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evelyn



Be Still With God By Nancy B. Gibbs

All day long I had been very busy; picking up trash, cleaning bathrooms and scrubbing floors. My grown children were coming home for the weekend. I went grocery shopping and prepared for a barbecue supper, complete with ribs and chicken. I wanted everything to be perfect.

Suddenly, it dawned on me that I was dog-tired. I simply couldn't work as long as I could when I was younger. "I've got to rest for a minute," I told my husband, Roy, as I collapsed into my favorite rocking chair. Music was playing, my dog and cat were chasing each other and the telephone rang.

A scripture from Psalm 46 popped into my mind. "Be still, and know that I am God." I realized that I hadn't spent much time in prayer that day. *Was I too busy to even utter a simple word of thanks to God?* Suddenly, the thought of my beautiful patio came to mind. *I can be quiet out there*, I thought. I longed for a few minutes alone with God.

Roy and I had invested a great deal of time and work in the patio that spring. The flowers and hanging baskets were breathtaking. It was definitely a heavenly place of rest and tranquility. *If I can't be still with God in that environment, I can't be still with Him anywhere*, I thought. While Roy was talking on the telephone, I slipped out the backdoor and sat down on my favorite patio chair. I closed my eyes and began to pray, counting my many blessings.

A bird flew by me, chirping and singing. It interrupted my thoughts. It landed on the bird feeder and began eating dinner as I watched. After a few minutes it flew away, singing another song.

I closed my eyes again. A gust of wind blew, which caused my wind chimes to dance. They made a joyful sound, but again I lost my concentration on God. I squirmed and wiggled in my chair. I looked up toward the blue sky and saw the clouds moving slowly toward the horizon. The wind died down. My wind chimes finally became quiet.

Again, I bowed in prayer. "Honk, honk," I heard. I almost jumped out of my skin. A neighbor was driving down the street. He waved at me and smiled. I waved back, happy that he cared. I quickly tried once again to settle down, repeating the familiar verse in my mind. *Be still and know that I am God*.

"I'm trying God. I really am," I whispered. "But you've got to help me here."

The backdoor opened. My husband walked outside. "I love you," he said. "I was wondering where you were." I chuckled, as he came over and kissed me, then turned around and went back inside.

"Where's the quiet time?" I asked God. My heart fluttered. There was no pain, only a beat that interrupted me yet again. *This is impossible*, I thought. *There's no time to be still and to know that God is with me. There's too much going on in the world and entirely too much activity all around me.*

Then it suddenly dawned on me. God was speaking to me the entire time I was attempting to be still. I remembered the music playing as I'd begun my quiet time. He sent a sparrow to lighten my life with song. He sent a gentle breeze. He sent a neighbor to let me know that I had a friend. He sent my sweetheart to offer sincere sentiments of love. He caused my heart to flutter to remind me of life. While I was trying to count my blessings, God was busy multiplying them.

I laughed to realize that the "interruptions" of my quiet time with God were special blessings He'd sent to show me He was with me the entire time.



Plant a Row for the Hungry

By Jeff Lowenfels

It was a cold night in Washington, D.C., and I was heading back to the hotel when a man approached me. He asked if I would give him some money so he could get something to eat. I'd read the signs: "Don't give money to panhandlers." So I shook my head and kept walking.

I wasn't prepared for a reply, but with resignation, he said, "I really am homeless and I really am hungry! You can come with me and watch me eat!" But I kept on walking.

The incident bothered me for the rest of the week. I had money in my pocket and it wouldn't have killed me to hand over a buck or two even if he had been lying. On a frigid, cold night, no less, I assumed the worst of a fellow human being.

Flying back to Anchorage, I couldn't help thinking of him. I tried to rationalize my failure to help by assuming government agencies, churches and charities were there to feed him. Besides, you're not supposed to give money to panhandlers.

Somewhere over Seattle, I started to write my weekly garden column for *The Anchorage Daily News*. Out of the blue, I came up with an idea. Bean's Cafe, the soup kitchen in Anchorage, feeds hundreds of hungry Alaskans every day. Why not try to get all my readers to plant one row in their gardens dedicated to Bean's? Dedicate a row and take it down to Bean's. Clean and simple.

We didn't keep records back then, but the idea began to take off. Folks would fax me or call when they took something in. Those who only grew flowers donated them. Food for the spirit. And salve for my conscience.

In 1995, the Garden Writers Association of America held their annual convention in Anchorage and after learning of Anchorage's program, Plant a Row for Bean's became Plant a Row For The Hungry. The original idea was to have every member of the Garden Writers Association of America write or talk about planting a row for the hungry sometime during the month of April.

As more and more people started working with the Plant a Row concept, new variations cropped up, if you will pardon the pun. Many companies gave free seed to customers and displayed the logo, which also appeared in national gardening publications.

Row markers with the Plant a Row logo were distributed to gardeners to set apart their "Row for the Hungry."

Garden editor Joan Jackson, backed by *The San Jose Mercury News* and California's nearly year-round growing season, raised more than 30,000 pounds of fruits and vegetables her first year, and showed GWAA how the program could really work. Texas fruit farms donated food to their local food bank after being inspired by Plant a Row. Today the program continues to thrive and grow.

I am stunned that millions of Americans are threatened by hunger. If every gardener in America - and we're seventy million strong - plants one row for the hungry, we can make quite a dent in the number of neighbors who don't have enough to eat. Maybe then I will stop feeling guilty about abandoning a hungry man I could have helped.



Beyond Expectations By Milt Garrett

It seems a car dealership in my hometown of Albuquerque was selling, on average, six to eight new cars a day, six days a week. I was also told that 72 percent of this dealership's first-time visitors returned for a second visit. (At that time, the average for all dealerships in Albuquerque for second-time visitors was 8 percent.)

I was curious and intrigued. How does a car dealership get 72 percent of its first-time visitors to return? And how can they sell six to eight cars a day in a slumping car market?

When I walked into Saturn of Albuquerque that Friday four years ago, the staff there didn't know me from Adam; yet they shared with me their pricing policy, the profit margin on every model, and staff income. They even opened their training manuals for my review and invited me back on Saturday if I wanted more information (an invitation I heartily accepted).

I learned that this dealership (like all Saturn dealerships) has a "no-dicker sticker" policy; that is, the price on the window is the price you pay for the car. Period. You can't even negotiate for a free set of floor mats. Saturn abides by its premise of selling high-quality automobiles for a reasonable price.

Furthermore, Saturn sales consultants (their term for customer-contact people) aren't paid a commission - they're salaried. This means when you walk onto the showroom floor you're not bombarded with what I refer to as "beyond eager"

sales people.

I expanded my research to other dealerships in Albuquerque. It turned out that Ford Escorts, LTDs and Thunderbirds, as well as the Mercury Marquis, were also sold as "no-dicker sticker" cars. As Bruce Sutherland at Richardson Ford said, "We were losing our market to Saturn because of their pricing and salary policies." He also said, "If we all did what Saturn was doing, we'd not only make a decent living, but we'd also enjoy a better reputation."

On Sunday, the day after my second visit to the Saturn store (their term, not mine), my wife, Jane, and I were walking as we frequently do. On this particular June morning, Jane gently slipped her hand in mine and said tenderly, "I don't know if you remember, but today's my fifth anniversary of being cancer-free." She was diagnosed with breast cancer five years ago and had undergone surgery. I was stunned, partially because I was embarrassed that I had forgotten, and, partially, because...well, it seems we spend all of our time earning a living and never stop to live our earnings. I mean, isn't this what it's really all about?

I didn't know what to do with Jane's information. I spoke to her tenderly. All day. I took her to lunch. I bought the lunch. It was a nice, intimate day.

The next day, Monday, Jane went off to work teaching school. Still beside myself not knowing what to do to mark this special occasion, I did the most impetuous thing I've ever done in my life: I bought a new Saturn. I bought every accessory they produce in Springhill, Tennessee, to hang on that car. There wasn't an accessory made that I didn't buy. I didn't pick the color and I didn't pick the model, but I paid cash and told them I'd bring Jane in on Wednesday at 4:30 to make those two decisions. I told them why I was buying the car, and that it was my secret and they were not to reveal anything to her.

Tuesday morning, it dawned on me that Jane always wanted a white car. I called our sales consultant at Saturn, and I asked him if he had anything white in the store. He said he had one left but he couldn't guarantee it'd still be available Wednesday at 4:30 because they were selling so fast. I said I'd take my chances and asked him to put it in the showroom.

Wednesday came and went. Unexpectedly, someone in our family was admitted to the hospital. So, it wasn't until 9:30 Saturday morning when, after telling Jane the biggest lie to get her out of the house, we finally made our way to the Saturn store. I quickly turned into the parking lot and Jane angrily asked, "What are you doing? You promised me we'd get home right away." I said, "I'm sorry, I forgot I have to pick up something here for my Kiwanis speech next week."

Jane had never been in a Saturn store. When we went through the front door, the Lord took control of her feet and her mouth. She saw that little white Saturn coupe all the way across the showroom floor. She quickly passed a multi-colored sea of automobiles, sat in the little white Saturn and said, "Oh, what a pretty little car. Can I have a new car?" I said, "No. Not until Charlie graduates from college." Our son, Charlie, was attending the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia (we call that "out of state" tuition). She said, "I'm sick and tired of driving that old Dodge, I want a new car." I said, "I promise, just three more semesters and he'll be out."

Next, Jane walked around to the front of the car. As she looked it over, she let out the most blood-curdling, shrill scream I'd ever heard in 29 years of marriage.

Now, before I tell you why Jane screamed, let me tell you what our sales consultant had done. He had ordered a large, professionally engraved sign (white letters on blue) and affixed the Saturn company logo on it. The sign stood alone on the hood of the little white Saturn coupe. It said "Congratulations, Jane. This car is yours. Five years cancer-free. Let's celebrate life. From Milt, Billy and Team Saturn"

Every employee at Saturn of Albuquerque had endorsed the back of that sign. Jane saw it, screamed, collapsed in my arms and bawled her eyes out. I didn't

know what to do. I was in tears. I took out my invoice from the previous Monday, unfolded it and, pointing to the white coupe, said, "No, honey, this car isn't yours. I bought you this one." I tapped the invoice with my index finger. Jane said, "No, I want this one right here." Charlie, who was home from college and with us, said, "No, Mom. Dad bought you anything you want in Springhill, Tennessee or anything on the lot here." Jane said, "You don't understand, I want this one."

While this conversation was going on, I looked around and discovered that there was no one in the store. Our sales consultant had arranged it so that we could share the moment alone. The mechanics, the clerical staff, the front-desk receptionist, management and all sales consultants had left the store for the sanctity of our event.

Even so, it's impossible to have a lot of privacy when so many people are standing outside the showroom windows looking in. When Jane screamed and collapsed in my arms, I saw everybody outside applaud and begin to cry. Every new customer that came to the store in those minutes was not allowed to enter; instead, the staff took them aside and explained what was happening.

Jane never drove the car until she took it through the showroom door that day to drive it home.

Over the years, I've told this story in the United States, Australia and Indonesia as an example of legendary service. A woman in my audience in San Francisco from Anchorage, Alaska, heard the story; she called Saturn of Albuquerque long distance and bought a new car. It's like Ken Blanchard says, "It's only the stories told about us that differentiate us in the market place."



Just One Wish By Margaret E. Mack

Fox River gave life to the country town of Colby Point, for the road and the river ran alongside one another. Colby Point was really the name of a road that crept between the hills and valleys of McHenry, Illinois. Homes were scattered here and there - mostly summer homes and retirement homes. At the very end of the road three houses all faced one another. Three sisters - all single, all seniors - lived in one of the homes. Across the way their widowed first cousin lived in a yellow house. Next to her lived their brother, Bill, and his wife Cleo.

Cleo had multiple sclerosis, so the pair had moved to Colby Point seeking a quiet, relaxed life. Little did they know when they relocated to this serene area that they would end up rearing their granddaughter, Margie. Before long, the once quiet neighborhood became active with the sounds of a child.

Margie always looked forward to the arrival of Christmas, and this year was no different as winter began to settle like a warm blanket around Colby Point. Everyone was in a flurry, for at the church Margie and her family attended, the congregation was preparing to share their Christmas wishes with each other. Since Cleo couldn't make it to church, and Bill didn't like to leave her alone for too long, he was in the habit of dropping Margie off at church early on Sunday mornings; the aunts would bring her home.

As Margie sat in church that morning, she rehearsed in her mind over and over what she would say. She wasn't afraid, for she knew what an important wish this was. The service seemed to drag on and on. Finally the pastor uttered the words Margie had been anticipating all morning, "This is a special time of year when everyone around the world celebrates peace and goodwill toward our fellow man. This year, here at St. John's, we want to hear your Christmas wishes. We cannot fill everyone's wish, but we would like to try and fill a few. As I call your name, please come forward and tell us about your Christmas wish."

One after another, the church members shared their wishes, large and small. Margie was the last and the youngest to speak. As she looked out at the congregation, she spoke confidently, "I would like for my grandma to have church. She cannot walk, and she and my grandpa have to stay at home. They miss coming so much. So that is what I wish for. And please don't tell them, for it needs to be a surprise."

Riding home with her aunts, Margie could tell they were speaking in low tones about her wish. She hoped that they would keep her secret. As the next Sunday came around, Margie was getting ready for church when Grandma asked, "Why are you so fidgety? You haven't sat still all morning."

"I just know that something wonderful is going to happen today!"

"Of course it will," said her grandma with a chuckle. "It's almost Christmas, you know."

Grandpa was getting on his coat when he happened to look out the front window. He saw some cars coming down the dirt road one after another. Now at this time of year there wasn't too much traffic, so this was really amazing. Margie pushed her grandma to the window so that she could see all the cars. Pretty soon the cars were parked all up and down the road as far as a person could see.

Grandpa looked at Grandma, and they both looked at Margie. Grandpa asked, "Just what did you wish for, Margie?"

"I wished that you and Grandma could have church. And I just knew that it would come true. Look! There's the pastor, and everyone from church is coming up the walk."

The congregation arrived with coffee and cookies and cups and gifts. They sang Christmas carols and listened to the pastor speak on giving to others the gifts that God gives. Later that night, Margie slipped out the back door and walked outside to look up at the stars. "Thank you," she whispered, "thank you for giving me my wish."

That was just one of the many wishes granted for Margie as she grew up. Her childhood overflowed with the love of her grandparents, four great aunts, and many wise, caring neighbors. Margie was truly a blessed little girl.

I should know - I was that little girl.



Working Christmas Day By Victoria Schlintz

It was an unusually quiet day in the emergency room on December twenty-fifth. Quiet, that is, except for the nurses who were standing around the nurses' station grumbling about having to work Christmas Day.

I was triage nurse that day and had just been out to the waiting room to clean up. Since there were no patients waiting to be seen at the time, I came back to the nurses' station for a cup of hot cider from the crockpot someone had brought in for Christmas. Just then an admitting clerk came back and told me I had five patients waiting to be evaluated.

I whined, "Five, how did I get five; I was just out there and no one was in the waiting room."

"Well, there are five signed in." So I went straight out and called the first name. Five bodies showed up at my triage desk, a pale petite woman and four small children in somewhat rumpled clothing.

"Are you all sick?" I asked suspiciously.

"Yes," she said weakly, and lowered her head.

"Okay," I replied, unconvinced, "who's first?" One by one they sat down, and I asked the usual preliminary questions. When it came to descriptions of their presenting problems, things got a little vague. Two of the children had headaches, but the headaches weren't accompanied by the normal body language of holding the head or trying to keep it still or squinting or grimacing. Two children had earaches, but only one could tell me which ear was affected. The mother complained of a cough, but seemed to work to produce it.

Something was wrong with the picture. Our hospital policy, however, was not to turn away any patient, so we would see them. When I explained to the mother that it might be a little while before a doctor saw her because, even though the waiting room was empty, ambulances had brought in several, more critical patients, in the back, she responded, "Take your time, it's warm in here." She turned and, with a smile, guided her brood into the waiting room.

On a hunch (call it nursing judgment), I checked the chart after the admitting clerk had finished registering the family. No address - they were homeless. The waiting room was warm.

I looked out at the family huddled by the Christmas tree. The littlest one was pointing at the television and exclaiming something to her mother. The oldest one was looking at her reflection in an ornament on the Christmas tree. I went back to the nurses station and mentioned we had a homeless family in the waiting room - a mother and four children between four and ten years of age. The nurses, grumbling about working Christmas, turned to compassion for a family just trying to get warm on Christmas. The team went into action, much as we do when there's a medical emergency. But this one was a Christmas emergency.

We were all offered a free meal in the hospital cafeteria on Christmas Day, so we claimed that meal and prepared a banquet for our Christmas guests.

We needed presents. We put together oranges and apples in a basket one of our vendors had brought the department for Christmas. We made little goodie bags of stickers we borrowed from the X-ray department, candy that one of the doctors had brought the nurses, crayons the hospital had from a recent coloring contest, nurse bear buttons the hospital had given the nurses at annual training day and little fuzzy bears that nurses clipped onto their stethoscopes. We also found a mug, a package of powdered cocoa, and a few other odds and ends. We pulled ribbon and wrapping paper and bells off the department's decorations that we had all contributed to. As seriously as we met physical needs of the patients that came to us that day, our team worked to meet the needs, and exceed the expectations, of a family who just wanted to be warm on Christmas Day.

We took turns joining the Christmas party in the waiting room. Each nurse took his or her lunch break with the family, choosing to spend their "off duty" time with these people whose laughter and delightful chatter became quite contagious.

When it was my turn, I sat with them at the little banquet table we had created in the waiting room. We talked for a while about dreams. The four children were telling me about what they would like to be when they grow up. The six-year-old started the conversation. "I want to be a nurse and help people," she declared.

After the four children had shared their dreams, I looked at the Mom. She smiled and said, "I just want my family to be safe, warm and content - just like they are right now."

The "party" lasted most of the shift, before we were able to locate a shelter that would take the family in on Christmas Day. The mother had asked that their charts be pulled, so these patients were not seen that day in the emergency department. But they were treated.

As they walked to the door to leave, the four-year-old came running back, gave me a hug and whispered, "Thanks for being our angels today." As she ran back to join her family, they all waved one more time before the door closed. I turned around slowly to get back to work, a little embarrassed for the tears in my eyes. There stood a group of my coworkers, one with a box of tissues, which she passed around to each nurse who worked a Christmas Day she will never forget.



Light in the Window By Eileen Goltz It was the first night of Chanukah and the night before Ellie's last final. As a freshman she was more than ready to go home for the first time since August. She'd packed every thing she needed to take home except the books she was cramming with and her menorah, the 8 branch candelabra that's lit every night of Chanukah. Ellie had been so tempted to pack the menorah earlier that night. However, just as she was getting ready to justify to herself why it was OK to "skip" the first night's lighting - (A) she'd have to wait for the candles to burn out before she could leave for the library and (B) she had no clue as to where her candles were hiding - her conscience (and common sense) kicked in. The voice coming from that special place in her body where "mother guilt" resides said, "You have the menorah out, so light it already." Never one to ignore her mother's advice, Ellie dug up the candles, lit them, said the blessings, placed the menorah on her window sill and spent the rest of the evening in her room studying.

Ellie's first winter break was uneventful, and when she returned to her dorm on the day before classes started she was surprised to find a small note taped to her door.

"Thank you," the note said. It was signed "Susan." It was dated the day that Ellie had left after finals. Ellie was totally perplexed. She didn't know a Susan. Convinced that the letter had been delivered to her by mistake, Ellie put the note on her desk and forgot about it.

About a half an hour before she was getting ready to head out for dinner, there was a knock at Ellie's door. There, standing in the hall was a woman Ellie didn't recognize. "I'm Susan," she said. "I wanted to thank you in person but you'd already left before I finished my finals."

"Are you sure it's me you're looking for?" asked Ellie. Susan asked if she could come in and explain.

It seemed that Susan had been facing the same dilemma that Ellie had been that first night of Chanukah. She really didn't want to light her menorah either. Not because she was packing, or was heading home, couldn't find the candles or because she busy studying but because her older sister Hannah had been killed by a drunk driver ten months earlier, and this was the first year that she'd have to light the menorah candles alone. The sisters had always taken turns lighting the first candle and this wasn't Susan's year. She just couldn't bring herself to take her sister's place. Susan said that whenever it was Hannah's turn to light the first candle, she'd always tease Susan that the candles she lit would burn longer and brighter than when Susan lit them. One year she even went so far as to get a timer out. It had always annoyed Susan that Hannah would say something so stupid but still, it was part of the family tradition. Susan said that it was just too painful to even think about Chanukah without Hannah and she had decided on skipping the entire holiday.

Susan said that she had just finished studying and was closing her drapes when she happened to glance across the courtyard of the quad and saw the candles shining in Ellie's window. "I saw that menorah in your window and I started to cry. It was if Hannah had taken her turn and put the menorah in your window for me to see." Susan said that when she stopped crying she said the blessings, turned off the lights in her room and watched the candles across the quad until they burned out.

Susan told Ellie that it was as she was lying in bed that night thinking about how close she felt to Hannah when she saw the menorah, that it dawned on her that

Hannah had been right. Hannah's last turn always would have candles that would burn longer and brighter than any of Susan's because for Susan, Hannah's lights would never go out. They would always be there, in her heart for Susan to see when she needed to reconnect with Hannah.

All Susan had to do was close her eyes and remember the candles in the window, the one's that Hannah had lit the last time it was her turn.



Silent Angel By Duane Shaw

Christmas Day, 1967. I'm a patient at the Ninety-Third Medical Evacuation Hospital near Saigon, Vietnam. Today I'm semi-alert, but unable to sleep and agonizingly scared. The constant aching pain in my arms and a pounding headache make me tense. I feel helpless. My spirit feels empty, and my body feels broken. I want to be back home.

It's impossible to get in a comfortable resting position. I'm forced to try and sleep on my back. Needles, IV tubing and surgical tape are partially covered by bloodstained bandages on my arms.

Two days earlier, my squad's mission was to secure the perimeter of Saigon for a Christmas Day celebration featuring Bob Hope and Hollywood's Raquel Welch. While on a search-and-destroy patrol, near the village Di An, we were ambushed on a jungle trail by a small band of Vietcong guerillas. My right thumb was ripped from my body by AK-47 assault-rifle fire and fragments from a claymore mine grazed my face and neck.

This medical ward has twenty-one sick and injured GIs, and one recently captured, young-looking Cambodian. Restrained, he lays severely wounded in the bed next to mine. I'm filled with anger and hostility. As an infantry combat veteran, I've been brainwashed to despise the Communists and everything they represent.

The first hours are emotionally difficult. I don't want to be next to him. I want to have an American GI to talk with. As time passes my attitude changes; my hatred vanishes. We never utter a word to each other, but we glance into one another's eyes and smile. We're communicating. I feel compassion for him, knowing both of us have lost control of our destiny. We are equals.

The survival of the twenty-two soldiers in the ward is dependent on the attentiveness and medical care from our nurses. Apparently, they never leave our ward or take time off. The nationality, country or cause we were fighting for never interferes with the loving care and nourishment necessary to sustain us. They are our life-keepers, our guardians, our safety net, our hope of returning home. It's nice to just hear a woman's voice. Their presence is our motivation to get well so we can go home to our wives, children, moms, dads, brothers, sisters and friends.

Christmas is a special day, even in a hospital bed thousands of miles from home. Today the nurses are especially loving and gracious. Red Cross volunteers help us write letters to our families. All of us still need special attention plus our routine shots, IVs, blood work and I swallow twenty-two pills three times a day. Even on Christmas, life goes on in our little community, like clockwork, thanks to the dedication of our nurses. They never miss a beat, always friendly and caring.

There's a rumor that General Westmorland and Raquel Welch will visit our ward today and award Purple Hearts to the combat wounded. I'm especially hopeful it's true because I would receive the commendation. The thought of meeting Raquel Welch and General Westmoreland gives me an adrenaline boost that lasts throughout the day.

By early evening we realize they aren't coming. Everyone is very disappointed, especially me. The day's activities cease quickly after a yummy Christmas dinner and most of my ward mates slip off to sleep by seven or eight o'clock.

It's impossible to sleep. The IVs in my arms continue collapsing my veins one by one. I'm pricked and probed by what feels like knives, not needles. My arms are black and blue after many failed attempts to locate a vein for IV fluids. I occasionally doze off, only to be awakened by the agonizing pain of another collapsed vein and infiltrating fluids. My arms are swollen to twice their normal size. This pain is worse than my gunshot wound.

It's 11 o'clock Christmas night. The ward is silent. My comrades and the Cambodian warrior sleep. I'm tense and suffering.

To avoid waking anyone, I silently signal a nurse. She comes to my side and gazes into my tearing eyes. Quietly, she sits on the side of my bed, embraces my arm, removes the IV, then lightly massages my swollen, painful arms.

Gently, she leans over and whispers in my ear, "Merry Christmas," and gives me a long, tender hug. As she withdraws, our eyes connect momentarily. She has tears running down her cheeks. She felt my pain. She turns and moves away, ever so slowly back to her workstation.

The next morning I wake slowly. I have slept throughout the night and feel rested. I see while I slept a new IV was inserted in my arm. The swelling is gone. Suddenly, I remember the nurse coming to my side in the night and my Christmas present. I'm thankful and think of her kindness. I look towards the nurses' workstation to see if I can see my angel nurse but she's gone.

I never see her again, but I will forever honor her compassion toward me on that lonely Christmas night.



Big Red By Linda Gabris The first time we set eyes on "Big Red," father, mother and I were trudging through the freshly fallen snow on our way to Hubble's Hardware store on Main Street in Huntsville, Ontario. We planned to enter our name in the annual Christmas drawing for a chance to win a hamper filled with fancy tinned cookies, tea, fruit and candy. As we passed the Eaton's Department store's window, we stopped as usual to gaze, and do our bit of dreaming.

The gaily decorated window display held the best toys ever. I took an instant hankering for a huge green wagon. It was big enough to haul three armloads of firewood, two buckets of swill or a whole summer's worth of pop bottles picked from along the highway. There were skates that would make Millar's Pond well worth shoveling and dolls much too pretty to play with. And they were all nestled snugly beneath the breathtakingly flounced skirt of Big Red.

Mother's eyes were glued to the massive flare of red shimmering satin, dotted with twinkling sequin-centered black velvet stars. "My goodness," she managed to say in trancelike wonder. "Would you just look at that dress!" Then, totally out of character, mother twirled one spin of a waltz on the slippery sidewalk. Beneath the heavy, wooden-buttoned, grey wool coat she had worn every winter for as long as I could remember, mother lost her balance and tumbled. Father quickly caught her.

Her cheeks redder than usual, mother swatted dad for laughing. "Oh, stop that!" she ordered, shooing his fluttering hands as he swept the snow from her coat. "What a silly dress to be perched up there in the window of Eaton's!" she shook her head in disgust. "Who on earth would want such a splashy dress?"

As we continued down the street, mother turned back for one more look. "My goodness! You'd think they'd display something a person could use!"

Christmas was nearing and the red dress was soon forgotten. Mother, of all people, was not one to wish for, or spend money on, items that were not practical. "There are things we need more than this," she'd always say, or, "There are things we need more than that."

Father, on the other hand, liked to indulge whenever the budget allowed. Of course, he'd get a scolding for his occasional splurging, but it was all done with the best intention.

Like the time he brought home the electric range. In our old Muskoka farmhouse on Oxtongue Lake, Mother was still cooking year-round on a wood stove. In the summer, the kitchen would be so hot even the houseflies wouldn't come inside. Yet there would be Mother - roasting - right along with the pork and turnips.

One day, Dad surprised her with a fancy new electric range. She protested, of course, saying that the wood stove cooked just dandy, that the electric stove was too dear and that it would cost too much hydro to run it. All the while, however, she was polishing its already shiny chrome knobs. In spite of her objections, Dad and I knew that she cherished that new stove.

There were many other modern things that old farm needed, like indoor plumbing and a clothes dryer, but Mom insisted that those things would have to wait until we could afford them. Mom was forever doing chores - washing laundry by hand, tending the pigs, or working in our huge garden - so she always wore mended, cotton-print housedresses and an apron to protect the front. She did have one or two "special" dresses saved for Church on Sundays. And amongst everything else she did, she still managed to make almost all of our clothes. They weren't fancy, but they did wear well.

That Christmas I bought Dad a handful of fishing lures from the Five to a Dollar store, wrapped them individually in matchboxes so he'd have plenty of gifts to open from me. Choosing something for Mother was much harder. When Dad and I asked, she thought carefully then hinted modestly for some tea towels, face clothes or a new dishpan.

On our last trip to town before Christmas, we were driving up Main Street when mother suddenly exclaimed in surprise: "Would you just look at that!" She pointed excitedly as Dad drove past Eaton's.

"That big red dress is gone," she said in disbelief. "It's actually gone."

"Well...I'll be!" Dad chuckled. "By golly, it is!"

"Who'd be fool enough to buy such a frivolous dress?" Mother questioned, shaking her head. I quickly stole a glance at Dad. His blue eyes were twinkling as he nudged me with his elbow. Mother craned her neck for another glimpse out the rear window as we rode on up the street. "It's gone..." she whispered. I was almost certain that I detected a trace of yearning in her voice.

I'll never forget that Christmas morning. I watched as Mother peeled the tissue paper off a large box that read, "Eaton's Finest Enamel Dishpan" on its lid.

"Oh Frank," she praised, "just what I wanted!" Dad was sitting in his rocker, a huge grin on his face.

"Only a fool wouldn't give a priceless wife like mine exactly what she wants for Christmas," he laughed. "Go ahead, open it up and make sure there are no chips." Dad winked at me, confirming his secret, and my heart filled with more love for my father than I thought it could hold!

Mother opened the box to find a big white enamel dishpan - overflowing with crimson satin that spilled out across her lap. With trembling hands she touched the elegant material of Big Red.

"Oh my goodness!" she managed to utter, her eyes filled with tears. "Oh Frank..." Her face was as bright as the star that twinkled on our tree in the corner of the small room. "You shouldn't have..." came her faint attempt at scolding.

"Oh now, never mind that!" Dad said. "Let's see if it fits," he laughed, helping her slip the marvelous dress over her shoulders. As the shimmering red satin fell around her, it gracefully hid the patched and faded floral housedress underneath.

I watched, my mouth agape, captivated by a radiance in my parents I had never noticed before. As they waltzed around the room, Big Red swirled its magic deep into my heart.

"You look beautiful," my dad whispered to my mom - and she surely did!



River Baptism By Garth Gilchrist

The summer I turned thirteen, my family's summer vacation was a visit to our relatives in the mountains of North Carolina. My cousin Jim, who was my age, took me down to his favorite swimming hole along the river. It was a deep pool under a high canopy of leaves. From the top of a twenty-five-foot cliff we looked down into the shimmering water and across to a sandy beach.

Standing beside us on the edge of that cliff grew a big white oak tree, with its roots sunk deep down into the rock. And hanging from a limb that stretched out at just the right height and angle, was a rope swing.

"Look here," said Jim. "This is the way you do it. You got to get a running start. Then you grab the rope and swing out and up as high as you can, and then you let go and fall to the water. Here, I'll show you."

Jim made it look easy, and when his head surfaced in the bubbling water he hollered up, "Now it's your turn!"

I was certain I was going to die, but at thirteen dying is better than looking bad. When I came up sputtering, Jim smiled approvingly and we swam a few strokes to the beach, lay on the hot sand for awhile, and then swam back across the pool to do it again.

Jim and all of his friends always wore the proper North Carolina swimming attire, for skinny-dipping was a time honored tradition among boys throughout the mountain states. Sometimes I felt like I was a wild boy, or a beaver sliding through the water. Jim said he felt like an otter, since he loved to turn and twist in the deep pools and could swim under water a long ways.

Jim's family was Baptists. On Sunday, Jim's mom made us dress up in straightjacket white shirts and strangle-hold ties, marched us down the street and filed us into church.

"You must be baptized, by water and by the Spirit" the preacher thundered. That water baptism sounded mighty good. I sat there dreaming of the river and waiting for the wonderful moment when the sermon would be over and Jim and I could go running down the path to the river.

On the tails of the closing prayer, Jim and I flew out into the sunny day and home for a quick sandwich. Then we plunged down the trail into the woods alive with the hum of cicadas hanging thick in the branches of the burr oaks and hickories.

When we got within a hundred yards of the rope swing, Jim said, "I'll race you!"

"You got it!" I replied.

We dropped our clothes right there and tore down the trail to see who could get to the rope swing first. I was a fast runner, but Jim was faster. He pulled ahead of me and dove for the rope. With a shriek of victory, Jim swung out over the water and up, to the very top of the arc. In perfect form, Jim let go of the rope and looked down to see where he was going to land.

But there - not twenty yards away on the beach - stood the preacher and two dozen of the faithful, performing a baptism. I could see they were looking straight up at Jim with their mouths wide open.

As fervently as Jim prayed to fly, he quickly descended from the heavens. Jim abandoned his plans for a graceful swan dive and instinctively assumed the cannonball position - known for its magnificent splash.

The whole congregation got baptized that day. But Jim never saw it. He broke his record for underwater swimming and was around the bend and out of sight while the congregation stood stunned and speechless on the shore.

"Don't worry, Jim," I consoled him later. "I'm sure everybody thought you were an angel, and besides, it turned out fine. You got the river dunking you wanted, and those folks will *never* forget that baptism."

Thinking about it now, I don't think there's much difference, anyway, between wild boys and angels, or between heaven and a rope swing on the river.



The Greatest of These

By Nanette Thorsen-Snipes

My day began on a decidedly sour note when I saw my six-year-old wrestling with a limb of my azalea bush. By the time I got outside, he'd broken it. "Can I take this to school today?" he asked.

With a wave of my hand, I sent him off. I turned my back so he wouldn't see the tears gathering in my eyes. I loved that azalea bush. I touched the broken limb as if to say silently, "I'm sorry."

I wished I could have said that to my husband earlier, but I'd been angry. The washing machine had leaked on my brand-new linoleum. If he'd just taken the time to fix it the night before when I asked him instead of playing checkers with Jonathan. *What are his priorities anyway?* I wondered. I was still mopping up the mess when Jonathan walked into the kitchen. "What's for breakfast, Mom?"

I opened the empty refrigerator. "Not cereal," I said, watching the sides of his mouth drop. "How about toast and jelly?" I smeared the toast with jelly and set it in front of him. *Why was I so angry*? I tossed my husband's dishes into the sudsy water.

It was days like this that made me want to quit. I just wanted to drive up to the mountains, hide in a cave, and never come out.

Somehow I managed to lug the wet clothes to the laundromat. I spent most of the day washing and drying clothes and thinking how love had disappeared from my life. Staring at the graffiti on the walls, I felt as wrung-out as the clothes left in the washers.

As I finished hanging up the last of my husband's shirts, I looked at the clock. 2:30. I was late. Jonathan's class let out at 2:15. I dumped the clothes in the back seat and hurriedly drove to the school.

I was out of breath by the time I knocked on the teacher's door and peered through the glass. With one finger, she motioned for me to wait. She said something to Jonathan and handed him and two other children crayons and a sheet of paper.

What now? I thought, as she rustled through the door and took me aside. "I want to talk to you about Jonathan," she said.

I prepared myself for the worst. Nothing would have surprised me.

"Did you know Jonathan brought flowers to school today?" she asked.

I nodded, thinking about my favorite bush and trying to hide the hurt in my eyes. I glanced at my son busily coloring a picture. His wavy hair was too long and flopped just beneath his brow. He brushed it away with the back of his hand. His eyes burst with blue as he admired his handiwork.

"Let me tell you about yesterday," the teacher insisted. "See that little girl?"

I watched the bright-eyed child laugh and point to a colorful picture taped to the wall. I nodded.

"Well, yesterday she was almost hysterical. Her mother and father are going through a nasty divorce. She told me she didn't want to live, she wished she could die. I watched that little girl bury her face in her hands and say loud enough for the class to hear, 'Nobody loves me.' I did all I could to console her, but it only seemed to make matters worse."

"I thought you wanted to talk to me about Jonathan," I said.

"I do," she said, touching the sleeve of my blouse. "Today your son walked straight over to that child. I watched him hand her some pretty pink flowers and whisper, 'I love you.'"

I felt my heart swell with pride for what my son had done. I smiled at the teacher. "Thank you," I said, reaching for Jonathan's hand, "you've made my day."

Later that evening, I began pulling weeds from around my lopsided azalea bush. As my mind wandered back to the love Jonathan showed the little girl, a biblical verse came to me: "...these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." While my son had put love into practice, I had only felt anger. I heard the familiar squeak of my husband's brakes as he pulled into the drive. I snapped a small limb bristling with hot pink azaleas off the bush. I felt the seed of love that God planted in my family beginning to bloom once again in me. My husband's eyes widened in surprise as I handed him the flowers. "I love you," I said.



The Marks of Life By Diana Golden

My teammates on the United States Disabled Ski Team used to tease me about the size of my chest, joking that my greatest handicap wasn't my missing leg but my missing cleavage. Little did they know how true that would become. This past year, I found out that for the second time in my life I had cancer, this time in both breasts. I had bilateral mastectomies.

When I heard I'd need the surgery, I didn't think it would be a big deal. I even told my friends playfully, "I'll keep you abreast of the situation." After all, I had lost my leg to my first go-round with cancer at age 12, then gone on to become a world-champion ski racer. All of us on the Disabled Ski Team were missing one set of body parts or another. I saw that a man in a wheelchair can be utterly sexy. That a woman who has no hands can appear not to be missing anything. That wholeness has nothing to do with missing parts and everything to do with spirit. Yet although I knew this, I was surprised to discover how difficult it was to adjust to my new scars.

When they brought me back to consciousness after the surgery, I started to sob and hyperventilate. Suddenly I found that I didn't want to face the loss of more of my body. I didn't want chemotherapy again. I didn't want to be brave and tough and put on a perpetual smiling face. I didn't ever want to wake up again. My breathing grew so shaky that the anesthesiologist gave me oxygen and then, thankfully, put me back to sleep.

When I was doing hill sprints to prepare for my ski racing - my heart and lungs and leg muscles all on fire - I'd often be hit by the sensation that there were no resources left inside me with which to keep going. Then I'd think about the races ahead - my dream of pushing my potential as far as it could go, the satisfaction of breaking through my own barriers - and that would get me through the sprints. The same tenacity that served me so well in ski racing helped me survive my second bout with cancer.

After the mastectomies, I knew that one way to get myself going would be to start exercising again, so I headed for the local pool. In the communal shower, I found myself noticing other women's breasts for the first time in my life. Size-D breasts and size-A breasts, sagging breasts and perky breasts. Suddenly and for the first time, after all these years of missing a leg, I felt acutely self-conscious. I couldn't bring myself to undress.

I decided it was time to confront myself. That night at home, I took off all my clothes and had a long look at the woman in the mirror. She was androgynous. Take my face - without makeup, it was a cute young boy's face. My shoulder muscles, arms and hands were powerful and muscular from the crutches. I had no breasts; instead, there were two prominent scars on my chest. I had a sexy flat stomach, a bubble butt and a well-developed thigh from years of ski racing. My right leg ended in another long scar just above the knee.

I discovered that I liked my androgynous body. It fit my personality - my aggressive male side that loves getting dressed in a helmet, arm guards and shin protectors to do battle with the slalom gates, and my gentle female side that longs to have children one day and wants to dress up in a beautiful silk dress, go out to dinner with a lover and then lie back and be slowly undressed by him.

I found that the scars on my chest and my leg were a big deal. They were my marks of life. All of us are scarred by life; it's just that some of those scars show more clearly than others. Our scars do matter. They tell us that we have lived, that we haven't hidden from life. When we see our scars plainly, we can find in them, as I did that day, our own unique beauty.

The next time I went to the pool I showered naked.



Burroville By John Soennichsen

Back in 1974, when I was in my early twenties, I befriended a group of hikers who were mapping a desert trail from the Mexican to the Canadian border. Offering to try a few routes for them through Death Valley, I made the drive to a base camp near Ulida Flat, where I camped for the night.

At first light, I started my trek up an alluvial fan into an unnamed canyon in the Cottonwood Mountains. After about an hour of hiking through the rock-strewn wash, I made my way deeper into the shadows and the bray of a burro told me I wasn't alone. With slow, careful steps, I rounded a bend and found myself in Burroville - Population: 100. I looked around and saw that the majority stood in little groups along the slopes while several others were perched atop the perpendicular cliff walls.

I continued walking and was soon met by an imposing welcoming committee-a dozen big Jacks with massive heads, standing shoulder to shoulder and daring me to approach. Though they stood a good thirty feet away, their resolute stance and effective blockade of the canyon ahead made me pause a while to consider my next move. I'd never heard of anyone being killed by a burro, but it was clear they had no plans to let me pass.

Several moments went by until one of the big Jacks pawed at the ground with his hooves and another looked behind him, as if to check the rear for a surprise attack. That's when I saw what the burro was actually looking at - a Jenny and

nursing foal standing close beside the canyon wall about twenty feet back. Our eyes met and the female's flanks shuddered as she watched me with a wariness that only a true wild thing can display.

When I lifted my gaze to scan the slopes behind her, I was surprised to see other females and their young, planted in groups of two and three all around me. Suddenly I realized it was the time of year for foals to drop, and the big males were merely protecting their mates and babies. I must have let out a big sigh, because one of them pricked up his ears and raised his head as if waiting for me to speak.

"Don't worry, guys, I'm just passing through," I called gently.

No response, just a flutter of flanks and a few ear twitches. Clearly, the subtle approach wasn't working, so I picked up a rock and lobbed it near the biggest Jack. It fell at his feet and he lowered his head to sniff it.

Clearly the burro had no intention of moving, so I reluctantly turned and began to make my way back down the wash in defeat. That was when a loud bray made me about-face once more.

To my surprise, the big jacks were lumbering out of the wash and making their way toward the northern walls of the canyon. Now, only the biggest of them remained at the edge of the bank, staring at me. Suddenly, the way was clear; I'd won the standoff. I started up the canyon but was stopped by the look in the burro's great brown eyes. As we stood there staring at each other, a shudder passed through me.

In that instant the message he sent me became clear: he was asking me to leave the canyon. Politely, and with some measure of supplication, but plain as day. And I knew then I couldn't go on, couldn't violate his trust. So I turned and headed back down the canyon.

As I retreated, I considered my role in creating a desert trail that hundreds of hikers would traverse each year. Today's unknown route through a rugged canyon might well become a dotted red line on some future map. Was it so important that people knew about this place? I began to think it wasn't.

Maybe what this earth really needed was a few more unnamed canyons. Maybe there's some intrinsic value in knowing that some mountains will never be climbed, that a handful of jungles will remain unexplored. Must we really clamber up every alluvial fan, map every desert canyon, and slap a name on every dry lake and rocky outcropping?

Perhaps, in the end, it's enough just knowing they're out there - somewhere.



The Diary

By Martine Klaassen

Armed with two over-packed suitcases, we arrived at the airport just in time for my flight. "Well, here we are, the airport," my sister said with a sigh. As I watched her unload my luggage, I could see the sadness in her eyes. This was not easy on her either. We had both been dreading this moment for the past week. One last hug and a final good-bye and I would be on my way to a new life abroad, leaving my beloved sister behind.

All my life I had loved airports. To me they were some kind of magic gateway to the world, a place from which to start great holidays and adventures. But today it seemed like a cold and heartless place.

As we made our way to the gate we passed through a busload of frustrated holiday goers and their screaming children. I looked at my sister and even though her eyes were filled with tears, she was trying to keep a brave face. "You better go or you'll miss your flight," she said.

"I am just going to walk away and not look back," I said, "that would just be too hard."

As I held her one last time she whispered, "Don't worry about me, I'll be just fine."

"I'll miss you," I replied, and with those last words I was off. As promised, I did not look back, but by the time I reached the custom's office I was sobbing. "Cheer up, love," the tall customs officer said with a smile. "It's not the end of the world, you know." But to me it was the end of the world, as I had known it.

While boarding the plane I was still crying. I did not have the energy to put my bag in the overhead locker, so I stuffed it on the empty seat next to mine. As I settled into my chair, a feeling of sadness overwhelmed me. I felt like my best friend had just been taken away from me.

Growing up, my sister and I would do everything together. Born barely fifteen months apart we not only looked alike, we were alike. We both had that same mix of curiosity and fear of all things unknown to us. One sunny summer day I was playing outside on the grass when she came up to me and said, "Want to come to the attic?" We both knew that the answer to that question was always 'Yes.' We were frightened of the attic but also fascinated by its smells and sounds. Whenever one of us needed something, the other one would come along. Together we would fight the life-size spiders and battle through the numerous boxes until we found what we needed.

Over time the visits to the attic became less scary. Eventually there came a time when we would go by ourselves, but my sister and I stayed as close as ever. When the time came for us to go to college, what better way than for us to go together. My parents were pleased because that way we could 'keep an eye on each other' and of course report back on what the other one was up to. But now that our college days were over and I was off to a foreign country, all I had left were my memories.

The plane shook heavily and the bag that I had shoved onto the seat next to me fell on the floor. My aspirin, hairbrush and a copy of the book I planned to read

were spread on the floor. I bent over to gather them up when I saw an unfamiliar little book in the middle of my belongings. It was not until I picked it up that I realized that it was a diary. The key had been carefully placed in the lock so I opened it.

Immediately I recognized my sister's handwriting. "Hi Sis, What a day it has been today. First you let me know that you are moving abroad and then my boss..." Only then did I realize that my sister had been keeping a diary for the past month and that she was now passing it on to me. She had been scheming to start the diary for the past year but now the time seemed right. I was to write in it for the next couple of months and then send it back to her.

I spent the rest of the flight reading about my sister's comings and goings. And even though a large ocean separated us, at some point it felt like she was actually there. It was only when I thought that I had lost my best friend that I realized that she was going to be around forever.



Ramona's Touch By Betty Aboussie Ellis

It was only a few weeks after my surgery, and I went to Dr. Belt's office for a checkup. It was just after my first chemotherapy treatment.

My scar was still very tender. My arm was numb underneath. This whole set of unique and weird sensations was like having a new roommate to share the twobedroom apartment formerly known as my breasts - now lovingly known as "the breast and the chest."

As usual, I was taken to an examination room to have my blood drawn, again - a terrifying process for me, since I'm so frightened of needles.

I lay down on the examining table. I'd worn a big plaid flannel shirt and a camisole underneath. It was a carefully thought out costume that I hoped others would regard as a casual wardrobe choice. The plaid camouflaged my new chest, the camisole protected it and the buttons on the shirt made for easy medical access.

Ramona entered the room. Her warm sparkling smile was familiar, and stood out in contrast to my fears. I'd first seen her in the office a few weeks earlier. She wasn't my nurse on that day, but I remember her because she was laughing. She laughed in deep, round and rich tones. I remember wondering what could be so funny behind that medical door. What could she possibly find to laugh about at a time like this? So I decided she wasn't serious enough about the whole thing and that I would try to find a nurse who was. But I was wrong.

This day was different. Ramona had taken my blood before. She knew about my fear of needles, and she kindly hid the paraphernalia under a magazine with a bright blue picture of a kitchen being remodeled. As we opened the blouse and

dropped the camisole, the catheter on my breast was exposed and the fresh scar on my chest could be seen.

She said, "How is your scar healing?"

I said, "I think pretty well. I wash around it gently each day." The memory of the shower water hitting my numb chest flashed across my face.

She gently reached over and ran her hand across the scar, examining the smoothness of the healing skin and looking for any irregularities. I began to cry gently and quietly. She brought her warm eyes to mine and said, "You haven't touched it yet, have you?" And I said, "No."

So this wonderful, warm woman laid the palm of her golden brown hand on my pale chest and she gently held it there. For a long time. I continued to cry quietly. In soft tones she said, "This is part of your body. This is you. It's okay to touch it." But I couldn't. So she touched it for me. The scar. The healing wound. And beneath it, she touched my heart.

Then Ramona said, "I'll hold your hand while you touch it." So she placed her hand next to mine, and we both were quiet. That was the gift that Ramona gave me.

That night as I lay down to sleep, I gently placed my hand on my chest and I left it there until I dozed off. I knew I wasn't alone. We were all in bed together, metaphorically speaking, my breast, my chest, Ramona's gift and me.



As a Man Soweth By Mike Buetelle

When I was in junior high, the eighth-grade bully punched me in the stomach. Not only did it hurt and make me angry, but the embarrassment and humiliation were almost intolerable. I wanted desperately to even the score! I planned to meet him by the bike racks the next day and let him have it.

For some reason, I told my plan to Nana, my grandmother - big mistake. She gave me one of her hour-long lectures (that woman could really talk). The lecture was a total drag, but among other things, I vaguely remember her telling me that I didn't need to worry about him. She said, "Good deeds beget good results, and evil deeds beget bad results." I told her, in a nice way, of course, that I thought she was full of it. I told her that I did good things all the time, and all I got in return was "baloney!" (I didn't use that word.) She stuck to her guns, though. She said, "Every good deed will come back to you someday, and every bad thing you do will come back to you."

It took me 30 years to understand the wisdom of her words. Nana was living in a board-and-care home in Laguna Hills, California. Each Tuesday, I came by and took her out to dinner. I would always find her neatly dressed sitting in a chair

right by the front door. I vividly remember our very last dinner together before she went into the convalescent hospital. We drove to a nearby simple little family-owned restaurant. I ordered pot roast for Nana and a hamburger for myself. The food arrived and as I dug in, I noticed that Nana wasn't eating. She was just staring at the food on her plate. Moving my plate aside, I took Nana's plate, placed it in front of me, and cut her meat into small pieces. I then placed the plate back in front of her. As she very weakly, and with great difficulty, forked the meat into her mouth, I was struck with a memory that brought instant tears to my eyes. Forty years previously, as a little boy sitting at the table, Nana had always taken the meat on my plate and cut it into small pieces so I could eat it.

It had taken 40 years, but the good deed had been repaid. Nana was right. We reap exactly what we sow. "Every good deed you do will someday come back to you."

What about the eighth-grade bully?

He ran into the ninth-grade bully.



Disaster on a Mountain

By Patricia Lorenz

When Ruth Hagan was seventy-eight years old, she visited her daughter Judy and teenage granddaughter Marcy in California. They headed for their cabin, zigzagging forty miles up and down the mountains in their Bronco, from pavement to gravel to a narrow one-lane road of brittle shale and powdery dirt that wound terrifyingly close to cliffs.

After dinner Marcy announced the water tank was low and that she would take the Bronco down to the pump and get water. Ruth was nervous about her young granddaughter driving down the narrow dirt road by herself, but Judy reminded her that Marcy had been driving vehicles up there on the ranch roads since she was twelve.

"Just be careful, Marcy," her mother warned. "They've had a dry spell up here and the cliff side is pretty shaky. Be sure to hug the mountain side."

Ruth said a quick prayer as she and Judy watched Marcy from the big window where they could see the road winding down the mountainside. Fifteen minutes later Judy was still watching when suddenly she screamed, "Oh no! God help us! She went over the cliff, Momma! The Bronco and Marcy - they went over! We have to help her! Come on!"

The cabin door slammed and Judy took off running. Ruth ran behind her, but Judy was quickly out of sight after the first turn in the road. Ruth raced down the steep hill, breathing hard. She ran on and on, down the hill, up the next, trying to catch up with her daughter. It was getting harder and harder to see anything at dusk. Ruth stopped cold and looked around.

She screamed into the darkness "Judy, where are you?" Off to her immediate right and down the cliff she heard, "Down here, Mother! Don't come near the edge! I slipped on loose rocks and fell over. I'm down about twenty feet."

"Oh dear God, Judy, what can I do?"

"Just stay back, Momma! The road is giving out all over! I think I can crawl back up. I saw the white roof of the Bronco when I was falling, Momma, and I heard Marcy calling for help. She's alive! But she's way down there in the ravine. You have to go back to the cabin and phone for help. Tell them to send a helicopter. We have to get Marcy out!"

Ruth resisted looking over the edge to make sure Judy was really okay. She turned around and started running back up the hill she'd just stumbled down. Up one hill, down the next. She had one hill left to climb when she stumbled on loose dirt and rocks and fell on her face. Chest pains took her breath away. She started to sob. "Dear God," she prayed, "please help me get back to the cabin so I can call for help!"

At that moment something went through Ruth. It was like a powerful energy and she knew for certain that somebody was there to help her. She heard the words, "I am here." She stood up, completely relaxed and rested. A surge of pain-free energy propelled her forward.

Ruth ran on confidently, faster than she had before, and up that last big hill. She turned into the cabin driveway, pushed through the front door and dialed 911. She sputtered out the details of the disaster but unfortunately, she had no idea where she was. The dispatcher was totally confused. Ruth had to get Judy up to the phone so she could give directions. Ruth stepped out of the cabin into total darkness. She grabbed a three-foot-long walking stick propped against the cabin door and started running back down the switchback road.

She continued to run with energy and determination through the darkness. Up the hill, down the hill, up the second hill. Suddenly she stopped, not knowing where she was. "Marcy! Judy!" she shouted.

A faint voice cried from directly below. "I'm here, Grandma."

Another voice. "Momma!" It was Judy.

Ruth dropped to her knees, then lay flat on her belly as she scooted herself closer and closer to the edge of the cliff. She held the walking stick over the edge and asked Judy if she could see it.

"I see it, Momma, I'm almost there."

Ruth heard gravel rolling around where Judy was climbing. Within minutes, Judy grabbed the other end of the stick and Ruth pulled her 140-pound daughter up and over that cliff. Judy crawled into her mother's lap, shaking and sweating and immediately passed out.

Ruth held her close and stroked her wet forehead. "Judy, Judy, wake up. We have to get help for Marcy!" Ruth kept talking and rubbing her daughter's head. Finally, Judy came to. Ruth pulled her to her feet, and the two women started

walking. Dazed and bleeding, Judy fell three times as they worked their way back to the cabin in the darkness.

When they reached the cabin they heard the phone ringing. It was the volunteer emergency crew on the other end. Judy sputtered out directions to where Marcy was. As soon as she hung up, she and her mother started down the mountain again to meet and guide the rescuers. They trudged up the hill, down the hill. Still full of energy, calm and confident, Ruth held on to Judy, for Judy's sake, not hers.

An hour later, the fire trucks, ambulance, paramedics and, finally, the Flight for Life helicopter arrived. It took three-and-a-half hours to cut Marcy free from the wreckage at the bottom of the cliff. At last the sheriff pulled her out of the back end of the Bronco and carried her to the waiting ambulance. She was rushed to the hospital for treatment of a crushed ankle and severely broken leg, foot and finger.

The next day, when the sheriff came to visit Marcy in the hospital, he shook his head and said, "That mountain didn't beat you."

Ruth Hagan knew the mountain didn't beat them because God was there that night, protecting her, guiding her, breathing strength into her frail body. Ruth, Judy and Marcy all have their lives to prove it.



Manatee Meeting By Linda Ballou

Walking alone on a remote beach in southwest Florida, I was startled to hear splashes and a deep sigh coming from the water just offshore.

As I squinted in the direction of the sounds, the rounded gray back of a sea creature rose amid a red froth, rolled turbulently at the surface, then sank back into the Gulf. Moments later a broad nose emerged and exhaled in a great snuffling breath. It was a manatee, and by the looks of the reddish-colored water and the way it was thrashing, it was in trouble.

I had often watched manatees in these warm coastal waters, but I'd never seen one act like this before. Usually just their big nostrils appeared for a gulp of air as they foraged on sea grasses or swam slowly to greener underwater pastures. But I also knew how common it was for these lumbering giants to be gashed by boat propellers or entangled in crab traps.

I wanted to help, but what could I do? There was no one else on the beach, and the nearest phone to call the Marine Patrol was miles away.

Tossing my beach bag onto the sand, I began wading toward the animal, who continued to writhe as if in distress. I was still only waist deep when I came close enough to make out the bristly whiskers on the manatee's muzzle as it thrust up

out of the sea. Then, to my surprise, a second muzzle, much smaller, poked up beside it.

I pushed on through the shoal water, but now the manatees were also moving toward me. Before I knew what was happening, I was in chest-deep water encircled by not one or two, but at least three blimplike bodies. I felt elated and slightly dizzy like the kid who is 'it' in a schoolyard game.

A bulbous snout emerged next to me. In the translucent water, I could clearly see the rest of the huge mammal, and there, nestled close behind her, a smaller version of her massive body.

Then, with incredible gentleness for such an enormous creature, the larger manatee nudged the little one with her paddle-shaped flipper and pushed it to the surface beside me. I wanted to reach out and touch the pudgy sea baby, but I hesitated, not knowing the rules of this inter-species encounter.

As the two slipped back underwater, two other manatees moved in from behind and slid by, one on either side, rubbing gently against my body as they swam past. They circled and repeated the action, this time followed by the mother and her calf. Emboldened by their overtures, I let my hand graze the side of the small manatee, now clinging to the mother's back, as they made their pass. Its skin felt rubbery and firm like an old fashioned hot water bottle.

The group completed several more circuits. Since they obviously enjoyed touching me, I began stroking each of them as they sidled by. When one of them rolled over for a scratch, I knew I had made the right move.

Eventually my new friends made their way off towards deeper water. I stood anchored to the spot, not wishing to break the spell, until finally the rising tide forced me back to shore.

I suppose I will never know exactly what took place that morning. I like to think that the manatees included me in their celebration of a birth; that I was welcomed to meet the newest member of their tribe. But over time I have come to cherish the experience without questions.

During that unexpected rendezvous, I felt more in tune with the rhythms of life on this vast planet than I ever have. The memory has become a song I sing to myself when I have the blues, a dance I do to celebrate joy.

And each year, during the last week of May, I pack a lunch and head for that isolated stretch of beach for a quiet little birthday picnic on the shore. After all, you never know who might show up for the party.





Remember, We're Raising Children, Not Flowers! By Jack Canfield

I recently heard a story from Stephen Glenn about a famous research scientist who had made several very important medical breakthroughs. He was being interviewed by a newspaper reporter who asked him why he thought he was able to be so much more creative than the average person. What set him so far apart from others?

He responded that, in his opinion, it all came from an experience with his mother that occurred when he was about two years old. He had been trying to remove a bottle of milk from the refrigerator when he lost his grip on the slippery bottle and it fell, spilling its contents all over the kitchen floor - a veritable sea of milk!

When his mother came into the kitchen, instead of yelling at him, giving him a lecture or punishing him, she said, "Robert, what a great and wonderful mess you have made! I have rarely seen such a huge puddle of milk. Well, the damage has already been done. Would you like to get down and play in the milk for a few minutes before we clean it up?"

Indeed, he did. After a few minutes, his mother said, "You know, Robert, whenever you make a mess like this, eventually you have to clean it up and restore everything to its proper order. So, how would you like to do that? We could use a sponge, a towel or a mop. Which do you prefer?" He chose the sponge and together they cleaned up the spilled milk.

His mother then said, "You know, what we have here is a failed experiment in how to effectively carry a big milk bottle with two tiny hands. Let's go out in the back yard and fill the bottle with water and see if you can discover a way to carry it without dropping it." The little boy learned that if he grasped the bottle at the top near the lip with both hands, he could carry it without dropping it. What a wonderful lesson!

This renowned scientist then remarked that it was at that moment that he knew he didn't need to be afraid to make mistakes. Instead, he learned that mistakes were just opportunities for learning something new, which is, after all, what scientific experiments are all about. Even if the experiment "doesn't work," we usually learn something valuable from it.

Wouldn't it be great if all parents would respond the way Robert's mother responded to him?





Magic Snowball Time

By Colleen Madonna Flood Williams

Every fall, when the frost first played freeze tag with the grass, Papa would come to our house. He would shuffle in, his soft, shiny leather shoes dancing across Momma's sunflower-yellow-tiled kitchen floor. All six of us kids knew why he was there. First frost meant magic snowball time.

Papa only came to our house once a year. He and Granny lived in an apartment upstairs from an old neighborhood corner store in the big city. Papa said they lived there to be close to the old-fashioned penny candy counter in the store.

We went to see Papa, Granny and that penny candy counter every Saturday. Unless, of course, the first frost fell on a Saturday. The first frost always meant that Papa was coming to see us.

Papa would bring an old battered coal shovel and an old-fashioned ice chest with him. He'd hustle all six of us kids out to the backyard. Then, he'd start digging and talking. He always worked as he talked.

Papa would tell us how he'd lived with the gypsies before he'd met Granny. He'd tell us about life on the road with the carnival. He'd show us magic tricks and tell us strange but true tales of gypsy powers. Then, Papa would start talking about the importance of the magic snowbank.

We'd gather around him and listen like we were supposed to, but never did, in church. He would tell us how some folks believed that if you wanted a good snowy winter, you always had to save a little snow from the winter before and put it into the magic snowbank. Then, he'd let us each have a turn digging.

The dirt would fly, as we steadily took turns digging down into the earth. We could smell the last barbequed breezes of summer, and the newly fallen leaves of autumn. Sometimes, we'd all swear that we'd smelled the peppermint, candy cane, gingerbread house and poinsettia fragrances of Christmas wafting out of that hole.

Papa would tell us how some folks believed that you have to give to the earth if you want it to give to you. He'd talk about how any good farmer knows that you can't expect to reap a harvest without planting seeds. Our snow seeds were in his old ice chest.

Soon enough, Papa would open that old ice chest. We'd crowd around it with the same amount of wonder every year. Inside, Papa would have seven perfect magic snowballs. There was always one for him, and one for each of us kids.

We'd wait politely, but impatiently as he passed them out. We could never hold them for long, as Papa said it wouldn't work if we were selfish. We didn't want to melt the snow and have nothing to offer the earth.

We would solemnly place our snowballs into the hole, quickly, if still a bit reluctantly. There's not a child I've ever known that didn't want to throw a snowball once it was placed into his or her hands. We weren't any different. We just knew that we had to give our snowballs to the earth. Our snowballs were magic. Our snowballs were the seeds for the magic snowbank.

Papa would cover our magic snowbank with the dirt that we'd shoveled out of the hole. We'd all hold hands and sing Christmas carols, as Papa buried our magic snowballs.

Then, Papa would wipe his hands on his pants and smile.

"Well, we've planted our magic snowballs on the day of the first frost, kids. It's up to the magic snowbank now," he'd say.

When the first snow came, as it did every winter, all six of us would run out into the yard and catch snowflakes on our tongues and in our mittens. We'd taste the tickly, shivery delight of falling ice stars. We'd examine the crystal beauty of bright white, frosty flakes on dark, warm mittens.

It was all Papa's magic, and we were a part of it. We would dance and hug and giggle and grin and sing, all six of us together. We never quarreled or argued on the day the first snow fell. We were too pleased with ourselves.

We knew we were magic. The first snow reminded us of Papa, the first frost and our magic snowbank deep within the earth. We knew we had a secret all our own. We had helped the snow to fall once again. We were snow farmers, and to us, first frost meant magic snowball time.

I'm all grown up now. Still, I'll tell you a secret. My family carries on Papa's magic. We have a magic snowbank in our backyard. Think of us when the first snow flies...as I think of my Papa and hope that someday my grandchildren will think of me.



The Power of a Blue Box By Hanna Bandes Geshelin

When I worked in a Jewish nursing home, I learned the true meaning of the Jewish national Fund Blue Box. A Blue Box is not just a *pushke* into which coins are put. It is the repository of dreams, prayers and efforts of generations of Jews. I learned this one day at a storytelling activity at my nursing home.

One day, to stimulate memories among the participants in my group, I brought a tray of objects. I set out a small pair of small candlesticks, a couple of seashells,

a lace-edged, monogrammed handkerchief, a Blue Box, and other odds and ends on the tray and passed it around. The residents would finger the objects, then pass the tray on. When their turn came, they'd share a personal anecdote that one of the objects had brought to mind.

That day, an aide had brought Clara to the group. Clara had suffered a stroke that left her paralyzed on one side and somewhat aphasic: She understood language but had trouble finding the correct words when she wanted to speak.

Clara did not take her disabilities with grace. She was angry, hostile and disruptive. Storytelling was the most inappropriate activity of all, for it focused attention on her language disability. But there she was, and I was too busy with the rest of the group to wheel Clara back into the hall. I just hoped that Clara wouldn't raise too much of a ruckus.

When the tray went around the room, Clara grabbed the Blue Box in her good hand and clasped it to her chest, refusing to relinquish it. Although no one else took an object off the tray, there were grumbles from the other participants. "Anyone can tell a story about any object - these or any others," I said. The grumbles died down. Then the stories began. One woman told how the seashells reminded her of going to the beach every summer Sunday as a child. Another described the lacy handkerchief she carried when she eloped with a soldier on the eve of World War II. The next person was Clara, but the person beyond her, knowing Clara never participated in a group, cleared her throat. Clara waved the Blue Box and said, "Mine, mine." Another old woman, a former social worker, said, "Clara wants to speak!" Clara nodded, and the room became silent.

Slowly, haltingly, Clara began her story. Often she said something that made no sense, and I would suggest words that fit better. Clara would shake her head until I hit the right word, then she'd nod. I then repeated the story up to that point, and Clara would continue. Other old ladies had told their memories in two or three sentences, but in spite of her laborious method of storytelling, Clara told her story in detail.

Her son was six, she said, when World War II was over and the news of concentration camps became public. Clara, a young Boston housewife, was devastated, although all her family was already in America. Her heart ached for the survivors, crammed into Displaced Persons camps, and she wanted to help. After much thought, she made a plan. Every afternoon, when her son came home from school, she would take him by one hand with her Blue Box in the other hand, and she would collect money for Israel. Clara went door to door through the Jewish neighborhoods, and everyone gave. But she couldn't just stop, so she started going through other neighborhoods. "Everyone gave," she told the group. "The Irish and the Italians and the Greeks, everyone gave.

"They said, 'I feel so bad for your people. Thank you for giving me a chance to help." Clara told the group that for two years, until the birth of her second child was imminent, she and her son went out almost every day to collect money for Israel, money to bring the survivors home to their new land.

When Clara finished, the room was silent. Her painfully told, detailed account had brought those days back clearly in everyone's mind. They had also peeled back the curtain of time to show this woman when she had been vitally alive. Suddenly one old woman began to clap, and then applause filled the room. Clara nodded at the group, and the side of her mouth that could move curved into a smile. Slowly the room returned to normal, and the next person told her story.

That night, Clara had another stroke, one that left her completely unable to speak. But in my eyes and those of the other people who had been in that room that day, Clara never again looked like the mere wreck of a woman. Instead, we saw past the wreckage of age to the vibrant soul of a woman who cared.



The Day I Became a Mom By Linda Jones

The day I became a mom was not the day my daughter was born, but seven years later. Up until that day, I had been too busy trying to survive my abusive marriage. I had spent all my energy trying to run a "perfect" home that would pass inspection each evening, and I didn't see that my baby girl had become a toddler. I'd tried endlessly to please someone who could never be pleased and suddenly realized that the years had slipped by and could never be recaptured.

Oh, I had done the normal "motherly" things, like making sure my daughter got to ballet and tap and gym lessons. I went to all of her recitals and school concerts, parent-teacher conferences and open houses - alone. I ran interference during my husband's rages when something was spilled at the dinner table, telling her, "It will be okay, Honey. Daddy's not really mad at you." I did all I could to protect her from hearing the awful shouting and accusations after he returned from a night of drinking. Finally I did the best thing I could do for my daughter and myself: I removed us from the home that wasn't really a home at all.

That day I became a mom was the day my daughter and I were sitting in our new home having a calm, quiet dinner just as I had always wanted for her. We were talking about what she had done in school and suddenly her little hand knocked over the full glass of chocolate milk by her plate. As I watched the white tablecloth and freshly painted white wall become dark brown, I looked at her small face. It was filled with fear, knowing what the outcome of the event would have meant only a week before in her father's presence. When I saw that look on her face and looked at the chocolate milk running down the wall, I simply started laughing. I am sure she thought I was crazy, but then she must have realized that I was thinking, "It's a good thing your father isn't here!" She started laughing with me, and we laughed until we cried. They were tears of joy and peace and were the first of many tears that we cried together. That was the day we knew that we were going to be okay.

Whenever either of us spills something, even now, seventeen years later, she says, "Remember the day I spilled the chocolate milk? I knew that day that you had done the right thing for us, and I will never forget it."

That was the day I really became a mom. I discovered that being a mom isn't only going to ballet, and tap and gym recitals, and attending every school concert and open house. It isn't keeping a spotless house and preparing perfect meals. It certainly isn't pretending things are normal when they are not. For me, being a mom started when I could laugh over spilled milk.



The Gift of Music By Brandon Lagana

I had been inside the prison called Gander Hill several times already by the time I met Ray in the spring of 1993. My father worked there with a group teaching inmates to improve their communication and speaking skills. I was a senior in college, majoring in speech communications, and eventually I started my own volunteer student group at Gander Hill.

Teaching communication means getting people to tell their stories, but Ray could tell you how much he missed playing his guitar without speaking. Sometimes he moved his hands across the air as if he were playing his favorite blues scale. He always gave me a slight nod when he saw me come into the chapel for the meeting. He loved sharing his guitar stories. Although he had been an inmate at Gander Hill for over a decade, he always had a song in his head, in particular one that he said he had been writing in his mind since his arrival. He looked forward to playing again the way a child counts the days until summer vacation.

When my group formally established itself at Gander Hill, the men were allowed a night of celebration to which they could invite one or two family members. The night of the celebration was just like Christmas for them. They huddled with their loved ones, whom they had not seen or touched in several months or longer. Since his family lived in Texas, no one came to the celebration as Ray's guest, but he waited patiently for me to arrive. As he rehearsed his song in his head, I walked into the prison with a guitar.

Ray tuned that guitar as if he were putting his life back into harmony. I have never heard a guitar tuned like that before or since. He looked at me over his shoulder and nodded a thank-you before bringing his song to life on the guitar. I watched Ray's fingers dance across the strings as if they were himself, running free. And for those moments, he was.



A Change of Heart By George Mapson

It was the tail end of the depression, and things were tough. Mum had a hard time raising us kids on her own in our small community of New Westminster, BC. My Dad had drowned in Pitt Lake, five years earlier - I still remember it like it was yesterday. Because Dad had no pension, or benefits, there was not much money so we went on relief, now called social assistance. We relied on the Salvation Army to keep us clothed, and although our clothes were second hand, we thought they were beautiful.

Looking back, I realize what Mum went through sending us kids to school. Every morning she would tuck a new piece of cardboard in our shoes, because our soles were worn out. When we got home, Mum would have "French Toast" ready for us. This was bread deep-fried in lard. Constant moving was typical for my family in these times. Rent was twenty-five dollars a month, but Mum couldn't pay it, and we knew we would be evicted right after Christmas on the first of January. These were hard and sad years, but we never complained.

Christmas was approaching, and we were entitled to a twenty-five dollar Christmas fund for social services. The Inspector came to our house, and searched it from top to bottom to be sure we didn't have any food hidden away. When he didn't find any, he issued the cheque for Mum. It was four days before Christmas, and Mum said that instead of buying food, she would use the money to pay back rent, assuring us all of a roof over our heads for a little while longer. She told us then there would be nothing for Christmas.

Unknown to Mum, I had been selling Christmas trees, shoveling snow, and doing odd jobs to earn enough money to buy a new pair of boots. Boots that weren't patched, boots with no cardboard in the soles. I knew exactly which boots I wanted. They were ten-inch Top Genuine Pierre Paris and they had a price of twenty-three dollars.

Well, the big day came on the afternoon of Christmas Eve. I was very excited, as I hurried up the road to catch the bus. It was only half a mile walk, but on the way I noticed a house with Christmas lights and decorations. It was then I realized that at our house, we had no lights, no decorations, nor any money for Christmas goodies.

I knew then that we would have no turkey or ham for Christmas, and I felt sad. But I knew for certain that we would have French toast.

As I continued walking I began to feel bewildered. I was eleven years old, and I was feeling a strange sense of guilt. Here I was going to buy a new pair of boots while Mum was home in tears. She would be trying to explain to us why there were no presents. As I arrived at the bus stop, the driver opened his big manual hinged door. I stood there for what seemed an eternity, until eventually the driver asked, "Son, are you getting on this bus or not?" I finally blurted out, "No thanks Sir, I've changed my mind."

The bus drove off without me, and I stood alone in a daze, but feeling as if a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. My mind was made up and I realized what I had to do.

Across the street from the bus stop was a big grocery store called the Piggly Wiggley. Into the store I went, brimming with happiness and excitement. I realized that the twenty-five dollars I had worked so hard for went a long way for groceries. I bought a turkey, ham, oranges and all the Christmas treats. I spent every dime of my hard-earned money. The owner of the grocery store said, "Son, you can't pack all those groceries and carry them home yourself." So I asked two boys with carriers on their bicycles to run them the half-mile down to our house. As I walked behind the delivery boys, I whispered for them to quietly unload the groceries on the porch and pile them against the door. Once they had done this, with great excitement and tears in my eyes, I knocked on the door. I could hardly wait to see my mother's face! When Mum opened the door, some of the groceries fell inside onto the floor, and she just stood there dumbfounded. Holding back the tears, I hollered, "Merry Christmas Mother!! There really is a Santa Claus!"

I had a lot of explaining to do as we unpacked all the food and put it away. That day I got enough hugs and kisses from Mum to last two lifetimes. To see my Mother's prayers answered more than made up for the boots I never got. It was a Merry Christmas for us after all!



Speaking By Cynthia Laughlin

I was no different from any other mother.

When my little boy, Skyler, was born, I longed for the day he would talk to me. My husband and I dreamed about the first sweet "Mama" or "Dada." Every cry or coo was a small glimpse into my son's mind.

My baby's noises were even more precious to me because Skyler had been born with several health problems. At first, the problems had delayed his development, but once they were safely behind us, I looked forward to my son's first words. They didn't come.

At age three, Skyler was diagnosed autistic, a developmental disability destined to affect his social and emotional well-being his entire life. Skyler couldn't talk wouldn't talk. I would probably never hear any words from him at all. In a store, I would hear a child calling "Mommy," and I would wonder if that were what my little boy might sound like. I wondered how it would feel to hear my child call out for me.

But I could have learned to live with his silence if it weren't for another hallmark characteristic of autism: Skyler formed no attachments. He didn't want to be held, much preferring to lie in his bed or sit in his car seat. He wouldn't look at me; sometimes, he even looked through me.

Once, when I took him to the doctor, we talked to a specialist who was my size, age and who had the same hair color. When it was time to go, Skyler went to her instead of me - he couldn't tell us apart. When Skyler was three, he spent three days at Camp Courageous for disabled children in Iowa, and when he returned he didn't even recognize me.

The pain was almost unbearable. My own son didn't even know I was his mother.

I hid the pain, and we did the best we could for Skyler. We enrolled him in our local area educational agency preschool, where the teachers and speech pathologist worked hard to help Skyler connect with the world around him. They used pictures and computer voice-machines that spoke for him, and sign

language. These devices gave me little glimpses of who Skyler was, even if he didn't understand who I was. "He will talk," the speech pathologist insisted, but inside, I had given up hope.

The one dream I couldn't let go was to have Skyler understand that I was his mom. Even if I never heard him say, "Mom," I wanted to see the recognition in his eyes.

The summer of Skyler's fourth year was when it started. A smoldering ember of understanding in him sparked, and fanned by our efforts, steadily flamed. His first words were hardly recognizable, often out of context, never spontaneous. Then, slowly, he could point to an item and say a word. Then two words together as a request. Then spontaneous words. Each day, he added more and more recognizable words, using them to identify pictures and ask questions. We could see his understanding increase, till his eyes would seek out mine, wanting to comprehend.

"You Mom?" he said one day.

"Yes, Skyler, I'm Mom."

He asked his teachers and caregivers: "You Mom?"

"No, Skyler, not Mom."

"You my Mom?" he said back to me.

"Yes, Skyler, I'm your Mom."

And finally, a rush of understanding in his eyes: "You my Mom."

"Yes, Skyler, I'm your Mom."

If those had been Skyler's only words ever, they would have been enough for me: My son knew I was his mother.

But Skyler wasn't done.

One evening I leaned against the headboard on Skyler's bed, my arms wrapped around him. He was cozily tucked between my legs, our bodies warm and snug as I read to him from one of his favorite books - a typical affectionate scene between mother and son, but because of Skyler's autism, one that I could never take for granted.

I stopped reading. Skyler had interrupted me, leaning back his head so he could look me in the eye.

"Yes, Skyler?"

And then the voice of an angel, the voice of my son: "I love you, Mom."



Flying A Kite By Vicki L. Kitchner

Her skin was the color of rich, hot chocolate and her brown eyes twinkled with intelligence and humor. Her name was Michelle and she spent her days in a purple wheelchair because she had been born with Cerebral Palsy. She rolled into my classroom - and my heart - when she was just three years old. Her courage was an inspiration to me and her spirit touched my heart.

Michelle and her mother once gave me a figurine of a beautiful black child sitting in a wheelchair. I displayed the cherished gift on a shelf in my den at home. It always reminded me of the little girl I loved so much.

When Michelle was seven, she was to undergo open-heart surgery for the third time. The night before surgery, I sat in the chair beside her bed and held her hand.

"I'm tired, Bicki," she said weakly.

"Why don't you close your eyes and try to get some sleep?"

"No, not sleepy. Tired."

I thought of the tiny, imperfect heart that had to work so hard, the grand mal seizures, terrible headaches and tight, spastic muscles that made her every move difficult and painful. I was heart-broken at the wisdom of the little soul who understood the difference between sleepy and tired at such a young age.

"Will I go to Heaven soon?"

I placed my hand on her forehead, "I don't know, that's up to God."

She glanced at the stars through the window of her room. "How will I get all the way up there? An airplane?"

"No, God will send a special angel to show you the way. You won't have to take your wheelchair or your leg braces or any of your medicine because you won't need any of that in Heaven. You'll be able to run and play just like your brother."

Her eyes filled with hope. "Do you think I could fly a kite?"

I swallowed a tear and smiled, "I'm sure if you ask God for a kite, he would find one for you."

"Oh, I hope so Bicki!"

It was very early in the morning while I was doing my prayer time when the figurine of Michelle, for no apparent reason, fell from my bookshelf to the floor. The impact of the fall separated the figure of the girl from the wheelchair. I was devastated and vowed to have it repaired. Later that same day, Michelle's mother called to tell me that her daughter's heart had simply stopped beating and she had peacefully slipped away in the early hours before dawn.

I have since thrown the ceramic wheelchair away and the little girl sits on the edge of the shelf with her legs dangling over the side. She's smiling toward the sky. I always think of Michelle on warm, windy days. I imagine her running through the clouds with a kite dancing above her!



Grandfather's Clock by Kathy Fasiq

In the dining room of my grandfather's house stood a massive grandfather clock. Meals in that dining room were a time for four generations to become one. The table was always spread with food from wonderful family recipes all containing love as the main ingredient. And always that grandfather clock stood like a trusted old family friend, watching over the laughter and story swapping and gentle kidding that were a part of our lives.

As a child, the old clock fascinated me. I watched and listened to it during meals. I marveled at how at different times of the day, that clock would chime three times, six times or more, with a wonderful resonant sound that echoed throughout the house. I found the clock comforting. Familiar. Year after year, the clock chimed, a part of my memories, a part of my heart.

Even more wonderful to me was my grandfather's ritual. He meticulously wound that clock with a special key each day. That key was magic to me. It kept our family's magnificent clock ticking and chiming, a part of every holiday and every tradition, as solid as the wood from which it was made. I remember watching as my grand-father took the key from his pocket and opened the hidden door in the massive old clock. He inserted the key and wound-not too much, never overwind, he'd tell me solemnly. Nor too little. He never let that clock wind down and stop. When we grandkids got a little older, he showed us how to open the door to the grandfather clock and let us each take a turn winding the key. I remember the first time I did, I trembled with anticipation. To be part of this family ritual was sacred.

After my beloved grandfather died, it was several days after the funeral before I remembered the clock!

"Mama! The clock! We've let it wind down."

The tears flowed freely when I entered the dining room. The clock stood forlornly quiet. As quiet as the funeral parlor had been. Hushed. The clock even seemed

smaller. Not quite as magnificent without my grandfather's special touch. I couldn't bear to look at it.

Sometime later, years later, my grandmother gave me the clock and the key. The old house was quiet. No bowls clanging, no laughter over the dinner table, no ticking or chiming of the clock-all was still. The hands on the clock were frozen, a reminder of time slipping away, stopped at the precise moment when my grandfather had ceased winding it. I took the key in my shaking hand and opened the clock door. All of a sudden, I was a child again, watching my grandfather with his silver-white hair and twinkling blue eyes. He was there, winking at me, at the secret of the clock's magic, at the key that held so much power. I stood, lost in the moment for a long time. Then slowly, reverently, I inserted the key and wound the clock. It sprang to life. Tick-tock, tick-tock, life and chimes were breathed into the dining room, into the house and into my heart. In the movement of the hands of the clock, my grandfather lived again.



The First Day of Middle School By Patty Hansen

My stomach tied in knots, and I could feel the sweat soaking through my T-shirt. My hands were clammy as I spun the face of my combination lock. I tried and tried to remember the numbers, and every time I thought I had it, the lock wouldn't open. Around and around went the numbers, left, right, right, left...*which way was it supposed to go*? I couldn't make it work. I gave up and started to run down the hallway. As I ran, the hall seemed to get longer and longer...the door I trying to reach was farther away than when I had started. I began to sweat even worse, then I could feel the tears forming. I was late, late, late for my first class on my first day of middle school. As I ran, people were watching me and they were laughing...laughing...then the bell rang! In my dream, it was the school bell. But as I sat up in bed, I realized that it was my alarm clock jarring me awake.

I was having the dream again. I started having the dream around the end of the sixth grade, and as the start of seventh grade grew closer, the more I had the dream. This time the dream was even more real, because today was the first day of seventh grade.

In my heart, I knew I never would make it. Everything was too different. School, friends - even my own body.

I was used to walking to school, and now I had to walk six blocks to the bus stop so that I could take the bus to and from school. I hated buses. They made me carsick from the jiggling and the smell of the fuel.

I had to get up for school earlier than in the past, partly because of having to be bussed to school and partly because I had to take better care of myself now that I was in my preteen years. My mom told me I would have to shower every morning since my hormones were kicking in - that's why I perspired so easily. I was totally uncomfortable with my body. My feet didn't want to respond to my own directions, and I tripped a lot. I constantly had a sprained ankle, wet armpits and things stuck in my braces. I felt awkward, smelly, insecure and like I had bad breath on a full-time basis.

In middle school, I would have to learn the rules and personalities of six different teachers instead of just one. There would be different kids in all my classes, kids I didn't even know. I had never made friends very easily, and now I would have to start all over again.

I would have to run to my locker between classes, remembering my combination, open it, put in the books from the last class and take out different books...and make it to the next class all within *five minutes!*

I was also scared because of some stories I had heard about the first day of middle school, like being canned by the eighth-graders. That's when a bunch of eighth-graders pick you up and put you in a trash can. I had also heard that when eighth-grade girls catch a new seventh-grader in the girls' bathroom alone, they smear her with lipstick. Neither one of these first-day activities sounded like something I wanted to take part in.

No one had ever told me that growing up was going to be so hard, so scary, so unwelcome, so...unexpected. I was the oldest kid in my family - in fact, in my entire neighborhood - and no one had been there before me, to help lead me through the challenges of middle school.

I was on my own.

The first day of school was almost everything I feared. I *didn't* remember my combination. I wrote the combination on my hand, but my hand was so sweaty it came off. I was late to every class. I didn't have enough time to finish my lunch; I had just sat down to eat when the bell rang to go back to class. I almost choked on my peanut butter and jelly sandwich as I ran down the dreaded hallway. The classrooms and the teachers were a blur. I wasn't sure what teacher went with which subject and they had all assigned homework...on the very first day of school! I couldn't believe it.

But the first day wasn't like my dream in another way. In my dream, all the other kids had it together and I was the only one who was the nerd. In real life, I wasn't the only one who was late for classes. Everyone else was late, too. No one could remember their combination either, except Ted Milliken, the kid who carried a briefcase to school. After most of the kids realized that everyone else was going through the same thing they were going through, we all started cracking up. We were bumping into each other in our rush to get to the next class, and books were flying everywhere. No one got canned or smeared - at least no one I knew. I still didn't go into the girls' bathroom alone, just in case. Yeah, there was laughter in the hallway, but most of it was the laughter of kids sharing a common experience: complete hysteria!

As the weeks went by, it became easier and easier. Pretty soon I could twirl my combination without even looking at it. I hung posters in my locker, and finally felt like I was at home. I learned all my teacher's names and decided who I liked the best. Friendships from elementary school were renewed and made stronger, and new friends were made. I learned how to change into a gym suit in front of other girls. It never felt comfortable, but I did it - just like everyone else did. I don't think any of us felt very comfortable.

I still didn't like the bus; it did make me carsick. I even threw up on the bus once. (At least it was on the way home, not on the way to school.) I went to dances and parties, and I started to wonder what it would feel like to be kissed by a boy. The school had track tryouts, and I made the team and learned how to jump the low hurdles. I got pretty good at it, too.

First semester turned into second, and then third. Before I knew it, eighth grade was just around the corner. I had made it through.

Next year, on the first day of school, I would be watching the new seventhgraders sweating it out just like I did - just like everyone does. I decided that I would feel sorry for them...but only for the FIRST day of seventh grade. After that, it's a breeze.



Something Special By Pam Bumpus

"I would do something special for her. Not take out the trash without being reminded. Something special, something I wouldn't ordinarily do." With tears streaming down his face, the gentleman had just answered the reporter's question, "What would you do differently if you had known you might not see your wife again?"

Now, I personally think this is a pretty crappy question to ask anyone, much less the husband of a victim of a terrorist attack. The reporter seemed to have no compassion for this man whose wife's plane had been flown into the World Trade Center.

"I'm just glad I kissed her good-bye and told her I loved her this morning," he managed to choke out.

Of course, we would all act differently if we knew time together with our spouse was running out. My anger at the insensitive reporter simmered along with the disbelief and fear that had become part of my life since watching the results of the attack on America. "Stupid guy," I muttered to myself, switching off the television. Maybe I needed a break. I have that luxury. I can turn off the pictures of the devastated buildings, despondent relatives and harried rescue workers.

But could I turn off my feelings? My husband Alan and I farm. He was cutting a field of soybeans that afternoon. I decided to go take pictures of the American flag he had mounted on the back of our combine. With terrorists trying to cripple our nation, we wanted to show our support: The American farmer was still hard at work.

Back at the house, starting a load of laundry, I found myself thinking about that interview. 'I would do something special,' played over and over in my mind. That gentleman would never have that opportunity now, but I did. I hope Alan and I

have another forty years together. But there are no guarantees. Tomorrows are not guaranteed.

'Something I wouldn't ordinarily do.' Well, his pickup could sure use a good cleaning. So I got to it. After about thirty minutes of vacuuming and scrubbing the interior, I was ready to wash the outside. I had one little problem: Starting the power washer was a bit tricky. You had to choke the motor just enough, and the idle had to be set just so. The possibility of getting jerked on the recoil was significant. 'Something special...'Grabbing the rope pull I tackled it head on. Suddenly it was very important to me to accomplish this surprise for Alan. Several attempts later, with no success and an aching arm, I thought I might not succeed. 'Lord,' I prayed silently, 'I could sure use your help. I want to get this started so I can finish this for Alan. I really want to do this for him.'

The guilt hit immediately. How could I bother our Lord at a time like this? Thousands were praying for their loved ones. Much more important prayers needed his attention right now. "I'm sorry, Lord," I whispered. How could I be so selfish? I had spent a lot of time in prayer over the past three days, asking for comfort for the victims' families, strength for our nation's leaders and healing for all of us. My request for help now was automatic. I always ask for help when facing a difficult task. But it just didn't seem right to do so today.

Defeat didn't seem an option either, so I pulled the rope one more time. The motor sputtered to life.

Yes, Alan was surprised and grateful when he saw his pickup. And I was surprised and grateful for the important lessons I learned that day. First of all, despite his tactless approach, the reporter brought home a very important point. Through his pain, the man who lost his spouse taught me to cherish mine. I will look for those "special" things to do for Alan.

Secondly, and maybe more importantly, God does care about us, all of us. He hears the prayers of those whose suffering seems unbearable. He cares. And he hears those of us who need a little boost when we have set out to do something special for someone we love.



Hungry for Your Love by Herman and Roma Rosenblat As told to Barbara DeAngelis, Ph.D.

It is cold, so bitter cold, on this dark, winter day in 1942. But it is no different from any other day in this Nazi concentration camp. I stand shivering in my thin rags, still in disbelief that this nightmare is happening. I am just a young boy. I should be playing with friends; I should be going to school; I should be looking forward to a future, to growing up and marrying, and having a family of my own. But those dreams are for the living, and I am no longer one of them. Instead, I am almost dead, surviving from day to day, from hour to hour, ever since I was taken from my home and brought here with tens of thousands other Jews. Will I still be alive tomorrow? Will I be taken to the gas chamber tonight?

Back and forth I walk next to the barbed wire fence, trying to keep my emaciated body warm. I am hungry, but I have been hungry for longer than I want to remember. I am always hungry. Edible food seems like a dream. Each day as more of us disappear, the happy past seems like a mere dream, and I sink deeper and deeper into despair. Suddenly, I notice a young girl walking past on the other side of the barbed wire. She stops and looks at me with sad eyes, eyes that seem to say that she understands, that she, too, cannot fathom why I am here. I want to look away, oddly ashamed for this stranger to see me like this, but I cannot tear my eyes from hers.

Then she reaches into her pocket, and pulls out a red apple. A beautiful, shiny red apple. Oh, how long has it been since I have seen one! She looks cautiously to the left and to the right, and then with a smile of triumph, quickly throws the apple over the fence. I run to pick it up, holding it in my trembling, frozen fingers. In my world of death, this apple is an expression of life, of love. I glance up in time to see the girl disappearing into the distance.

The next day, I cannot help myself-I am drawn at the same time to that spot near the fence. Am I crazy for hoping she will come again? Of course. But in here, I cling to any tiny scrap of hope. She has given me hope and I must hold tightly to it.

And again, she comes. And again, she brings me an apple, flinging it over the fence with that same sweet smile.

This time I catch it, and hold it up for her to see. Her eyes twinkle. Does she pity me? Perhaps. I do not care, though. I am just so happy to gaze at her. And for the first time in so long, I feel my heart move with emotion.

For seven months, we meet like this. Sometimes we exchange a few words. Sometimes, just an apple. But she is feeding more than my belly, this angel from heaven. She is feeding my soul. And somehow, I know I am feeding hers as well. One day, I hear frightening news: we are being shipped to another camp. This could mean the end for me. And it definitely means the end for me and my friend. The next day when I greet her, my heart is breaking, and I can barely speak as I say what must be said: "Do not bring me an apple tomorrow," I tell her. "I am being sent to another camp. We will never see each other again." Turning before I lose all control, I run away from the fence. I cannot bear to look back. If I did, I know she would see me standing there, with tears streaming down my face. Months pass and the nightmare continues. But the memory of this girl sustains me through the terror, the pain, the hopelessness. Over and over in my mind, I see her face, her kind eyes, I hear her gentle words, I taste those apples. And then one day, just like that, the nightmare is over. The war has ended. Those of us who are still alive are freed. I have lost everything that was precious to me, including my family. But I still have the memory of this girl, a memory I carry in my heart and gives me the will to go on as I move to America to start a new life. Years pass. It is 1957. I am living in New York City. A friend convinces me to go

on a blind date with a lady friend of his. Reluctantly, I agree. But she is nice, this woman named Roma. And like me, she is an immigrant, so we have at least that in common.

"Where were you during the war?" Roma asks me gently, in that delicate way immigrants ask one another questions about those years.

"I was in a concentration camp in Germany," I reply.

Roma gets a far away look in her eyes, as if she is remembering something painful yet sweet.

"What is it?" I ask.

"I am just thinking about something from my past, Herman," Roma explains in a voice suddenly very soft. "You see, when I was a young girl, I lived near a concentration camp. There was a boy there, a prisoner, and for a long while, I

used to visit him every day. I remember I used to bring him apples. I would throw the apple over the fence, and he would be so happy."

Roma sighs heavily and continues. "It is hard to describe how we felt about each other-after all, we were young, and we only exchanged a few words when we could-but I can tell you, there was much love there. I assume he was killed like so many others. But I cannot bear to think that, and so I try to remember him as he was for those months we were given together."

With my heart pounding so loudly I think it wil1 explode, I look directly at Roma and ask, "And did that boy say to you one day, 'Do not bring me an apple tomorrow. I am being sent to another camp'?"

"Why, yes," Roma responds, her voice trembling.

"But, Herman, how on earth could you possibly know that?"

I take her hands in mine and answer, "Because I was that young boy, Roma." For many moments, there is only silence. We cannot take our eyes from each other, and as the veils of time lift, we recognize the soul behind the eyes, the dear friend we once loved so much, whom we have never stopped loving, whom we have never stopped remembering.

Finally, I speak: "Look, Roma, I was separated from you once, and I don't ever want to be separated from you again. Now, I am free, and I want to be together with you forever. Dear, will you marry me?"

I see that same twinkle in her eye that I used to see as Roma says, "Yes, I will marry you," and we embrace, the embrace we longed to share for so many months, but barbed wire came between us. Now, nothing ever will again. Almost forty years have passed since that day when I found my Roma again. Destiny brought us together the first time during the war to show me a promise of hope and now it had reunited us to fulfill that promise.

Valentine's Day, 1996. I bring Roma to the Oprah Winfrey Show to honor her on national television. I want to tell her in front of millions of people what I feel in my heart every day:

"Darling, you fed me in the concentration camp when I was hungry. And I am still hungry, for something I will never get enough of: I am only hungry for your love."