Tying Shoes: A Collection of Essays

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Tying Shoes: A Collection of Essays

by

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

This collection of seven personal essays centers on certain commonalities of human experience as discovered in the life experience of the author. Issues of discussion include the acceptance and/or alienation of self, the way issues of gender are transferred to succeeding generations, the divide between spirituality and physicality or faith and reason, the transformation of the stages of grief, as well as the dichotomy of living in a world filled with beauty and horror, pleasure and pain. Also discussed are issues dependent on human institutions or frameworks such as self in relation to community, family, friendship, as well as marriage, and parenting. In each of the texts, it is the author’s intent to demonstrate that hope or faith can be evident through subtle paradigm shifts and simple actions rather than miraculous epiphanies or heroic deeds.
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Introduction

There are many manuscripts already—worthy ones, most edifying and moving ones, intelligent and powerful ones ... Why not shoot yourself, actually, rather than finish one more excellent manuscript on which to gag the world? (Dillard, *The Writing Life* 12).

Certainly, the world does not need more writers. It would seem that everything of importance has been said already by voices far more qualified to speak than this writer. It seems a simple case of hubris for me to add my work to those who have filled the world with words, beautiful and true. Yet, here it is: another collection of personal essays to clutter the world, gag it perhaps.

Perhaps, like a modernist, I dare to “make it new,” to take my own experiences and form connections, to find commonality. In the introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate discusses the commonality of man’s experience. He writes, “At the core of the personal essay is the supposition that there is a certain unity to the human experience” (xxiii). It is an old idea. Montaigne voiced the same idea when he wrote, “Every man has within himself the entire human condition” (qtd. Lopate xxiii). Furthermore, the idea is not unique to the essayist. The Apostle Paul wrote, “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man” (I Cor. 1:13). We are all subject to the same emotions, the same fears, subject to
the same sorrows and joys, and yes, even the same sins. It would seem that this is what makes us human. We are common, and we seek connection.

As from the beginning, language is generative. Though Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” the mode of God’s creation was his words: “and God said, ‘Let there be light’” (1:3). The entire first chapter of Genesis reveals a god who speaks things into existence, who creates and names things and then pronounces them “good.” In the Christian tradition, the Word was preeminent, existing even before there was matter. Words move into being things as yet uncreated.

My words, however, can only recreate, and so I write. Ink and line recreate the world, forming earth from chaos, separating darkness from light, search for truth. My words demonstrate the fall over and over again. I reveal my desire to eat from the tree of good and evil, to be like God, and ultimately I realize that I am fallen too. As in Milton’s, *Paradise Lost*, writing makes me feel fortunate in the fall, for I search for redemption through the written page.

Like the biblical stories, these essays are grounded in time and place, in action and character, the tools of fiction. Each provides exposition, which Lopate believes to be essential. To orient the reader, Lopate believes “the essayist must constantly assume his reader needs the exposition – the set up of character and relationships – of place and time” (xxix). Every personal essay must be able to stand on its own, must give the reader the exposition needed to make the narrative complete. The essayist
must always begin afresh. She must always rebuild the beginning, must always recreate the world from scratch.

In this collection, this is true for segmented essays as well as those with a more conventional narrative arc. For example, the segments within “Sallow Skinned” are each completely encapsulated short narratives. There is a glimpse into the first warm day of spring in one segment; another recounts the events of a church potluck dinner; a third covers a tiny fragment of a boy’s afternoon chores. Any of them could be lifted out from the others and be completely self-contained.

They work alone, yet taken together these segments form connections that are difficult to define, somewhat similar to the way human experience and memory work. One memory triggers another and initially may seem entirely random. Often, when one submits oneself to the reconstruction, one discovers that memories are linked in delicate and subtle ways. These connections may yield significant truths that resist explication. So, the process of segmentation is both intrinsic to natural thought processes and resistive to definitions. But this is a strength, actually, that a more linear text may not be able to accomplish. In his article on the segmented essay, Robert L. Root says, “The connections and associations that arise so readily in the mind often defy easy transitions on a page and impede progress through the text . . . they often interfere with issues requiring compression and focus” (323). This was true of the original draft for “Sallow Skinned,” which had taken a more traditional linear form. Using color as a device, I was dealing with the dichotomy one experiences living in a world of beauty and horror, pleasure and pain. However, as I began to
revise the piece, I found that certain sections felt more compelling than others, and I wondered what would happen if I removed all of the “unnecessary” transitions and explanations, leaving solely the narrative hearts of each major section. Furthermore, I staggered the sections, mixing their order to create a clearer divide between positive and negative experience. What remains continues to reflect the original intent, but the segments more adequately reflect the dichotomy itself. Root says, “the force of the segments will come from their juxtaposition with one another and their cumulative effect” (323). This helps to prevent the narrative from losing what Root would call its “emphatic force.” Either way, whether segmented or in traditional linear form, the reader gets the full exposition and remains fully oriented in each separate section, while the sections and essays themselves, taken in conjunction with one another, build associations as a whole.

The reader receives only one writer’s perspective though. The personal essay’s narrative is a recreation or refocusing of one person’s experience, written from one writer’s bias. An individual who was present at any of the events depicted in the following essays might have come away with very different perspectives, have had very different impressions of the events themselves. Lopate says, “The hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy” (xxiii). It allows the reader to come up close, to see the particular in hopes that it will touch the common. For example, in the essay “She is Twelve,” very specific moments of time are depicted, each separate yet distinct and highly individualized: A moment between a mother and her daughter one early morning; a girl overhearing the argument between her sister and her father; a
grandmother's attempt to convey standards of femininity to a granddaughter. Yet the hope is that through them, the reader will connect to the larger themes of transgenerational gender issues.

It is an intimate form, certainly, but it is also highly selective. Lopate continued, "The consequence is that the personal essayist is always recovering the minutia of her life. The benefit however is that the writer is given the freedom to focus on one given aspect or nuance over another" (xxix). I, as writer, determine what is important about any given anecdote. For example, the focus of the essay "Kickball," changed several times during revisions. I had terrible trouble finding the "emotional center" of the essay. At first, I focused on my hope to learn to try new things. I revised to explore how my childhood experiences had affected me as an adult. I revised again to explore my relationship with my father. All of these focuses were components, but none of them the center. As the essay stands now, it focuses on how one essentially cannot change one's character, whether one likes it or not. Anne Panning, in a discussion about this, compared the process to a spotlight. It is as though I as writer search out what an essay is really about, choosing to light up one aspect of the narrative over another. Philip Lopate says the same thing in a different way. He writes, "The essay form allows the writer to circle around one particular autobiographical piece, squeezing all possible meaning out of it, while leaving the greater part of his life story for later milking" (xxix). It is certainly possible that I would select the same event (i.e. the same kick ball game) of that essay for a future work. Perhaps I might focus the spotlight on an incident that served only as a
So, the personal essay focuses intimately on a select experience of the writer, recreating and interpreting the event in hope of connecting to the reader. It does seem egocentric, though, to assume the reader would give even so much as a cursory glance before walking off for less self-conscious material. But there is a long tradition of just such writing. Often, earlier attempts were received with skepticism. I turn to the classics for advice. Henry David Thoreau was criticized for being egocentric, and he addressed the issue in *Walden*. He reminds his reader that all writing assumes the “I.” He says, “We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking.” In other words, writers, at best, are only hiding; it is of course always and absolutely about the personal “I.” He continues his justification: “I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience” (1). We, as writers, are limited. As much as we would like to see from another’s point of view, ultimately we have only our own life experience to draw from. Though we create new worlds with our words, we can only see them from one corner.

I worried about this in the construction of “And the One Shall Be Made Twain.” Written in the second person perspective, the piece takes on an authoritative, fairly brash tone. It is of course written from my own experience with divorce, and I was concerned that it did not reflect my ex-husband’s “truth” about the events. I felt it important to get his views, as well as permission, and asked him to look it over. When
I asked him what he thought, he said, “I hate it. Go ahead and print it.” What he meant, I assumed, was that he understood that this was how I saw things, that it was an awful time for both of us, that this was how life worked. What else would I have written?

Bret Lott, however, is unconcerned about being perceived as egotistic and offers words of consolation to the writer who struggles with the issue. He says, “if one is honestly seeking to understand, circling with a cold eye one’s relation to events, places, people – whatever the subject of the essay – then that search’s chances of being construed as egotistical will be dismissed” (313). For Lott, it is all about the motivation of the writer. He would absolve those who are pure in heart. The writer’s focus should be one of cool bravery, to face the truths of the events we depict, honestly measuring our relationship to them.

Lopate is nearly as generous, though he would add a certain degree of self-effacement. He offers, “The trick is to realize that one is not important, except insofar as one’s example can serve to elucidate a more widespread human trait and make readers feel a little less lonely and freakish” (xxxii). I am not so sure I would call my reader freakish, but the point is well taken. Like Moses, we are all “aliens in a strange land” looking for a place to belong. The personal essay is one such place. If the writer, and I hope that this is true of my own work, can make the “I” as unimportant as possible, perhaps there can be connection to the reader. Annie Dillard also speaks about the personal “I” saying, “another thing I left out [of An American Childhood], as far as I could, was myself. The personal pronoun can be the subject of the verb: ‘I
see this, I did that.’ But not the object of the verb: ‘I analyze me, I discuss me, I describe me, I quote me” (241). The personal I would only focus the reader on Dillard herself, and would be therefore unacceptable and most likely very dull.

Though Dillard would extend outward toward her alien reader, we all, including Dillard I think, want to be less alien, less freakish. We read to be less freakish, to see how we fit in the world and whether or not others are as freakish as we. Lott says that writing is “all in an effort, simply, to see”(313), though I think one could extend this to the reading as well. To simply see implies that the reader and writer are looking for an ultimate or universal truth within the events of written experience. It implies a relationship between the two, one of mutual respect, one of trust.

Tracy Kidder, in his essay entitled “Courting the Approval of the Dead,” discusses the implications of a reader’s trust. “Belief is an offering that a reader makes to an author, what Coleridge famously called, ‘That willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith’” (282). Kidder believes the writer to be responsible to this trust, not to disappoint or cause the reader to lose faith. He says, the writer is free “In fiction [to] make it up” (282), but nonfiction requires a higher standard. He continues, “I figure that if I call a piece of my own writing nonfiction it ought to be about real people, with their real names attached whenever possible, who say and do in print nothing that they didn’t actually say and do”(282). This seems to be the ideal. I would agree with Kidder, indeed have followed this “whenever possible” in the collection that follows.
In “Sallow Skinned,” the episodes depicted are real, as are the names of the people involved, though I withheld the names of those who may have had reason to prefer them hidden; it is my version of Kidder’s “whenever possible.” Also, in “Dancing on My Father’s Grave,” the email correspondence is transcribed as I received it. I included brackets if I condensed or clarified the original material and I chose to correct spelling errors for the reader’s ease. I did not, however, manufacture emails to fit the segments that follow. Instead, I used the emails to “discover” the segments I would include. In “The Real Deal,” each segment’s events actually happened, and the dialog is as accurate as I could recall. I did take license to reconstruct the dialog, (for who would carry a recording devise around for possible material) though I was as careful as possible to stay true to the original speaker’s intent as much as my own perceptions would allow.

Regardless though, the reader enters a contract of sorts with me the moment he reads my subtitle: “A Collection of Essays.” He trusts this is a work of nonfiction. This seems to imply an ethical component in the writing, though how much creativeness nonfiction tolerates is up for debate. The word “creative” suggests a certain freedom or latitude, the line between fiction and reality blurred, difficult to define at times. One wonders when it is acceptable to bend or blur the boundary. Complicating the matter is the fact that this blurring may not even be through any fault of the writer’s own doing. Writers are stuck not only on their own corner of the world, but in their own bodies as well. The five senses, along with a writer’s perceptions and biases are not wholly dependable or accurate. C.S. Lewis, in A Grief
Observed, complains about how inadequate he felt himself to be in reconstructing memories of his dead wife. His words ring true for writers of creative non-fiction as well:

Five senses; an incurably abstract intellect; a haphazardly selective memory; a set of preconceptions and assumptions so numerous that I can never examine more than a minority of them – never become conscious of them all. How much of total reality can such apparatus let through? (76)

It is obvious to Lewis that he will misrepresent his wife. His senses are limited, his intellect ill suited to the task, his memory bad. He distrusts what he has always believed of her and realizes that the “real” woman will never be recreated on his page. He will make her completely other.

I sympathize with Lewis. In the essay “Dancing on My Father’s Grave,” I was conscious that my memories were not only fifteen years old but had been filtered through my own experience, my own corner of the world. I was not sure if my account was reliable – if what I thought was true of my father, was actually true. I certainly was not completely sure if all the details, conversations, settings were accurate. But I felt I had stayed as true to the matter as my memory allowed. Still, my father seems flat, hollow – “other” in these pages.

Simply knowing that one will recreate people and events as other, regardless of one’s good intentions, does not, however, absolve one from trying to be as accurate
as possible. Patricia Hampl, in an essay about memory and imagination in creative nonfiction writes, "a reader has a right to expect the memoir to be as accurate as the writer's memory can make it" (263). She does not deny that she herself struggles with the issue in her own writing. Indeed she depicts one struggle most writers would empathize with. She says, "after I finished it, I realized that I had told a number of lies. I think it was my father who took me the first time for my piano lesson;" then a few paragraphs later she says, "I must admit that I invented" (261-62).

Her explanation for the invention is that she had not yet found what the essay was to be about. She believes that writers invent because they have not yet dug around in the truth long enough to really see what the essay wants to be about. She says, "The real trouble: the piece hasn’t yet found its subject; it isn’t yet about what it wants to be about. Note: what it wants, not what I want" (263). Perhaps this is too metaphysical for some. I am suspect of it somewhat, but feel it lies very close to the truth of the matter. This was true in the writing of "Stepping Out," originally entitled "Visiting Churches." I did not originally want to admit to myself that I would some day feel the need to "amicably divorce" my congregation, a place I have been deeply connected to for many, many years. I avoided the motivation behind the simple plot line of the essay, a month of Sunday visits to other churches. But the truth was that everything in life moves and changes eventually, and this intimate, supportive community relationship is not immune from the process of change. That was an uncomfortable underlying theme for me, one I avoided because I do not like discomfort.
Steve Fellner would add to Hampl’s thoughts. Invention can sometimes supplement the essay’s real subject. In a lecture on writing creative nonfiction, Fellner encouraged a student to elaborate a draft with more vivid details. She protested that she could not remember much more, that the event had occurred when she was a small child. He encouraged the student to hunt for the “emotional truth.” The details were not as important as getting to the heart of the matter. He said something like, “Put it all in there! And if you can’t remember it, make it up!” It is not a matter of historical revision for Fellner, it is a matter of finding the essence of what is lying beneath the surface of the simple events of the narrative. The emotional truth seems not so much a betrayal to the reader as an act of faith toward the text.

Annie Dillard has caused plenty of readers to lose faith in her text. She shocked her readers by admitting that the opening lines of her book, *Pilgrim at Tinker’s Creek*, were completely fabricated. The event she recalled reads:

\[I\text{ used to have a cat, an old fighting tom, who would jump through the open window by my bed in the middle of the night and land on my chest . . . And some morning I’d wake in daylight to find my body covered with paw prints in blood; I looked as though I’d been painted with roses . . . I still think of that old tomcat, mornings, when I wake. Things are tamer now; I sleep with the window shut. (3-4)}\]

It is a lovely image, and one of literature’s most vivid and memorable, but the event itself never happened. Some readers were disappointed by the freedom Dillard took with the genre, wondered why it was necessary to package it as nonfiction when the
image would have been just as powerful had she admitted it was fictionalized. Or would it have been? There is a certain authority that actual experience carries. It makes the alien less alien. There is no “fictive veil” for the author to hide behind. The narrator is taking full responsibility for the content, is saying “Here I am; here is my story. I am just like you.” It seems a discourteous act to treat a reader’s trust in this way, spectacular as the prose may be. Kidder seems to think that invention is not unusual. He might say Dillard’s confession of it is though. He says, “Some nonfiction writers do not lack . . . willingness to invent, but the candor to admit it. [They try] to discover the truth about a situation, and then invent or distort the facts as necessary” (282-83).

Lauren Slater finds a middle ground between invention and confession. In her book, Lying: A Metaphysical Memoir, Slater exploits this freedom to invent, to diverge from the facts in order to prove a point. She illustrates through the artifice of the written page that her “authority is illusory, the etiologies constructed” (221). She justifies her formal choice to mislead her reader. The “emotional truth” of her life could not be stated by the actual facts, which themselves proved chimerical, even unattainable. Perhaps she is right to make any formal choice she needs to write a “slippery, playful, impish exasperating text . . . shaped like a question mark,” She confesses that “In Lying I have written a book in which some cases I cannot and in some cases will not say the facts” (219). In other words, she has decided the whole truth would not be the best choice for her text. But as a reader, I am left wondering
how much I can trust an honest liar. I wonder if there is such a thing, wonder if the willing suspension of disbelief is justified in her text.

In this collection, I have attempted to steer clear of this ethical minefield. As a child, I remember having an overactive conscience. One Halloween night, I in desperate jealousy stole one small candy corn from the enormous haul my older sister had collected. I ate it in the dead of night and suffered such guilt that I confessed the sin to my parish priest on several subsequent visits to the confessional. Writing this collection of essays has not caused me to lose any sleep and though I am no longer Catholic, I believe the priest would not need to assign me extra penance on this account. I have attempted to remain faithful to both the factual and emotional truths of these texts, though I suspect that in subsequent visits to them in coming years, I will realize that I was not fully seeing, had not found what some were meant to be about. For now, the present emotional truth weaves in and around these essays, that life means change and challenge, that the simple of act of getting up each morning and tying one’s shoes can be seen as an act of valor.

I do still worry that the writing is unnecessary, that the world has enough worthy manuscripts, but I take heart in Anne Lamott’s words. In *Bird By Bird*, she encourages, “Writing has so much to give, so much to teach, so many surprises. That thing you had to force yourself to do – the actual act of writing – turns out to be the best part . . . The act of writing turns out to be its own reward” (xxvi). I am just one of the world’s aliens and freaks, yet when I write, I recreate the world, something new forms from my hands. When I write I am more fully aware of what is around me. I
feel more alive. In *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard describes the feeling one gets when walking away from a manuscript after long hours of work. She writes, “I opened the blinds a crack like eyelids, and it all came exploding in on me at once – oh yes, the world” (31). When I write, my eyelids are open. I feel as though I can breathe. Dillard says, “The work is not the vision itself . . . you try – you try every time – to reproduce the vision, to let your light so shine before men. But you can only come along with your bushel and hide it” (58). Yes, I sometimes feel I hide the light, or like Lewis, I feel as if I am muddling it up. Feel that the new world beneath my pen is mutant somehow, but I have faith – and so I write.
Rise, take up thy bed, and walk.

Jesus of Nazareth

Some days I found faith was just tying my shoes.

Billy Sprague
She is Twelve

She came in the room and flounced down onto the bed, her hair pulled back into a ponytail, not one strand allowed to break free, each plastered down firmly by her mother's, by my own, hairspray. I sat up to give her room.

“I have a wide back.”

“A what? A wide - what?”

“A wide back.”

“A wide back?”

“Yes. Back.” She rolled over onto her stomach and pulled the blanket over her legs. Her chin was down, resting on her crossed arms. The morning sun peeked through the mini-blinds causing streaks of light and shadow to fall over her back, like faint prison bars.

It was true. What could I say? She does have a wide back. She is “big boned,” like her father, like her father’s mother. Unlike her best friends. She does not know that she is beautiful. She is twelve.

“Yes, you do have a wide back, and yes, part of it is that you are a bit overweight. It might help if you stop sitting so much after you get home from school and get outside and move.” I always feel horrible saying these things. But it is true. She does sit too much. So do I. We are sitters. “But even aside from your needing to exercise, you will always have bigger bones than Lydia.”
Lydia is one of her friends. She does not have a wide back. She is not a sitter. She is tiny and wears “teenager clothes.” Lydia knows she is pretty. The world has reaffirmed this many times.

“I don’t want to have big bones.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I want to be little.”

“I know.” She is twelve and does not understand. “You are beautiful. And you can be beautiful and strong and tall and big-boned. It can be beautiful if you let it be.”

She did not look convinced, so I stuck my foot outside of the sheets and wiggled my toes at her as though they could speak, and in a voice that I imagined toes might use, said, “I like you just the way you are.” She laughed, and as is our habit, imitated my inane behavior.

***

My father, a good man, was the son of Italian immigrants, a first generation American. He grew up between two worlds, as did my mother. They were encouraged to speak English. They were encouraged to be Americans. Some of their relatives changed the spelling of their names. The old country, however, was not that easily subdued, so when my father raised us, vestiges of his own upbringing broke through. He was, after all, standing between two worlds.
They had seven children. They selected American names. Good anglicized names. Frank instead of Francesco. Mary instead of Maria. Timothy and Arlene and Carol and Anne and Laura.

Two of us are twins. We twins are the youngest and thankfully did not worry about our weight. However, my older sisters did.

They did worry about their weight.

One evening, when I was twelve, I overheard an argument between my father and my sister, Carol. I only heard a little of it. I was upstairs on my bed and they were downstairs by the stairway door. I don’t know what started it; I only heard a little.

I heard my father shout, “But you are fat – fat!” I heard my sister try to defend herself, my mother’s voice quieter yet angry. She said, “Joe!” He would not stop. I got up and tiptoed to my door. They shouted back and forth a few times, then my father said, “How will you ever find a husband if you are so fat?” I heard my sister crying as she climbed the stairway and I quickly, quietly closed my own bedroom door. I did not want to humiliate my sister by seeing her cry.

***

With the phone to my ear, I said to my mother, “She thinks she is fat.” And though I could not see my mother’s face, I could imagine from her “humm” that her brows were furrowed, her thin lips drawn tight. My mother is almost seventy-eight now and I love her desperately. I asked her, “Do you remember the first time you realized that your body was not the perfect ideal?”
“Well,” she said, “It was a different time then, Laura.” She waited a minute, I waited with her, then she said, “I think I was about nine or ten and my mother said to me ‘If you don’t stop eating too much you’re going to get fat. You’ll never have a boyfriend if you are fat.’”

“Nine!” I said. “Do you remember how that made you feel?”

“Well, I remember it enough to tell you about it, so it must have made an impression,” she said. I felt silly for having asked the question. She continued, “But I developed early, you know. When I got my period, my mother asked me if I knew what was happening and I told her that Dolly, my cousin, had told me all about it, that I would bleed for about a week.” My mother laughed a little and then said, “I thought women only got a period one time. Then your grandmother said to me, ‘Oh no! It will come every month!’”

Now both of us were laughing. “What did you say to that?”

“I was totally grossed out!” she said. My mother, using a phrase like grossed out. Then we talked about how things were handled in those days, and my mother told me of rolled up rags and safety pins and embarrassing moments, and then she said, “There were a lot of strange odors in those days, Laura.”

***

My daughter uses my makeup but never looks as if she has any on. I know this because she leaves the cosmetic bag out on the sink, the eyeliner open; the powdered blush sprinkled over the countertop. She spends an unbearable amount of time brushing her hair, scooping it into ponytails, forcing the curls out of it, but
though she brushes her hair, she still needs me to really get the tangles out. “Start from the bottom,” I say, “then you won’t split the ends and it won’t hurt so much.” She takes the brush back and stubbornly starts at the roots again. I roll my eyes and leave the room, but a few minutes later she asks how much perfume is enough and offers me her neck to sniff. I smell an opportunity and bury my face in her neck and blow raspberries. She laughs, or gets mad, depending on the day, because she is twelve.

She is impossible to shop for.

She still needs to be cuddled and with angry cries she complains when I have not spent enough time with her. She manipulates, bargains, threatens, pouts, gets cranky and picks fights with her brothers all because she is twelve and still needs her mother. For just one year more, if I am lucky maybe two, that is all that I will have with her. Then I will be obsolete. I will be out of step and corny, my jokes old and used up, my stories predictable. She will start to hate the nasal sound of my western New York accent and it will grate against her nerves. She will avoid eye contact, give one-word responses, and talk on the phone in her room. She will go to college and forget to call home and get aggravated when I worry.

Until she is in her twenties, then if I was smart enough not to drive her away by my own need to be needed, she will need me again. I will transform into someone funny and smart once again and she will bring me flowers on a bright May morning for no reason at all while I am sitting in church, and I will tear up just like my mother did when I was twenty. She will call me from her first apartment and ask how much
spaghetti feeds two people and what temperature to cook a chicken. I will remind her to take the gizzards out of the carcass first. She will say, “Ok, bye.” She will ask me questions about how I met her father. She will wonder what really caused our divorce. I will have to tell her things I have hidden.

***

When I was twelve, I was so skinny and flat chested and my hair was so short that people at times mistook me for a boy. Once in a shopping mall, a security guard approached me and said, “Excuse me, young man.” I, reading an *Archie and Jughead* comic book, did not realize he was talking to me. “Excuse me, young man. Would you take your feet off the seat please?” Stupidly, with a rash of embarrassment, I said yes. I waited until the security guard had sauntered away and then got up and left.

I had been innocently unaware that my appearance was bothersome. One day, my mother said to me, “You know you’re old enough to wear makeup.” I gaped and wondered if I was ugly. I began to notice that my mother always “put her face on” first thing in the morning. Even if she were still in her bathrobe, she would put on her face. She would say, “You never know when someone might stop by unexpectedly.” My mother always looked nice. She had standards.

Another day, while painting my fingernails a very bright red, I overheard a radio interview. A faceless woman was speaking about raising junior-high aged children. The woman said that junior-high was the worst time of a child’s life. That junior-high school kids were not very likable, were moody and gangly and ugly, that their arms and legs were too long, that they were clumsy. I was devastated. I had had
no idea how hideous I was. I grabbed the polish remover and wiped off the polish. Soaked paper towels streaked with reddened alcohol lay tossed in the trashcan. I got on my bike and went for a ride, angry tears swelling.

My mother does not know this story.

***

My grandmother was only four feet, ten inches tall. Her eyes were the color of worn brown shoe leather, comfortable and broken in. I remember that even into her eighties, there was still a strip of dark brown hair along the nape of her neck, the rest a soft and brilliant white. She was big bosomed and thick waisted. She was very careful with her appearance and wore dresses every day, hemmed just exactly at her knee because she was a good seamstress and could make her own clothing. The sound of her antique foot-peddle sewing machine humming away in the hallway across from my bedroom was familiar on early Saturday mornings; one I never really took notice of, never thought about twice. She would wear her homemade skirts over full body girdles, complete with the elastic garters and metal stays, vertical metal rods that ran the length of her torso.

I remember her shoes lined up against the wall of her bedroom. They were not comfortable looking shoes. They were leather, closed-toe pumps with a two-inch heel. The heels were delicately shaped, like the neck of a vase. When not in use, a steel contraption designed to stretch the leather was inserted into each shoe. And when she put on a pair, it looked as if the contraption had not really worked; the skin pudged out at the top. When her feet were bare I noticed that her toes piled into and
over each other, forming the precise shape of the unstretched shoes. Large corns bulged on the sides of her big toes.

Every morning, before she even got out of bed, my grandmother would do ten sit-ups. She was very proud of this. She would say to me, “If you want to keep your figure when you get older, you must always remember to do your sit-ups.” “Humph,” my mother would say, “Sit-ups! The mattress bounces her back up.” I thought this very funny.

***

Several boys apparently find my daughter attractive. They are very wise. She has come to tell me this, a little hesitatingly, like one who opens a present yet suspects it may hold a gag-gift. I smile and say something like, “What do you think about that?” She hems and haws, clears her throat. She picks my necklace up off the bedside table and fiddles with the clasp. I walk into the bathroom to brush my teeth. Now that I am not looking directly at her, she suddenly becomes animated, talking fast about which girls have boyfriends and what they act like after they get a boyfriend and how she thinks it is stupid to give up all your friends just because you have a boyfriend and how she would rather just have friends that could be boys but not necessarily boyfriends and that she just wants to be a kid. I am relieved and want to shout “Yeah! Who’s the mom?!” but instead say, “That sounds reasonable.” She continues with a stream of endless examples. Of which girl likes what boy, of hurt feelings and betrayals. She talks longer than it takes for me to brush my teeth. She puts on my necklace and lies on my bed. She talks longer than it takes for me to put
on my pajamas or clear my papers and books away from her feet, longer than I wish she would. Now that I know all is well with her, all I really want is for her to go away so I can do some reading. I am tired and I want to climb into my own bed. She asks if I am listening to her and I lie, “Absolutely,” but she is not deceived.

***

Henry Flesh, that was his name. He went to my church and was my best friend, Janet’s brother. They lived across town and we only saw each other on the days we went to church. I was twelve and he was my first boyfriend. We never talked to each other. He gave me a school picture, which I took and showed to my girlfriends, and they all thought he was cute. It seemed as if they treated me with more respect after that, even calling for me to pull out the picture and show it to lunch-table late arrivals.

One Sunday afternoon, I went home from church with the Flesh family for a visit. They lived near the Seneca Park Zoo in Rochester, New York, close enough to walk and so, after a polite dinner with their mother and stepfather, we left the house and went to the zoo. Henry took the opportunity to hold my hand. I felt that I had an obligation to do this, but was not impressed since his hand was soft and sweaty and it was difficult to walk with him holding on so. After awhile, he put his arm around my shoulder, and this, this was even more uncomfortable. I did not understand how people could make it look so natural when all I wanted to do was push it off and walk unencumbered. Janet also had a boyfriend there that day. His name was Chuck. He was very tall and had big muscles and had already begun to grow facial hair. He had
terrible acne. He liked to kiss Janet, scooping up toward her face as she sat with her head down, her hair hiding her face, brown and mousey. I looked at Henry and hoped he wouldn’t get any ideas and when Chuck tried to snap a picture of us as we walked home, with Henry’s arm annoyingly over my shoulder, I turned my face away and covered it with my hand and said, “What would I say if my father saw that!”

***

My sister Carol had a sweet, clear, soprano voice that as a teen earned her lead roles in school musicals and as an adult gives her mild fame in community theater. She is gregarious and charming, a gracious performer. I, on the other hand, have only a tolerably good voice. I stay on pitch, have decent tone, and do not see people scoot farther away from me during Sunday morning church service. I have been asked occasionally to participate in music events, but I do not sing solos. I do not stand in front of audiences all by myself to sing.

When I was a teenager, trying to form “self-identity,” I fancied I might be as talented as my sister Carol, and so I began to sing. I would sing with my friend Lois, our pastor’s daughter, who wrote her own music. She and I would sit and sing her songs for hours, she carrying the melody, me picking out alto harmonies and background parts. We would go to sing at church events like ladies brunches or wedding showers. I was pleased with this arrangement.

One day, in her basement she began to play the accompaniment to a song I had recently memorized. It was entitled, “I Am a Servant,” a gentle Christian folk song, slow, and I thought lovely, and most importantly, perfectly suited to my vocal
range. Lois asked me to sing it, and encouraged by our familiarity and the safe confines of her basement, I sang with all my heart. It was the best performance I have ever given in my entire life, to this day.

The next morning, Sunday morning, her father, the pastor of the Spencerport Assembly of God Church, called my house and said to me, “Laura, how would you like to do a special service for your God and for your congregation?” Well, what could I say? It was a big question. I said nothing. He continued, “Would you be willing to sing that song again this morning in church?” He reminded me that I had already practiced it with his daughter, that I had all the words memorized and that I should not hide my light under a bushel. Haltingly, I agreed.

I was scared, but I went to church with visions of how Carol would perform, envisioning myself being brave and charming and self-controlled. I envisioned the congregation listening with rapt attention, the women moved to tears, my lilting voice filling the rafters. It did not turn out quite that way. I stood in front of the congregation and Lois began to play. She certainly was comfortable, in perfect control. My heart was thumping so loudly I wondered if people could see my chest wall moving. I did not know what to do with my hands. I shoved them into my pants pockets, the fists balled tightly, the nails biting into my palms. I began the song and someone else’s voice squeaked out of my throat. This voice was quiet; it did not fill the church. This voice wobbled; it did not have a vibrato. It seemed to fall to the ground before it reached the front pew. Things improved slightly through the second verse and then I finished the last chorus.
On the way home, I asked my father, who had remained suspiciously quiet, what he thought of my solo. He said, "It was nice; just don’t get a big head about it." Someone else in the car said, "Why’d you keep your hands in your pockets?" I was angry. Not many months later, we moved to a different congregation and I never saw Lois again.

***

My daughter is a storyteller.

She was last to perform, storyteller number ten, in Room 205, at the Genesee County Storytelling Festival. She stood in front of the class, head bowed, assuming her character. When fully prepared, she looked up and began. Her diction was clear, steady, evenly paced and she made good eye contact with her audience. Good start, I thought and smiled, but not too broadly; I didn’t want to throw off her rhythm.

I snuck a look at her audience. All fidgeting had stopped. Parents were sitting still, quiet and at attention to hear a story of a servant boy who believes an old, ragged, bald-headed man is actually the king out for a walk and of an innkeeper, pompous and sarcastic, who knows what he sees, knows the man is just a beggar.

My girl did not speak like the other children, with their arms straight down at their sides or wildly waving about, either far too quiet or much too loud. My girl understood the worth of a well-timed pause, of varied pitch and volume, of consistent repeating lines, words and sounds. She glanced at me again, and then – forgot her line. I grimaced, and then she remembered; "That’s all right, he thought it was just fine." The audience did not seem to notice and she continued.
But all was not well; she was forming a mental block. She began to improvise sporadically but did not match the story's sweet Medieval-like English. Her new innkeeper said things like "Oh man!" and "Gosh darn it!" instead of "Whatever shall I do?" But her improvised lines were apparently all right because there was break-out laughter in the audience. She smiled, no – she grinned. Empowered by the audience she threw caution to the wind and began creating lines simply because she thought them funny. This, however, annoyed me; authors spend a long time creating sounds, patterns, rhythms – stories. Storytellers should respect that.

Afterward, as we filed out of the classroom, shoulder to shoulder with other families, I tried to swallow my criticism, but when she said, "I messed up and forgot my lines," I agreed. I wanted to be reassuring, yet like my own family of long ago, I found myself being all too "honest."

"Did it sound bad?"

"Well, I noticed it."

"It was bad then?" The school librarian was waving and giving us a thumbs up.

"Well, no. I don't think anyone else noticed it."

My daughter didn't believe me. We were pushing our way through the crowded corridor, funneling down the stairs toward the main auditorium to listen to a professional storyteller. I glanced over and saw self-doubt flicker across her face. I felt guilty immediately.
“Honey, you did a great job. It’s all right to make a mistake. I just thought it would have been better to stick to the story because it’s a good story and the author spent a lot of time making it just right.” The words were lumpy in my throat, like food that tries to come back up after it’s been swallowed. She had performed better than any other child. She had performed better than most adults could have. I tried to make up for my first reaction. I said, “Deanna, you were just fine,” but crowded hallways are not the best places to parent. I stumbled slightly on my feet. My purse slipped off my shoulder and my daughter moved forward while I tried to back pedal.

***

She woke up early today. I called to her and said, “Come cuddle with me for awhile” and she did. Her hair all matted and her cheeks all pink, she was kind enough to wait till I pulled my legs up before she climbed over to the other side of the bed, a vast improvement over the pain she used to cause when she was smaller. This is her favorite way to wake up in the morning; I almost never have time to do this. We laid side by side, her head on my shoulder, her arm wrapped around me, talking about how nice it is to cuddle. I stuck my free arm straight up into the air, stretching my fingers and wiggling them at the ceiling. She imitated me and then we compared our hands to each other, palms together pressing firmly, almost like one person. Her wrist is a half inch larger than mine, her fingers nearly as long. She will be taller than I.

I am taller than my mother, who was taller than her mother.
On the table by my bed is a book of short stories that my grandmother wrote. It is not a “real” book. My uncle had her stories collected and bound so that my grandmother could finally see them “published.” When I was a child, she would send off large envelopes and would ask me to say a prayer. She never had one accepted, which is not surprising now that I read them, they are flat and overly sentimental, yet they hold me transfixed. She began to write in the nineteen-thirties, as the daughter of poor Italian immigrants, without a high school education. She wrote as a young widow while she raised three small children. She wrote through the Depression, the Second World War and through her second marriage, as well as after she moved in with my parents. She wrote conflicts with easy resolutions, of sins easily forgiven. In my grandmother’s world, mercy always triumphed over justice.

My mother says that my grandmother saw the world through rose-colored glasses. That she remembered her own mother, my great grandmother, as loving and kind when in actuality she was cranky and mean. My mother remembers my grandmother taking them to the library and bringing home stacks of books, reading to them out loud everyday. She remembers my grandmother teaching and reading and singing with the neighborhood children, though she did not have a formal education herself. She remembers that their “flat” was always cluttered and messy because my grandmother would spend all her time with children or visiting relatives. My mother said my grandmother was a “good mom.”

I remember thinking my mother was better than all my friends’ mothers. I thought her beautiful. I remember how good her hands felt when she rubbed my back
or head. How good they still feel. My mother lives just far enough from me that I cannot see her as often as I would like. Now, after my divorce, my mother worries about me. She prays for me and says that God has assured her that everything will be okay. My mother is Mercy.

I made a joke this morning, actually just a silly noise. My daughter laughed and said, “I like my silly mother.” I worry sometimes what she will remember about me. Will she remember these few times I make room for her on a Saturday morning? Mornings when the sun shines through the mini-blinds and we pull them all the way open to let the warmth and light in. Will she remember that I thought her beautiful?
And The One Shall Be Made Twain

They tell you that you shall be made one. They say that once you are joined together, nothing should tear you apart. And you believe it, and you take joy in it. They say that there will be hard times. In sickness and health, for richer or poorer. And you nod in innocent acceptance, sure that your hard times will be mild, glamorous trivialities. You are sure that you will be careful, that you will be wise, patient, faithful, kind. With a kiss and prayer, you are sure that you will cherish and be cherished. And for a little while this is so. You feel the sun and the breeze, and believe that no one has ever enjoyed them more than you. Work seems more meaningful, play more satisfying. You have dreams to fulfill, a whole life ahead.

Then after a few weeks, you notice subtle changes. Say for example, he does not want to make love one evening. Perhaps he had never noticed how very loud you laugh. Perhaps he folds his cloths, then throws them on the floor. Perhaps he finds you too clingy. These things happen just often enough, and a petulant, childish brooding sets to work, burrowing just slightly behind a forehead, peeking out between tightened shoulder blades or from beneath a locked bathroom door. It is not initially serious. It is nothing. It is easily taken care of. A card or a kiss or a single pink carnation. But slights, like canker sores, only lie dormant; they do not ever heal.

They tell you about the seven-year itch and how children can challenge a marriage. They say to hold on, it gets better. That these are “the difficult years.” And you nod in puzzled hopefulness and change the baby’s diaper. You nod in vague affirmation, hiding behind half smiles, and say, “Of course, you are right.” So, you
put on fresh lipstick, and pull in your stomach, and hope when he comes home, you can pretend you are happy. And he does come home, but instead of coming inside, he sits in his car. Sits in his car with a brooding face. And when he finally gets out, he walks to the neighbor’s to borrow a tool. And when dinner is ready and he finally comes in, he kisses the children, gives the baby some gum. You say please don’t do that, but he doesn’t reply. Instead, he fills a dish with potatoes and meat and eats in the living room. But it is okay, you assure yourself. He has worked a full day. He is tired and is ready to sit and relax.

Sit and relax.

They tell you to find something that interests you. That women need their space, need a little time to themselves. They tell you not to feel guilty for needing time to yourself. So you look through the paper and find a hobby. And he agrees to watch the children one night a week so that you can make ceramic teapots and chess sets. But when it is time to go out, the babies cry. He watches the news andabsently says, “Go ahead.” But the babies stand by the door and cry, and you suck in your breath and shout for him to come, and he slams down his glass and tosses the remote and stomps over to pick up the children who look exactly like him. Your ears ring in the silence as you drive, and you pick up a girlfriend, and the two of you, angry, complain about insensitive men.

They tell you to grow up, that your expectations are too high. And you scowl, ask what they mean. Life is not a romance novel; he’s only a man; you must learn to be happy within yourself. So you square your shoulders and you learn to prefer your
own company and you learn to do things all by yourself, go places all by yourself. He seems relieved that you’re more independent, that you’re going without him. And a daily routine develops, and you both find a measure of peace, a certain amount of comfort in the familiar, the feel of your bodies, the regularity of breathing in the night, the safety in having each other. The growth of your children brings both of you joy, which you mistake for connection. You resist the tug at the back of your sensibility and cling to any connection.

They say that men are from Mars and women from Venus. That men need their “caves” and that women require too many words. That it’s normal for him to shut down when you talk too much. So, you read self-help books and plan weekend getaways. You try to like football and camping, and you try not to talk about “us.” Your feelings are news briefs. He asks, “How are you today,” and you answer, “A little blue.” And you see his face stiffen. So you accept his platonic kiss and go call a girlfriend.

They say it’s for the children, that children need two parents. That he really does love you. They’ve seen his expression as you walk away. That he is a good husband and father. They say you should be careful of what you say in front of little ears. And you agree and feel guilty. So you go to bed lonely, and wonder where he is, and when he finally comes home, you try not to cry till you know he’s asleep. Then he throws back the covers and grabs his pillow. Says it’s easier to sleep on the couch. And you wake in the morning, your head in a vice, your nerves jangled raw. He leaves the house without saying goodbye. And the children come sleepily and ask
for a drink and you tell them to wait, that you’ll be down in a minute. But you aren’t and they pour their own juice and turn on the TV and watch far too long while you look at the crow’s feet at the corners of your eyes. Then you make them some toast as you pack up the car to go to the zoo to get away from the house.

They tell you stories of when they had hard times too. They say they know a counselor, or a book, or a program that will help you both sort all this out. They give you business cards and pamphlets and you take them home and leave them on his bed-stand. And he comes into the bedroom and looks down at these things and briefly he softens, looks you straight in the face. He will give it a try, if you want. Hope, stone-like, sits in your stomach. So you start the long process, airing laundry to a stranger. A stranger who sits smugly, her watch propped up on the table. One hour ticking. And you sit cowering in the corner of her stiff green sofa while he rails about all the things that drive him crazy. And she asks you how you feel about that, and you don’t know what to say. Then you write out a check with a blue ballpoint pen from a basket she keeps by her watch. You awkwardly stand, your dignity torn out with your check, and you offer a shamed “thank you” as you go. Mostly, he will go alone, every week for a long time.

They say they knew it all along. That they had seen the signs years ago. That they had hoped you could pull through, but that they aren’t really surprised. And you look at them bitterly. And he begins to pack his things and you send the children to your sister’s so they don’t have to see their father move out. He asks for a few pictures of the kids for his place. And you pull down the albums and open them up.
The pictures are all in order, dated with notes. You’re not sure how to break them apart, how to ruin their order. Then the tears start to come and you cling to his neck and sob as he holds you gently and strong. Then he pats your back and says just keep them here; he’ll borrow them sometime to make copies. Then you know it is real, this thing called divorce. You know it is real but not how to survive. It is as though someone has taken a chainsaw and torn you in half, two where there was one, in the dining room over old photographs.

They say it takes time. That you must be patient and heal. That you will start a new life of your own. And you stare numbly and hold your anger in. But when you’re alone, you break. You cry in the car while you drive, as loudly as you can. You cry before the children get home, set a timer for twenty minutes. Set a timer so that your eyes will have time to clear. So that your face will not look so puffy. But at night it is no use, the children can hear, though you hold it as quietly as you can. They know you are afraid. And sometimes one comes to you and climbs in bed next to you, pats you on the arm or holds your face in his hands and you feel like a failure for needing his comfort.

Some days he comes. And you wish you could just forgive it all and have the old life back. You notice he looks suddenly old. You ask how he’s doing, strange old friend and enemy. Lousy, he says, then asks you in return. And you understand each other, which makes it better and worse. Then the children climb in his car to go see a woman, and they drive away, and you stand alone in the driveway while the cicada bugs buzz.
They say they knew you could do it. That you are so brave. And you smile kindly, knowing they haven’t a clue. They don’t know the nights, how you sit up late as you can. Delaying the moment you turn off the light, when you are forced to acknowledge you’re alone. Don’t know how your mind whirls in the darkness. Don’t know the strength it takes to get up each day and bend down to tie your shoes. Don’t know how much easier it would be to just stay in bed. They cannot possibly understand how awkward you feel at parent-teacher conferences or at high-school soccer games when he is standing there with his girlfriend. How you look her over and note that she is thinner than you. That you know he is giving her hell.

They haven’t any idea how sometimes you’re so glad you’re alone that you secretly run through the house. Dance ludicrously. How you laugh when your friends cannot go wherever they want, how silly it seems to worry about what your husband will think. They don’t know the glee in being free to buy pink carpet, if you wanted it, though you don’t. You are free to stay in your worst sweat pants all day Saturday if you wish, unshowered and pungent. You are free from arguing, manipulating, free from feeling insane. You suspect that you will never be free from the yearning to be loved. Yet you and your children are free to laugh as loud as you want, and you are glad that at least they will get to see him twice a week. And oddly, beyond love’s death, you and he still love. Ill formed, mutant, yet real as finding one’s old toys in the attic, the old friendship survives. You know each other. Years of close living, the pounding of iron against iron. You are sharp with the knowledge of each other.

When you can let go, the rage, the fury, a little at a time, if you can dare to let go, you
find the friendship still intact. It is bittersweet. Like the aspirin your mother crushed and mixed with sugar when you were a child. You are left with this medicine, this crushed and sweetened forgiveness.
Dancing on My Father's Grave

Emails and Ambulances

Email received from my sister, Anne 3/3/04

If anyone has forgotten, today is the 15th anniversary of dad's death... I would like to hear some favorite memories. Here is one to get you started.

- I remember the look on his face every time we all threw our wadded up napkins at him at the end of dinner... He never knew they were coming.

**

It had been a fine, uncommonly cold March afternoon, in 1989. My father, Joe, went for a walk after flirting with my mother, his wife of forty-one years, and had a heart attack. On the side of the road, on the front lawn of a private Christian college in North Chili, New York, Joe had a heart attack and fell to the ground. Oddly, my sister, Arlene, drove by a few minutes later. She saw a man lying on the ground, writhing in pain. She did not recognize him until she stopped her car and went over to help.

She fell to her knees and cried, "Dad, can you hear me?" He was unable to respond; she did not know what to do. Two young men stopped and began CPR. Arlene drove one block to the home she shared with our parents to get our mother and call an ambulance. She told our mother, whose name is also Arlene, to come quick,
that Dad was lying on the ground. My mother, frantic, rode along in the ambulance. Later, the paramedics said he died in the ambulance.

**

Strollers and Phones.

*My Reply. 3/6/04*

*When I was first pregnant with Philip and very sick, Dad took Anthony for a walk in the stroller. When after an hour they hadn’t returned, I stuck my head out the front door to look around. Nothing. I checked on and off for another half hour when a neighbor across the street called out, “I saw them downtown” [Bergen, New York’s downtown consists of about seven beat-up nineteenth century storefronts, a railroad crossing and a grist mill turned antique shop]. Turns out they were looking in all the stores, visiting the post office staff, watching the local mechanic raise and lower cars on the lift, and of course buying cookies at Gregory’s Bakery...*

**

When Arlene called in the late afternoon, I was home alone with two toddlers. I was newly pregnant with my third child and very nauseous. Arlene’s voice was strained, as though someone’s hands were around her throat. She said, “Something’s wrong with Dad.” She was forced to repeat herself. “Something’s really wrong with Dad,” she said, “I don’t think he is going to make it.”

The words ran askew, slamming into each other. Arlene explained, “I found him on the ground”; “I think he knew I was there”; “He seemed scared.” She found
him on the ground? The cold ground? I said, “Dad hates being cold.” Arlene said, “I’ll call you when I know more.”

I waited. I changed diapers, wandered absently through the house, my arms tightly wrapped around my waist, bitterly wishing my husband would come home. The afternoon light softened toward evening while the children played with their dinner.

Arlene made six other phone calls much like that.

**

Mushrooms and Powder-Blue Suits.

Reply from Frank, a son. 3/4/04

How many of you remember driving to Utica on the highway (not the Thruway – he didn’t want to pay the toll). “Ooo... Ooo... Ma, stop the car, stop the car!”

Then he’d jump out and shimmy up some tree to pick a tree mushroom.

**

My father left my mother a love note in the jacket of his powder-blue suit, the suit he’d told her to bury him in if he died first. She went to his closet the night he died and pulled out the jacket to send to the funeral home. Then she came into the living room with the jacket in one hand and the note in the other, a look of confusion on her face. “He left me a note,” she said as she stood, and we, her daughters, stood in reply. It was a beautiful note, scribbled in his almost illegible handwriting, about how he had loved her, how he was happy to go home to his Lord, how he would plant beautiful gardens for her in their heavenly mansion, that she would see him again. He
left her instructions at the end of the note. He recorded account numbers and company names. But these were written after the love note, so gentle and sweet that she could not read it herself. One of us read it aloud, and we cried to think that he loved her enough to leave her a note in the jacket of his powder-blue suit. That he knew her so well that he knew she would stop to check every pocket of his powder-blue suit.

**

Potatoes and Pop Cans

*Reply from Carol, a daughter.*

*One time when he was visiting he scolded me for tossing out a left over baked potato. So, when he was packing up to leave, Dorian and I put it in his suitcase!*

**

My sisters and I opened the trunk of Dad’s car in the parking lot of Tops Friendly Market and discovered huge bags filled with returnable bottles Dad had collected from trashcans and roadsides and park benches. He had collected them for the nickels, as he had been for several years, because he couldn’t bear to see a nickel wasted after a childhood of poverty. We stood behind the open trunk, holding bags of deli take-out for a family gathering to plan his funeral. Submarine sandwiches made with ham or roast beef and provolone began to warm in the bags while my sisters, Carol and Mary, carried bags of empty bottles into the store to return.
"I'm glad Mom didn't find these," said Arlene. "I'm glad we found them instead." They emerged again from the store, oddly holding a fist full of money to give to our mother. Later, Mom would joke that lunch had been "on Joe."

**

Extension Cords and Epitaphs.

Reply from Arlene, 3/5/04

The garage had a window that looked out onto the backyard. One day, Dad was working behind the garage, listening to the radio he had plugged in with an extension cord. Rick came outside and decided Dad needed a little shaking up. Rick unplugged the extension cord and then watched Dad thru the window stop working and look at the "dead" radio. As soon as Dad put his tool down and headed for the radio, Rick plugged it back in . . . Rick repeated the prank, each time watching Dad put down his tool and go for the radio. I happened to come out of the house and Rick motioned to me to be quiet and come "look at this!" One time Dad actually shook the radio, Rick plugged it back in and you could see Dad . . . muttering to himself. . . . Rick and I could hardly contain ourselves. After about 7-8 times of witnessing Dad's frustration, Rick finally comes out of the garage, holding the unplugged extension cord. All Dad could say was, "Gall darn that Rick!!!!"
There was entirely too much laughing at my father’s funeral. This upset the guests, or at least disconcerted them. They did not know if they were supposed to laugh too. One guest said, “My! You’re all doing remarkably well!” It was as though the mask of tragedy had been quickly switched for that of comedy. It seemed as if we, with fevered steps, were dancing on my father’s grave. We conjured him, finally free of back pain and arthritic joints, dancing too. We began to create false epitaphs for the grave, laughing ever louder with each successor. The unofficial winner, “See, I told you I was sick!”

Later, I felt somewhat guilty about not crying at my father’s funeral. I had spent a sleepless night, sobbing, sitting on the bathroom floor, terrified to face the corpse. But everything seemed a little better once I saw him, touched his cold face and hands. Besides, if I had begun to cry, I was terrified I would never stop.

**

Traffic Lights and Golf Clubs.

*Reply from Carol. 3/4/04*

*What Marianne and Ben didn’t tell you about the walks to “the cookie store” is one time I went with them and as we got to the corner Marianne looked both ways and started to cross on the red light. I said “Stop!” And she said, “But Grandpa says it’s okay as long as no*
cars are coming." So I turned to him and said "DAD!!!" and he said
"I'm sorry, Honey!!!" in that wonderful funny Dad way.

**

Funerals don't end things; they begin things. There was the first time I saw a man with a brown corduroy overcoat pulled up around his neck. I assumed it was my father only to remember he was actually dead. The violence of my own weeping frightened me. There was the first time I remembered my last words to him: "Not today, Dad. Some other time." He had wanted to come visit the babies and I had been too tired. This slapped me hard. Once, while out in the yard, I found a golf club leaning against the shed wall. Though I knew it well, it seemed novel somehow, an improvised putter for my two and a half year old son, the handle cut short and wrapped in duct tape. The club sat casually right where Dad had left it, mocking me as I picked it up, daring me to put it away, someplace in the dark. I leaned it back against the shed wall, desperate to leave things as they were.

**

Love Tease

Reply from Steve, a grandson 3/6/04

[He] and I would sit down on the back patio steps to play chess. He used to beat me pretty bad when I was younger and I found myself getting really angry at times . . . He spoke to me about how I needed to control my temper. During the game, he'd say things like "Hmmm... I wonder why he did that? .... I wonder why he moved there"...It
would drive me nuts. Well, as I got older, I worked my way through college working with kids. I found myself treating the kids a lot like how grandpa treated me. I’d love to drive them crazy by saying the same things he would say to me during our backyard chess games . . . a sort of “love tease.”

**

It was difficult to visit the gravesite for a long time. Only my mother went initially; those of us who lived nearby could not face it. I avoided even driving by it for more than two years. These days, my mother goes to tend the grave two or three times a year. She brings her second husband, Bill, along. She thinks it a high joke when she leaves fake flowers in the pots because my father was such a wonderful gardener. She imitates him scowling at her and saying in his broken Italian accent, “Gall Damit, Arlene! I thought you knew better than that.” When my mother and Bill finish the work, they go to tend Bill’s first wife’s grave.

**

I Didn’t Raise You Like That.

*Response from Mary, a daughter 3/3/04*

*Common Grandpa/Dad quotes that surface in [our] household:*

- What’s the matter with you? I didn’t raise you that way.

- You can’t make your kids choices for them. They have to decide on their own.

**
On a Sunday morning, I took a seat in church next to a woman whose own father had recently died, unexpectedly. Oddly, her name is also Laura. She sat composed, yet withdrawn, and I, uncomfortable and unsure of what to say, decided to ignore the obvious and pretend I did not know of the death. Instead, I sang all the songs and prayed all the prayers and held a wiggly baby to give a young mother a break. But every now and then in the shadow of my vision, the woman and her pain sparked like a distress flare on a secluded road. I shifted, turned my body away, positioned myself toward the center of the church, away from the edges. It was no good though, and so when the doxology was sung and the congregation joined hands, I was forced to connect with this woman. She was very small. Fragile. Alone.


"Go in peace," I thought. I knew what I should do, so I pretended I was brave, turned and ventured, "Is it true that you lost your father last week?" The woman’s eyes reddened; tears swelled. I smiled painfully. Powerless to maintain composure, she nodded a short jerking ascent and turned away toward the end of the pew. I waited, hesitant, unsure if I should follow. Then swallowing, I approached her and said, "I lost my father fifteen years ago last month. He died very suddenly as well."

Her hungry eyes turned then, and for just an instant, pain became community and openly weeping, the woman allowed me to hold her.

I said, "Sometimes I still think I see him walking. Sometimes I still cry." My old familiar wound began to throb. The woman could not manage a response. I remembered how that felt, the tightness, the need to hold one’s breath. "It is hard to
sit here where all is happy and well, isn’t it?” We held each other then, and when we
finally looked up, three other women were waiting to help bear the grief, and I was
ashamed that I had been afraid to risk myself. I had not been raised that way.

**

Straight and Far.

Reply from Susanna, eldest granddaughter.

I also remember grandpa teaching [us] to play golf . . . we didn’t so
much play golf as we would go out and “hit balls” in the big grassy
field at the elementary school near our house . . . Grandpa taught
Steve and I how to swing and hold our hands the right way and hit the
balls as straight and far as we could.

**

One frozen January day, the youngest granddaughter, Veronica, a seven year
old ballerina, stood in the snow, asked to see her grandfather’s grave. It was the first
snow she’d ever seen, her first time in New York, and as I searched in the snow to
find the grave, I thought of the fun the child would miss because Grandpa Joe was not
there to help her discover winter. She would never stomp in muddy puddles with her
good shoes on and then listen to him apologize to her mother. He would never buy
her a bakery cookie and then eat the rest himself, saying cheerfully, “But they’re so
light, honey, so light.” He would not teach her how to kick her heels or throw a
bowling ball or ice-skate. They would never go on early morning walks together in
Black Creek Park to make breakfast in a pan on an open fire. She would never get to
hear her grandmother yell that he had ruined her best frying pan. She would not see him read for hours or sleep on the floor with his legs up on a couch, his arms splayed wide, never hear his tremendous snore. She would not hear his beautiful whistle or his pocket change jingle, never hear him clear his old smoker’s throat. She would never find an apple in the pocket of his brown corduroy coat or spend the morning watching trains and car mechanics.

I pushed the snow away from the headstone and we scraped the ice out of the grooved letters. I read her the words out loud, told her a story about him. As we walked back to the car, I asked if she knew what a snow angel was. Then we both tumbled backward in the snow near the headstone, threw out our arms and legs and became dancers on my father’s grave.
Kick Ball

A kick ball game was set up in the very back corner of Tracey and Karl’s
country property. Fred, the 70-ish owner of a local tractor and farm machinery
company, was pitcher. I sat next to his wife, Eunie, chatting with others on the
sidelines. My friend Sonya, David’s wife, played shortstop. Their baby daughter
toddled around on her knees, wandered over to grab hold of Fred’s pant legs, came
close to being hit with the rubber ball, and prevented her mother from tagging the
runner on first. No one minded though; the runner was only six years old. I ran out
and lured the baby off the field with a handful of my cheese crackers. She was very
soft, and sat on my lap like a lump of dough.

As I held her, safe on the sidelines, I whooped and called and laughed, “Run,
Run, Run!”; “Good Job,”; “Whoo!”; but I did not play. I rarely play. After an hour or
so, Karl hauled out a cooler of lemonade and more snacks, the wind dumping half
eaten bags of chips and sending plastic cups flying. Though I vowed not to eat the
potato chips, I found myself licking the grease off my fingers not five minutes later.
David approached and asked why I wasn’t playing. I like David. He reminds me of
my father; he is perceptive, having what I would call “clear vision.” We tease each
other about being Italian-American. About being Presbyterian. I laugh when he
wears socks with his sandals. I cut his hair every couple months and he insists that I
take five dollars. Sonya generally laughs. “Girl,” she’ll say in a smoky North
Carolina drawl, “You know you can’t argue with David.”

“So,” he said, holding a handful of pretzels, “Why aren’t you playing?”
"I don’t exercise in public," I replied, knowing he would find this lame and that he would never let it go at that.

"Huh?" David is a jock - his master’s degree is in recreational management. He did not understand my excuse. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I don’t play sports. I mostly exercise in private - alone." He sized me up to decide if I was serious or not. I pushed on, "I exercise because I have to. I’m uncoordinated, and I look stupid when I run. So, I don’t want to play kickball."

He hesitated, then said, "You’re only kidding," and grabbed my arm to pull me into the kicker’s line.

I remembered this feeling every school year on the first day of P.E: panicked and trapped. For a brief second, I thought I might actually give in, might actually hop into line. I thought about how stupid I was not to play kickball on a beautiful June day. Everyone was laughing and playing and having a grand time. Absolutely no one was hyper-critical. I hesitated, nearly giving in, but then pulled back like stubborn a twelve-year-old and said, "No, David. I don’t want to play."

My daughter jumped on the bandwagon. "Yeah, Mom. Play." She pushed me from behind, a rude and sassy thing for a girl to do to her mother, I thought.

She would not be as easily convinced as David, so I said, "No, Deanna. Don’t push me," and then the real show stopper, "I’m your mother."

David gave up and said something about my being able to change my mind if I wanted, but I knew that I would not. I said, "Sure," and went straight back to the snacks. And that was it. I continued to eat potato chips against my better judgment; I
helped Tracey's four year old son put on a sweater; I chatted with Fred, now sitting with Eunie. The rest of the afternoon, I wondered why I couldn't just get over it, couldn't just have a good time like everyone else. It bugged me for several days.

A week went by and David called me for a haircut. While Sonya gave my children a piano lesson, I snipped, and buzzed, and chatted with David. He said, “That kick ball game was a lot of fun last Sunday.”

“Yes, it sure was,” I said, suspicious of where he was going.

“Plato once said he could learn more about a person in one hour of play than he could in a year of conversation.”

I winced a little and said, “Yes, I can see how that would be true.”

David never speaks very loudly, is what one would call “a man of few words.” Often, he forces his listeners to crane their necks forward to hear. He dropped his voice and mumbled, “I learned a lot about you that day.”

I chuckled to cover my discomfort and felt badly that he thought badly of me. I played it up a little, recalling childhood memories about being an “inside kid,” one who would rather read a book than run the bases. The youngest in a large family where older siblings played kickball and baby sisters watched on the sideline, remembered the big kids giving me “sympathy” turns. They would move forward when I stepped up to the plate. How the big kids would inevitably catch my pitiful kicks. How I was never actually picked for a team; I was assigned a team. All this I burbled out at poor David while he sat beneath my hair clippers and green plastic apron.
Unconcerned about any of it, he said “Uh, sure.” Then, “The top’s not too short, right?” The timer went off on the stove signaling the end of the piano lesson; David headed for the bathroom mirror to inspect his hairline. I, however, determined to put away my discomfort and become more of an outside kid. So, when I got in the car, I said to my daughter, “Next time you guys play kick ball, call me. I want to play kick ball.”

She laughed and said, “Mom, you’re funny. You don’t have to worry about not being good at kick ball. We love you just the way you are.” She has begun “mothering” me, telling me things I ought to know, things that should be my job to tell her.

The next month, I tried to play with the kids. I rode bikes and played a game called foursquare, I shot hoops and even tried swimming in the mini-pool, the water only as high as my thighs, shivering while my daughter told me to jump in and get it over with. I knew though, the kids were just being kind. I was their mother and they seemed to like me, but I was still not a great addition to anyone’s team.

Two months later, my family held a mini-reunion. I found myself on the sidelines of an oddly familiar kickball game. My sister’s husband sat in a lawn chair hooting out sarcasms at how often his wife changed the rules of the game. My son asked if I wanted to play. I said, “In a little while,” and stood watching, laughing at how funny my sisters looked when they ran, wondering if my back-end bounced like theirs. I tried to work up the courage to jump into the kicker’s line and noticed that I
could hear my heart beating. Eventually, I worked up the nerve to play and sidled up next to my daughter.

"Which team can I be on?" I asked.

She smiled, proud that I was willing to try – like my father’s pride would have been, unspoken but clear. She said, "Mine," and I headed to the outfield, pretending to be shortstop. The ground felt lumpy beneath my sneakers; I thought how easy it would be to twist an ankle.

My twin sister, covering first base, turned to me laughing and shouted, "Hey! You better not miss the ball!" I snapped back with false bravado, "Yeah. Yeah. Yeah." She has always been more athletic than me. I remember being totally puzzled when she wanted to join the track team when we were in high school. That never would have occurred to me. Sports were something other kids joined and I didn’t even vaguely understand why.

Of course, on cue, my nephew kicked a ball straight toward me, and terrified, I watched my hands reach up into the air, watched them wrap around the rubber ball. I panicked, gripped it tightly and, pulled it down toward my chest. I thought, "Don’t Drop It, Idiot – Don’t Drop It!" My family cheered and I lifted the ball back up shouting, "I caught it!" My twin called back, "Alright!"

Then I imagined my father, sitting by my brother-in-law with a cup of coffee in his hand, a fishing hat on his head, glad that I played. These things were so simple for him. I remember his frustration with me. Each season of the year brought new activities for me to avoid. I remember standing at the crest of the snowy tobogganing
hill, frigid, unwilling to slide down. I was afraid of the speed, afraid I’d get hurt; I hated the sinking sensation it would send through my stomach. Years later, as an adult, I understood. I, as C.S. Lewis once said about himself, was the kind of person who would rather avoid pain than seek pleasure.

So instead of tobogganing, I just stood still and tried not to notice how numb my toes were. My father, bundled in a heavy coat with snow covering his pant-legs and gloves, would say, “If you would get on the toboggan and start moving, you’d warm up, ya know.” But I could not bring myself to do it. I understood cold. I did not understand wanting to risk the hill.

I did the same thing with ice-skating. He laced my skates up tight, my ankle jerking as he pulled at the strings. I stood at the edge of the pond and watched him figure skate, tall and thin, absolutely graceful. He moved without effort, smooth, confident, beautiful. I remember wishing I could skate that way, yet my skates remained planted. Eventually he came and took me with him. He slowed down and held my hands, easily skating backward while he pulled me along. The most I managed though was a short choppy canter across the ice. I soon tired of the effort and chose to sit in the park shelter instead.

On summer vacation, he wanted me to learn to swim. He stood thigh high in the pond, slowly rinsing cool water over his sunburned arms and chest. He never jumped in quickly. He said in his thick Italian English, “Oh honey, this is better – No shock to the system.” I only watched, though, because I did not like the sound of water in my ears, and I was afraid. Eventually, he would sink down, let the water
cover his head for what seemed like long minutes. Afterward, he would swim straight and strong toward the center of the pond. Occasionally, he would say, “I ought to just throw you in, like I did Frankie.” But he never did. He must have known how stubborn I was, that I would not come to the pond again if he had. Like my daughter, like David, he wanted me to want these things.

When the kickball game ended, we gathered the bases and balls and headed into my sister’s garage to have dessert. We dished out vanilla ice cream and apple crumble. We sat in folding chairs and drank coffee out of Styrofoam cups, and I felt myself relax. The kids grabbed the golf clubs and practice balls, some headed off with a football. But we adults did none of these things. I knew that if the kickball game were to suddenly pick back up and if my sisters and brothers were to play again, I probably would not. I preferred this visiting with coffee. I was glad I had played, liked the happy fatigue of having run and moved. I might even push myself to play again some other day, but in reality I was still the girl who watched from the top of the hill, from the edge of the pond.
Stepping Out

The soloist squeals whenever she hits anything over a C above middle C. She is unaware of this. When I am subtle enough, I can watch the congregation’s pained reactions. Some flinch slightly, others, mostly adolescent boys, snicker. Teenage girls roll their eyes. It seems marvelous to me that she never seems to notice, that she pushes forward each time. This is not the only problem during Sunday morning church service. The preacher, in the words of a fifteenth century actor, “does not so much edify as tedify.” He repeats his points tirelessly. He expounds, elaborates, illustrates, illuminates, deviates. He analyzes, evaluates, applies, extends and parallels. The congregation nods, some in vague agreement, others in weary effort. To my left, a small child squirms, begins to whine. His mother gets up, pats his back and points him to the back door. I imagine my teenage son wishing he too could play in the nursery, that he might consider giving up his driver’s permit in exchange for an hour in the church nursery.

It is much this way in my church. Normally, I am content to be uncomfortable in church, but this past summer, I had reached the end of my patience. After fifteen years, I found myself wishing I could find a new church. Aside from Sunday service, I was tired of committee meetings, tired of new programs that promised solutions to all our problems, tired of listening to people complain even as I hypocritically complained myself. I just wanted to go to a church whose problems were unknown to me. I felt very guilty for this, like I was committing spiritual
adultery. I reasoned that I was not actually breaking up with my congregation; I was just stepping out a little. I just needed a vacation.

* *

Father's House, a Word of Faith Congregation

I took the month of August as Visiting Church Month. First, I visited a church that has been termed “seeker-friendly,” the kind of church that plans its services on the demographics of the area in which it exists. Gone were the traditional forms normally seen. There were no religious decorations, no crosses, no stained glass, no pews. Instead, the building was trendy, decorated in monochromatic shades of plum. Instead of hymnals, lyrics were flashed up on various PowerPoint screens set alternately around the room; the screens flashed peaceful, natural images, like waterfalls or autumn leaves.

Instead of a sermon, a Christian band from New York City performed. A mixture of deafening Christian pop and Latino music kept my daughter’s hands over her ears most of the time. The congregation turned into an audience. The band seemed very proud of its cultural diversity and complimented the congregation on its diversity as well. The saxophonist played with grotesquely affected facial expressions and poses. He enjoyed holding people’s gazes far, far longer than is normally comfortable. When he tried it on me, I gallantly resisted the urge to stick my tongue out and cross my eyes. My daughter leaned over and shouted above the music, “He’s annoying!” Afterward I wondered, “Was that really church?”
Then I ran into an old friend from high school. We smiled and caught up on the last twenty years. He said that his high school aged son loved the church, that it was relevant to his life. I understood that, especially on weeks when my own teenagers have made spit balls out of the Sunday bulletin. We said goodbye and I went to get my daughter out of the giant trampoline bubble set up in the parking lot, grabbed a muffin off a banquet table, and wondered what the antique car show in the front yard had to do with Christ. I could not be too judgmental though. After all, my friend’s son was “hanging out with good kids again.” Perhaps the extras were just bait. “Fishers of men,” Jesus said. “Ye shall be fishers of men.” I just didn’t think I was the kind of fish that liked that kind of bait.

* * *

The First Presbyterian Church of LeRoy.

Next I visited my best friend, Millie’s church, a two hundred year old historical treasure. A balcony stretched around three sides of the sanctuary, supported by graceful Greek revival columns. Though it could hold several hundred people, only about thirty aging parishioners were present; clearly, people were set in their ways. When I accidentally chose one elderly couple’s “regular” pew, they apparently did not know what to do. They sat directly in front of us, and considering the closeness of the antique pews themselves, I mean directly. We spent the entire service trying to peek around the massive old man. All around us on every side were dozens of empty pews. I had to laugh.
There were three “young” families beside my own and I wondered what drew them here among the old, amidst the roar of the restored pipe organ. Then one of the mothers stood up, pointed to her family, to her eight-year-old boy who was enduring cancer treatment and thanked God for how miraculously well the boy was doing this summer. She thanked the congregation for their heartfelt prayers, for their help, said that she was grateful for all God had done. I took a second look at the church, then at myself. I watched as old ladies wiped their eyes and old men smiled, watched as the little boy covered his face with a bulletin so that people would not stare and smile at him. Later, during the children’s sermon, when the pastor asked what the best day of the year was, the boy shouted loudly, “Christmas!” The day Christ was born. And I thought that for a moment it was Christmas, for here was Immanuel: God with us.

* * *

Church of Christ

On the third Sunday, Millie and I and our families set out for the non-denominational, evangelical church of another friend. The parking lot had been newly expanded but remained unpaved; dust clouds bloomed whenever a car pulled in or out. A man stood just outside the entrance, smiling and shaking hands and greeting each person as they arrived. He spotted us long before we reached him. He kept glancing at us in expectation. I felt a bit uncomfortable, hovering as it were halfway between the building and the parking lot. My son was taking his time, listening to music in the car, leaving me hanging out in the limbo of the sidewalk. Eventually, my son sauntered my way, making it clear that this visit would be on his
terms, that I could make him get in the car but that I couldn't make him perform like a barking seal. The greeter didn't seem to mind; he smiled and bubbled out a welcome. He asked where we were from. He laughed when we mentioned the family we knew from the congregation. We were given a bulletin, thick with information, and an outline for that morning's sermon. He showed us into the sanctuary, introducing us to a few people on the way. I was embarrassed to think how seldom I ventured to introduce myself to newcomers when I am at my own church.

The musicians were warming up, a mixed group of both young and old. The worship leader, a smiley, twenty-something with black hair pulled tightly back into a neat ponytail at the base of his neck, noticed us immediately, and though he was tuning his guitar and directing the musicians, I almost thought he would shout "Hello" right then and there. Eventually, he and a couple of band members did make their way over to where we sat, shook our hands vigorously.

I wondered why I felt so uncomfortable, finally deciding that I am far too much The Easterner: cold and unapproachable. I liked their greetings though, and I wanted to believe that this display of congeniality was in good faith. My son did not buy it. Later, in the car, when I asked him what he thought, he said, "It all seemed so fake."

"I know you don't like church at all, but between the two, our church and this one, which do you like better?"

"Our church," he said.
I think I know why. It has something to do with belonging. Later we headed over to our church – a picnic had been scheduled that afternoon and we like church picnics. I pulled into a parking space and spotted half a dozen people who I know well, love even. My pastor stood wearing blue jeans and a baseball cap. He, an ordained Presbyterian minister in his mid-fifties, looked innocently excited at the dessert table while he chatted with another member of the congregation. A group of teenage girls sat in folding chairs around a table. I like them because they laugh at my jokes, and I like to tease them, maybe fall across their laps so that they will think I am crazy. They were all eating great big portions of the Jell-O salads. My daughter and I grabbed plates and sat down with them. I no longer felt like a cold Easterner. It felt like home, this not needing to be introduced, this Jell-O salad afternoon.

* *

Assembly of God

My sister’s church did not rank high on overt friendliness. It has experienced a fair amount of growth in the last couple of years and is building a new church. I think perhaps the regulars are tired of being friendly. It is not so necessary any more. One greeter did finally approach, told us about the church and handed us a checklist of ministries that we could get involved in if we wanted. When he left, we stood awkwardly, wondering if we ought to sit down or wait outside for my sister’s family. Once the service began though, we felt a certain kinship. I glanced at my son; a musician and usually a cynic, he was fully engaged watching the worship leader play
the guitar. He sat by his cousin on the opposite side of the church from me and did not see me watching him. Did not see that I knew he liked this church.

The pastor was around forty, small and too thin. He had rings under his eyes and looked like he needed a good night’s sleep. He announced that he would be leaving directly after the service, that he was going on vacation. Someone in the congregation said, “Vacation!” and he nodded slowly and, nearly under his breath, said, “Vacation.” I felt very badly for him and thought it would probably be okay with everyone if he just left right then, that he should probably leave right then, that he should get some rest.

Then he started to preach, and his eyes cleared and his shoulders squared and his fatigue seemed to fall away, like a raincoat soaked through and dropped on the floor. And as he continued, I witnessed what the scriptures call the Living Word. He was resurrected. And then I understood why this church had experienced such growth in the last couple years.

**

Baptist

Even though there were rumors spreading within my own congregation that I was “church shopping,” I took one more opportunity to visit another sister’s church. The building was gigantic. It was new. It was clean and neat. The ceiling was so high it reminded me of a cathedral. The usher gave us a bulletin, and I noticed a list of the coming week’s activities. They offered six different services on three different days of the week, as well as children’s and teen’s events. By the look of the building,
I expected a polished, “television” service, very high class, but I was pleasantly surprised by the “old-timey” nature of the service instead. A quartet got up and sang, “The Old Rugged Cross” – badly. Then came, “When the Roll is Called Up Yonder,” and an old Southern Gospel song called “Little Flowers,” sung by an assistant pastor from Mississippi. It was all very comforting. I had a grand desire to stand up and sing out the alto part. Southern Gospel in Western New York: very unusual.

The sermon, out of the Book of Acts, the eighteenth chapter, reminded us to be teachable. The pastor said that we were responsible to confront each other in love if there was a problem, responsible to listen openly to constructive criticism. He said, “Don’t talk behind my back, talk by my side. Not nose to nose, but softly in my ear.” I wondered if he knew how meanly I had been feeling toward my own pastor, if there were a scarlet letter somewhere on my clothing that showed I had been stepping out on my congregation.

**

With the end of August came the end of Visiting Church Month. It was time to go back to my little congregation for the first day of the new Sunday school year. My friend Char, a third grade teacher who hangs a rubber chicken on a bungee cord from her classroom ceiling, came and asked, “You’re not leaving the church, are you?” She looked panicked, which made me very happy.

“No. I was only visiting,” I said. “I just needed a break.” She looked skeptical. We talked a minute or two more, and then I headed off to meet my new junior high Sunday school class. The kids were bouncing off the walls. I sat on an
old, office swivel chair – the classroom apparently the graveyard for all the discarded office swivel chairs in the building – and started playing a name game with the kids. I love getting to know new groups of kids, but I am not good at learning new names, so when I got stuck I simply made one up.

“Gertrude,” I ventured to the first girl. She laughed and corrected the mistake.

“George,” I said to a quiet blond who did not look like she appreciated the game.

“Ophelia,” I called the next.

One girl, whose actual name is Molly, interrupted. “You can’t call her Ophelia.” No one had ever said that I couldn’t before.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because you named my sister Ophelia a couple years ago!” I have taught Sunday School a very long time. I love these kids.

We laughed; then a boy named Andrew quietly reached over and released the seat adjustment knob on my swivel chair. My seat banged downward and my laughter became an indelicate shriek. And I remembered how much fun it is to be with junior high kids.

When class was over, I gathered my things and cleaned up the room, but instead of heading toward the church service, I headed down to visit Dave and Ida. They are Char’s son and daughter-in-law, and they teach the high schoolers. They feel like family to me. A handful of teens still remained, including my own, sitting on old couches and chatting. It was nice to be with them, but even after a month of
stepping out, I was still not anxious to go upstairs and sit through the service, to listen to the soprano, to nod through the sermon. I had hoped I only needed a little break and that it would solve the nagging at the back of my brain: that sense that things were beginning to change. I have felt it before. Like the time I knew a very close friendship would have to end, that it had become ingrown and unhealthy. Like when I knew I could not settle for an unhappy marriage any longer, that I would rather be alone than unloved. Like when I realized that I did not like who I had become, that I had become mean and angry. I knew that eventually I would have to leave this church, full of people who I loved and who loved me.
Sallow Skinned

I like colors that stand up and shout their names out loud. No weak pastels, no uncommitted varieties of off-white. Living in Western New York may be partially responsible. Half of the year we live in a kind of sensory deprivation. Snows are heavy, most often the sky is a steel gray, and the clouds persistent and impenetrable. Mostly, autumn likes to steal the show with its explosions of oranges and reds and yellows, but spring runs a close second; like the first meal after a long fast, colors never taste better.

When spring arrives, it wastes no time. It seems that overnight my hyacinths and tulips peek through the mud, that suddenly a young green overruns the tips of each branch and blade. Neighbors I have not seen in five months lazily saunter up our country road, walk right up the center of the street to avoid the muddy shoulders. They wave and call “hello” with their jackets open, holding their knit hats in their hands. We chat and kick at the gravel and hold our faces - sallow skinned from lack of sun, from central heat and fluorescent light - toward the sky. My children in their excitement pull their bikes down from the barn loft. I remind them that it is still too early to ride in the grass; the lawn is easily marred.

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In the spring, the fields around my house are saturated with melting snow. The soil is deceptive. Deeply brown, it calls to come and run wildly, but two steps into the field finds the children shin deep in muck. If winter wheat has been planted, it will be green early, then the green deepens, thickens, lengthens. It eventually passes through
the color wheel from shades of green to shades of yellow, yellows so bright in the slant of the evening light that at times they glow. It takes my breath away. Yellow changes to gold and in its turn passes to brown and then huge combines, John Deere green or sometimes red, chug and hum and bang as they bring in the harvest. The color of new hay is just as wonderful. It flowers. Acres and acres of small purple flowers, or white depending on the mix of seeds that the farmer selects. It grows low and curly, the light playing on the uneven surfaces, never the same twice. It grows quickly, is harvested, grows again, is harvested and finally grows and is harvested a third time. All this. Three times.

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In less than ten seconds, the evening news places a dying man in my living room. I watch him lying on a gravel-gray street. He is covered in dust and black blood, his white shirt saturated. Broken bottles and shards of window glass on the ground around him glint against the sun. His limbs are motionless, twisted to impossible angles. His neighbors run haphazardly past him. He is alone. And I am safe on my overstuffed green couch. The correspondent speaks from a separate location; in relative safety he tells me the story. Explains the dead man. Then he fades out. A commercial comes on for a local health spa. It is shallow and flashy, and confused I realize my children are arguing over whose turn it is to wash the dishes.

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Sometimes in the evening, while we walk off the day, as we swing our arms and stiff shoulders, my friend Millie and I watch the sunset create silhouettes out of
the trees in the hedgerow. The branches are black against fiery slurs of orange and red, the cirrus clouds a purple or periwinkle blue. An hour later, with a glass of white wine, we sit on her front porch and watch moonbeams make blue shadows in the yard. Our children run and play in the dark shadows, a game they call “Grizzly.” They hide behind trees, roar and scream. Millie’s Golden Retriever sits with cocked ears. We breathe deeply, and if the spring chill is too much, wrap flannel blankets around our legs.

***

At my little white church with the stained glass windows, over plates of macaroni and meatballs, blueberry crumble and apple pie, I try to make sense of a hurting world. Our friends, John and Betty, who recently returned from the Republic of Congo, spent a year building a new missionary hospital. They bring their slides and souvenirs for us to handle and admire. There is a tiny, wobbly, three-legged stool made of bamboo, a seat for a Congolese guest of honor. Pastor tries to sit on it and falls off. I toss my head back and laugh; he laughs too, his face red with embarrassment, his teeth whiter for the red. There is a hand-sculpted nativity set made of wood, painted in bright colors, an African Holy Family. Betty tells us the Congolese are people unafraid of color. They wear clothing with huge designs in greens and reds and blues, shouting yellows and oranges that seem apt in such a lavish, tropical setting.

Betty wears a liputa, the traditional Congolese skirt with the blouse and headdress to match; it is a luxury most Congolese cannot afford. It is gold and brown,
much more subdued than most Congolese would choose, but Betty, like us, is an
American and Americans are less willing to wear such wild colors.

I sit in the back with my son.

Betty stands in front, lit by the glow of the projector.

John holds a laser pointer.

In one slide, a toddler recovered from a dangerous form of small pox sits on
her mother’s lap. Her face, the deepest of browns, is polka doted with spots the size
of quarters. The baby is scarred for life. She smiles delicately for the camera. I look
at my son, seventeen. His face is smooth and clear. He does not notice me; he is
engrossed in what he sees.

Another slide shows a young couple who has killed a cobra. It is stretched out
full length for us to see. The couple crouches proudly behind it, smiling with white
teeth, with white dust on their black knees. They do not look at the camera. They
look only at the cobra; they look at the good fortune of having caught something for
dinner. The irony not lost, I sigh over my plate.

The bony young woman in the next photo wears a liputa. She bangs the root
of a manioc plant into paste and rolls it into packages of shiny green leaves. It is pure
white, void of nutritional value, unappetizing. It will be made into dough so that her
family’s stomachs will not be entirely empty. It will do nothing else. The lights
come up and I dry my eyes on a lavender party napkin. Afterward, we step through
deep drifts in the parking lot, blue in the moonlight.

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With samples taped to the walls of the living room I line up my most talented friends and ask for their opinions. Millie picks the forest green for the dining room, Susan picks sage for the bath, Cathy picks a creamy coffee for the living room, I pick tile red for the floors, and so with a glance in every room, I remember these friends. During the long New York winter, when it seems the world will never be warm and bright again, when my soul seems equally cold and dim, these deep colors help me know I am alive. When the wind gusts against the windowpanes, rattles, whistles through the windowpanes, I turn from my own cold grayness. I look at my red floor, my greens and browns and blues, and thank God there is color. I make a cup of peppermint tea and call a friend who stays on the line until I remember that I am not alone in this world.

***

Friends come for dinner. I feed them good food, rich with color, purple eggplant, pasta with tomato sauce, warm brown bread. I like to cook too much so that the table is stuffed full, so there is no excuse for people to walk away hungry. On colorful dishes with floral designs, I want my guests to have plenty to eat and plenty to look at, to have trouble finding a spot for their glass. I want my sons to fill those glasses with root beer or pink lemonade, to find extra chairs for late arriving guests while I take their coats and welcome them in. And while I slice chocolate cake or apple pie, I want my sons and daughter to learn to throw their heads back and laugh loudly, deep from their bellies, growing sweaty and red in the face as they listen to good people tell good stories.
Once, at two in the morning, an old friend’s ten-year-old daughter called me from a hotel lobby, afraid and alone. Her mother, drunk, had passed out at a wedding reception. I found the girl curled in a blue damask chair, her party dress rumpled, her mother unaware that I was taking her home. The next day, I yelled at my red-eyed friend. Another day, an old friend stood in my kitchen, shamefaced and newly exposed as an adulterer, his hair graying and shoulders rounded, the sparkle gone from his eyes. We laughed at old jokes and I gave him a sandwich and he said he was a scoundrel, and I agreed. Then he went home to his wife, my friend of twenty-five years, and I thought how life is not is not always colored as one thinks it should be.

Kindness was colored pumpkin orange in the pie Amy baked when my daughter was born. It was the blue of Cathy’s coat the day I crumbled into her arms, the day I knew my husband did not love me. It was the worried brown of my mother and sisters’ eyes and the yellow of their rubber gloves when I was too sick to clean my house, every week for months at a time. It was the color of money, a box of anonymous donations friends and family had gathered when there was no paycheck coming in. It was the color of denim and white shoe leather when my mother-in-law took the children shopping for school clothes. It was the black of burnt toast and runny eggs, a breakfast in bed, a gift on Mother’s Day from my little girl, standing with disheveled brown hair and rosy cheeks.
My son sweeps the autumn leaves off of the front patio, a thirty-year old slab of cement that a prior owner, a farmer, poured in front of the house. The leaves have fallen thick, browns and mustard yellow, and the rain has soaked them into a mottled heap. The air – crisp, musty – smells of wet dirt. He works quickly, thoroughly, in a yellow sweater, wanting to be done and off to better things. He must stop though and find a shovel. The barn cats have killed a harmless snake and left its blackened carcass on the cement. Near it lays the liver and stomach of a field mouse. He must carry these across the yard and throw them out into the field full of weeds.
The Real Deal

My sixteen-year-old son, Philip, came to me one night with tears in his eyes. Of course it was 11:00 at night, long past the time when I could think clearly, long past the hour when I was able to be wise or confident. He said, "I feel as if I have been lied to my whole life. Like I've been conned – and you've been part of it too."

Lied to? I can count on one hand the times in his life that I've lied to him, mostly for his own safety or mental health, like when he was very sick and I pretended to know it was not serious. He continued, "There is no God. Everything I've been taught is a lie." It was then I knew I would not get to bed anytime soon.

**

With eleven people sharing a four-bedroom house, the "upstairs bathroom" of my childhood home was the only private space. My mother papered it, in the late 1970's, in an ugly floral print. Regardless of the paper, I remember using that bathroom as a retreat of sorts, a place to hide and brood. When someone called me to wash dishes or fold laundry, I simply called back, "I'm in the bathroom." I would sit, running my fingers over the raised pattern on the paper, opening and closing the access door to the bathtub plumbing. I would revel in the melancholy of being all alone in a house full of people. As a high school girl, it was the upstairs bathroom I went to the first time I worried whether all I believed in was simply untrue.

**

It seemed my son had been deeply affected by some of the literature he had read in his English class: Aldous Huxley's, *Brave New World*, and George Orwell's,
1984. He spoke in tumbling words, speaking about how the church was really just a man-made institution, one that sought its own perpetuation. The church, he said, only wanted to push rules on people, keep them in line. It was a conspiracy of sorts, that the Bible was just a book, put together by men who wanted all the control. He pointed out how religion had been used throughout history as a tool for governments to gain or retain power. Then quietly, timidly, he told me how the Christians he knew were all just fools. There was no doubt that he meant to implicate me as well; he just did not want to hurt me.

**

When I was nine, I cried myself to sleep three nights in a row. I had tried very hard, with my rosary beads tucked under my pillow, to be as good as my grandmother, but I could not be good. On the third night, Christ whispered, “I was good enough, so you don’t have to be.” I knew the voice had not come from myself. I got up, the room utterly black, and felt my way to the bedroom door. Halfway down the stairs, my mother noticed me and asked why I was up. I could not answer. She said, “Laura, what’s wrong?” Crying, I squeaked, “Nothing,” and she held me.

**

“You will always be my son, whether you are a Christian or not,” I told him. He cried freely and I held him. But I was worried. I did not want my son to live in a godless universe. I wanted for him the comfort and safety of faith. In reality, I could not prove God’s existence. I remembered the Bible story of another parent, desperate with worry. He too did not know if Jesus was the real deal, but he searched Jesus out
and pleaded for help. When Jesus asked the man if he believed, the man responded, “I believe. Help thou my unbelief.” The story ends with a boy freed of a demon. I simply wanted mine to have peace of mind, and I wanted it for myself as well.

**

She was a short, fat nun, and she taught my religion class when I was in sixth grade. Her lesson was on the myths of the Old Testament, on how stories like Jonah and the Whale were only stories and should not be taken literally. She said that we ought to read them for the important lessons they teach. I sat fuming that a nun would teach such nonsense, that a nun would teach her students to doubt. I waited as long as I could, then when I could hold my tongue no longer, I raised my hand and began to argue with her. When I told my family about it later that evening, they were surprised that I, the quiet one, had stood up to the heretic nun. They were proud, and it pleased me very much.

**

My sister-in-law arrived with a fist full of books for him to look over: *The Case for Christ; More Than a Carpenter;* and *Mere Christianity*. My son shrugged and said he probably wouldn’t read them. She set them on the dining room table and plopped down on the couch to see what all this fuss was about. My children filtered in and out of the discussion, grabbing their homework or playing Nintendo. After an hour, she shrugged her shoulders, tired of the argument, and started to talk about the varsity girls’ soccer team she was coaching. I served dinner, split pea soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, and then before she left, she said, “I love Ya, Phil.” As I walked
her to the door, she said she would pray for Philip. I nodded, hugged her goodbye. Later, I thumbed through the books myself, remembering when I had read them so many years before.

**

My parents went to a crusade in 1971, where they accepted Jesus Christ as their personal savior and so began attending services at both the Catholic and Pentecostal churches. My father came home from Mass one evening, furious with our parish priest. I stood and listened as he told my mother all that had happened.

Nearly shouting he said, "He raised the Bible over his head," my father's own hand waving above his six-foot frame. "He raised the Bible and said, 'This is not the final word of God — the Church is the final word of God.'" He put his hands on his narrow hips, exhaled deeply, and as he often did when he was upset, looked up toward the ceiling.

My mother asked him what he did then. I was awed when he said, "I got up right then and there and walked right out the door."

**

My oldest son, one year older than Philip, has no doubts about his faith. He is dedicated to leading his friends to Christ. He is dedicated to living a life of service. The brothers debated. "I am not like you, Anthony. I do not accept everything that someone tells me. I am going to think for myself, not like some robot." And his brother said, "Phil, you think you're independent, but you're not. You are just following evolutionists' ideas. Can't you see that nature itself proves there is a god?"
They did not yell. They spoke passionately, yet with control. I stood outside the room and listened. I listened to them debate and recognized that they were "fighting nice." I was proud that they were able to reason, to discuss without yelling, but I wanted Anthony to be right.

**

In front of the sanctuary, the scientist used charts and graphs. He punched holes in the theory of evolution, spoke about weak data passed off as irrefutable proof. He spoke about the jawbone of a pig and the skeleton of an arthritic man being mistaken as evidence of prehistoric man. He spoke of secular humanist conspiracies that covered up the truth, spoke of the persecution that he and other creationists faced in the scientific community. I heard this and took it to school, argued it with my earth science teacher. After that, he would send students who were having trouble with their labs to work with me, though I didn’t always understand the labs myself.

**

Philip was driving that day. I told him to stay toward the center of the road, to avoid the edges. He drove just a little faster than I would have preferred, but I held my tongue. He pointed out a motorcycle for sale in the front yard of an old farmhouse. He had been pushing for a motorcycle, for many things actually, trying to weaken my resolve, but I would not be the mother of a dead teenager and so I said, “Yes, it is for sale on the green grass that God made.” I knew the statement would rankle his newfound atheism, and I hoped it would distract him from the bike. But he was persistent and returned, “It is only five hundred dollars.” I smiled sweetly, told
him to watch for potholes then said, “Yes, and it is for sale on a beautiful warm spring day that God has made.” We bantered a minute or two more about the futility of seeking happiness in material objects, till he veered onto the shoulder of the road. I grabbed hold of my door handle. “Phil,” I snapped, “Will you watch where you’re going!” Back in the center of our lane he scolded, “Well, why do you talk to me when I’m driving? Relax!”

**

A neighborhood friend asked why we went to church so often. She thought four times a week was an awful lot. We liked going, though, and sometimes she even came with us. We felt our Pentecostal church was better than any other. Services could last three hours, half of which was spirit-filled worship. The pastor preached with such anointing that people came from all around to hear. After Friday night service, there was always a fellowship hour, but we often stayed till midnight. My parents would sit, sipping coffee and visiting friends, while we ran wild through the building, gorged on donuts and punch. One Sunday morning, when I was in ninth grade, the pastor’s affair with the church secretary surfaced. I stood on the sidewalk as the pastor and half the congregation streamed past me. He claimed he was God’s anointed and walked out to start a new church. My family, with the other half of the congregation, remained behind in support of his wife, but after a few months, disillusioned, we found a new church.

**
Philip loves his Sunday school teachers, Dave and Ida (pronounced Itha). They are young, married, graduate students. They are in the army reserves. After Sunday school, Dave and Phil play their guitars together in the church basement because they both hate how boring church service is, and to tell the truth, lately, so do I. Our church services have morphed into an event for the gray-headed, but I love these people and do not want to find another church, though many young families have left. I cannot in good conscience force Phil to sit through the service. I pray that Dave and Ida are not the next young couple to find a new church because for Philip they are the real deal.

**

The auditorium accommodated 1,500; it was filled to capacity. A line, thirty deep, waited for the healing evangelist’s touch, prayer. His specialty was legs. He often sat a supplicant down on a chair and demonstrated how the Lord could lengthen a short leg. I watched as people lined up to believe him. I did not believe him. I did not doubt, however, that God could heal. I just had never seen it.

**

My sister cornered Phil in her kitchen; she too wanted to know about his struggle with the faith. He resisted, made a joke, told her, “Well, you know Aunt Mary, I got to think for myself.” She said she admired that. She told him how her son, Tommy, had to think things through for himself when he was Phil’s age. She said it was normal. He humored her, smiled uncomfortably, and tried to maneuver himself out of the conversation. Her husband came in and listened, added his two
cents. Soon the kitchen was full of family members all talking at once until Phil finally told them his ideas. Eventually, my sister took his cheeks in her hands, looked him in the face. He pulled back slightly, not appreciating the invasion. She said, “Well, Phil, I’m just going to trust that when you are done looking around, you will come back to Jesus.”

**

My marriage was terrible, my health bad; I had decisions to make. I left my four preschoolers in the cabin with friends and hiked the trails alone, the ground dappled with light. The path rose sharply ahead of me. My daughter’s laughter floated over from the cabin yard. A “still small voice within” said, “Everything will be okay.” Emerson would have said I had connected to the universal soul, my intuition. My Pentecostal upbringing said I had heard God speak. Either way, it was real. I knew, too, that this did not mean my marriage would necessarily work out or that I would be miraculously healed.

**

Philip put his arm around me. He knew he had pushed me over the edge; he had argued with me too much that day about too many things. Obstinately, he said that I should let him do whatever he wanted. He said that he would not stop pushing till I gave in. He wanted his way and did not want me to be angry about it. On the front porch, before he went to his father’s, he said, “I hate it when you’re mad at me.”

I was mad. Very mad. And I could not suddenly stop being mad. I frowned and said, “Well, then stop being such a jerk.” He left without a goodbye from me.
banged around the house until I went to bed, and I woke up still mad at him. It was not until a full day later that I could look at him without scowling. Finally, as we cleaned together around the house, I touched his shoulder softly. Then I took my rags in hand and pushed on.
Tie your shoes my dear friend, and press on.

Billy Sprague
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