!!

Gertrude Gooble
by Tranne Lassow

Gertrude Gooble, or Gertie Goobor as they teasingly called her, slowly left her home to start yet another school year. Last year in sixth grade, everyone had made fun of her. She had sprouted up much earlier than all her other classmates which made her seem awkward and insecure.

That summer had gone well. She spent it at her grandparents' farm in Iowa with her cousin Shelly. Shelly, too, was tall and awkward. They had shared many miseries and nightmares of being picked on at school, but Gertrude felt her situation was worse because of her thick glasses and long, red, frizzy hair that she hated. On the farm during that hot summer, neither the animals nor her cousin seemed to care. It didn't, wouldn't, couldn't matter to her grandparents either. Grandparents love unconditionally.

Each morning, by the time the rooster called, Gertie's Grandma had already been baking and cooking. The aroma of that loving act filled Gertie's head and heart. Neither she nor Shelly could get dressed fast enough to get to the kitchen. They would race each other to get the first hug of the day. As they bounded into the kitchen, Grandma would turn to greet them with a wide, tooth-gapped grin, and a "Mornin' girls. How's about a hot breakfast? I know I have a hunger for a hug."

The girls would each stand with their arms stretching around Grandma, side by side, yet never quite reaching. This tickled them all into a giggle. What a wonderful way to start the day!

Grandpa would get to the table after the food was spread out. He would stand behind the girls' chairs and make believe he was giving a great big yawn and stretch. But just before he was done, when he thought the girls would least expect it, he would turn the stretch into a hug around both of them. "Ah, such luck to be with such lovely ladies," he would always say, which made Shelly and Gertie blush.

Then, giving Grandma a kiss on her cheek, he sat at the head of the table. She had always known things there at the farm to be this way and knew they would never change.

She began to chew her nails as she laboriously inched her way to the corner bus stop. There the nightmare would begin again.

She thought that maybe if she took off her glasses and shook her hair loose, she would miraculously become stunning and graceful, just like in the movies. You know, the "ugly-duckling-turns-into-beautiful-swan" syndrome. She took off her glasses, and squinted. "No," she thought, "this was not for me." She needed those glasses. Walking into walls was not an option for her.

She then thought that maybe this year she would join the basketball team at school, and because she was so tall, become the star of the team and everyone would cheer her. No, this too was not going to be her fate. She couldn't bounce a basketball with any sense of coordination, let alone get it into a basket. The most she felt she could hope for was that someone new would be in school this year and either become her friend, or be more of a cushion for the other students' pins than she.

Gertrude proceeded to the corner. As she approached, she saw the group. Her knees were shaky, so she clutched her new binder close to her stomach for support. There was no turning back now. She fixed her eyes onto the cracks in the sidewalk and went forward. "Full speed ahead," she thought. But
The others started to chuckle as they circled their prey before the attack.

Gertrude just stared at her feet. She never even acknowledged that they were there. Her fingers were turning as white as the laces in her new sneakers as she squeezed all the blood out of them and into her cheeks. With her heart in her throat, her eyes lids began to overflow.

The squealing brakes of the school bus jolted her so, that she dropped her new binder. The circle broke up in a burst of laughter and then quickly boarded the bus. Gertrude slowly gathered her hopes and followed.

The rest of the day was the nightmare she feared. Each step of the day presented yet another jab. The time moved by slowly as the anticipation weighed heavily in her soul, awaiting the next chapter of her life. One by one they started to arrive. One by one she stared at each during their approach. The longer they stared their distance, the longer it would take to see her knees shaking, or hear her heart beating through her chest, and the higher she could keep holding her head up.

The next morning Gertie awoke extra early. She hurriedly dressed, not with the greatest of care, but not a real threat to her. Nick, Dave, and Andrea, on the other hand were already watching her arrive.

"Well, well, well! Look who's here again. Good 'ole Gertie Goober," Andrea tauntingly snarled. "Oh, nothing," she sighed. "Just a nightmare." Gertrude's mom heard her crying and came into her room. "What's wrong, Sweetheart?" her mom asked in a soft whisper. Sometimes stories end with a bang...sometimes they end with only a whimper. Now, you might think that this would be a good place to end a story. And, in fact, I would agree. But Gertie won't let it end there.

She knew this would not be the last night she cried herself to sleep. But today was the last day she would be just a sponge and absorb the pain. Of course the hurt would be there, but she had to react. But Gertie won't let it end there.

The next morning Gertrude awoke extra early. She hurriedly dressed, not with the greatest of care, just the greatest of speed. She inhaled her food as she grabbed her school totes and flew to the bus stop. The rest of the day was the nightmare she feared. Each step of the day presented yet another jab. The time moved by slowly as the anticipation weighed heavily in her soul, awaiting the next chapter of her life. One by one she stared at each during their approach. The longer they stared their distance, the longer it would take to see her knees shaking, or hear her heart beating through her chest, and the higher she could keep holding her head up.

"Mama is a 'meany'! Mama is a 'meany'!" Ian chanted as she tap danced her way across the kitchen floor on a hot day in late June. She knew she wasn't really good at tap dancing, but this little routine seemed to have the effect she wanted--making her mother feel badly. Her mother didn't really "rise to the occasion," though, by running over, grabbing her arm, and telling her to "Knock it off, NOW!" Instead she left the room quietly, simply informing Jan that she wasn't about to change her mind, even if Ian tap danced "till the cows came home.

When Ian's legs were tired and she didn't think her mom was paying her enough attention to warrant carrying on with this little charade, Jan sat down on the kitchen floor, took off her tap shoes, and placed them neatly in her green, plastic case. Enough of this, she thought to herself.

After locating a suitable pair of sneakers in the hall closet, she skipped down the back steps and nearly ran head-on into her cousin Butch. Butch was too tall, too skinny and too blond. He was from Michigan, and he was spending the summer across the street at Jan's aunt and uncle's house. For much of the day, Butch usually played in Jan's large, fenced-in back yard, rather than in her uncle's small front yard. Usually, Butch could be found trying to catch one of the many frogs that seemed incredibly abundant this year. He'd also hang around by the built-in pool or walk a few houses down to the country store for a soda or an ice-cream cone.


"I don't see what's funny about that," Jan whined. But secretly, she was mortified that her older cousin heard her acting like a baby. She felt like crawling in a hole.

"What was the problem in there, or shouldn't I ask?" Butch inquired in a more serious tone.

"Oh, nothing. Only, she never lets me do anything. I told her Debbie and I wanted to go down to the woods to have a picnic. It's so beautiful back there, down Thomas's Hill." Jan pointed across the street, behind her aunt and uncle's house.

"So? She won't let you go?"

"No. She says girls shouldn't go down there alone. And she keeps bringing up how Debbie's father mistakenly shot a man while they were hunting. She says anything can happen in the woods."

"Sounds a little paranoid to me, but she's probably just trying to protect you."

"From what?" Jan asked doubtfully.

"Who knows? You know the way parents are, especially YOUR parents, what with you being an only child and all."

"Okay. Enough already! What do you want to do today?"