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CONTENTS

PROSE

THE BLUE DRESS

David Cariens 1

A WEDDING TO REMEMBER

Cindy L. Freeman 4

LADY LOUISE

Gwen Keane 9

THE PERILS OF A PRE-TEEN

Edward W. Lull 12

THE LAST KISS

Lynn Underwood 16

POETRY

JANICE HOFFMAN

Harbinger 21

A Life Punctuated 22

First Light 23

SHARON CANFIELD DORSEY

The Great Toilet Paper Caper 24

To Hoard or Not to Hoard 25

Our New World 26

JOYCE CARR STEDELBAUER

Turquoise Thunder 27

Life's Puzzle 28

The Balloons Will Fly 29

MARY MONTAGUE SIKES

Understanding Light 30

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- second chances,
- the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America,
- and the right to free expression.

The contributions to the journal this year reflect the diverse culture in The Writers Guild of Virginia. Some you will agree with; some you won't.

When we say it is never too late to write, we mean that. Our member's diversity includes age and life experience.

We hope you enjoy this edition of the Journal. Thank you for supporting our members.

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THE BLUE DRESS

DAVID CARIENS

***W**ere young, in love, newly married, and our possessions did not own us yet. Life was wonderful.*

There is nothing that can compare with young love. The excitement and the passion for each other; the touch; the look; the feel of your bodies together; the ecstasy of it all. A time before disappointment, pain, and worry; a time too quickly gone, never to be repeated.

*It was the early 1960s, and the turmoil of Vietnam was just beginning to surface. But we lived in a bubble of happiness. I was a student and Janice was a legal secretary. We did not have two cents to rub together. Our big treat was a periodic movie, and every Friday night, a half dozen doughnuts while we watched *The Avengers*. Life was perfect if for no other reason than we had each other.*

Christmas 1962 was approaching and we were trying to figure a way to buy Christmas gifts for the family. Money was no object because we had none.

Our friends from school, Tom and Mary Kay, phoned in mid-December inviting us to a New Year's cotillion in Chillicothe, Ohio—a small city about forty miles south of Columbus. Chillicothe is steeped in the state's history, having been the first capital.

Mary Kay's family was wealthy. Her father was a prominent judge and a leading figure in Chillicothe's establishment. It would not cost us anything—music to our ears. We would be guests of Mary Kay's parents; we would have dinner at the country club and then go to the cotillion.

Both Janice and I loved to dance—and what a chance for dirt-poor students to hobnob with the social elite of a prestigious community. A once in-a-life-time experience for two young people. The answer was “yes.”

I hung up the phone and told Janice the good news. To say we were excited is an understatement.

Then reality set in.

I had a dark suit, but what would Janice wear? We had enough trouble buying a week's groceries; a ball gown was not in our budget. Where would we get the money for the dress? Our hearts sank.

We tried to think of any way we could to come up with money, but nothing seemed possible. There seemed to be no option but to call Mary Kay and make up some excuse to back out of the invitation.

“Let's sleep on this, maybe something will come up.”

As hard as we tried, we could not figure out where to get the money. We didn't know how much a ball gown would cost, but whatever the price it would be a fortune to us.

I was determined we would go. There had to be a way.

After a few days, I came up with a plan—we would charge a dress. The problem was, we didn't have a credit card. We would apply; I was not sure we would even qualify, but we would try. Then, if we budgeted carefully, we could pay off the dress in installments.

Janice agreed.

I applied for a credit card and was accepted. I think the card limit was \$1,000—a small fortune for us in those days and more than enough to buy a dress. We

began the search.

This purchase was important; the most important of our young married life; it was special. We looked and looked, but nothing seemed right; nothing merited going into debt.

The credit card came in early December, and we redoubled our search. No luck.

One evening on my way to pick up Janice from work I took a different route. I went up High Street rather than the more direct route up Indianola Avenue.

When I stopped at a light near East North Broadway, snow started to fall and cover the ground in a light dusting of white. Snowflakes glistened in the streetlights and the headlights of my VW bug; it was one of those magical winter moments when there is a quiet; a calm, and all seems well with the world.

I looked to my right and there was Cole's Ladies Shoppe. My mother had always talked about Cole's. “The most fashionable boutique in Columbus,” she would say. Whenever she needed something special, she went to Cole's.

In the window a spotlight shone on an ice blue chiffon evening gown. I recognized it as an Empress Josephine style. The chiffon gathered in the center, just under the bust line—held together by a dazzling blue broach.

It was the most beautiful dress I had ever seen. I stared, knowing I had found the perfect gown for my beautiful wife.

When Janice got in the car, I said, “Hurry, I have a surprise. I think I have found the dress. We have to get to Cole's before it closes.”

We made it just before closing. Inside, I looked at the price tag—a fortune.

“If they have it in your size, try it on,” I said.

“Can we afford this?” came the response as Janice entered the changing room. I nodded yes.

The gown fit, the deal was done; we bought the dress. I don't remember the price; I just remember thinking the price was exorbitant. I don't think I told Janice how much it cost.

On New Year's Eve we arrived a little late in Chillicothe. After introductions, Mary Kay's parents told us to change so we would not miss our dinner reservations.

Upstairs we went.

It did not take us long to get dressed, and Janice left the bedroom ahead of me. She waited on the balcony overlooking the circular stairs descending to the black and white foyer.

“Hurry,” she said. And hurry I did, tying my tie as I followed her.

I stopped at the head of the stairs and watched my wife go down the steps, a soft cloud of vibrant blue trailing behind her.

She stopped at the foot of the stairs, looked up, smiled and said, “Come on, we’re keeping everyone waiting.” The blue cloud settled gently to the floor around her feet.

I was mesmerized. Looking down at one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen, I fell in love all over again.

At dinner I felt all eyes were on Janice and the blue dress. My chest beat with pride. The meal was perfect: fine linen, silver, china. We basked in the moment.

From dinner we moved to the ballroom. The music started. The first dance was a waltz.

Janice and I stepped onto the dance floor and waited a moment for the beat of the music. We began to move to strains of the orchestra, our bodies in perfect synchrony with Strauss’s “Blue Danube.”

As we moved across the floor, the blue chiffon wrapped around my legs as if to pull me closer to the woman I loved. The dress held us in a lover’s embrace.

Round and round we spun, engulfed in billowing blue. One by one other couples stopped and stepped aside to watch us.

I was transported to a time of elegance and grandeur, dancing with my Josephine. I was filled with a passion I had rarely known.

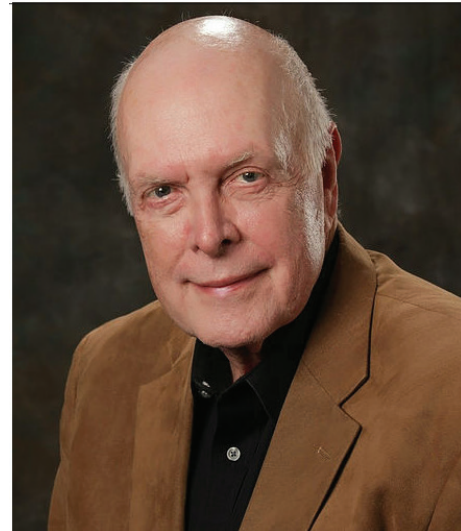
It was a moment in time, one of life’s unforgettable experiences.

Now, over fifty years later, our granddaughter stands in front of us wearing the same blue dress, waiting for a young man to take her to her high school prom. The alterations cost three times the original price, but they are worth every penny. The smile on her face is worth a fortune. She twirls around and around, the dress flowing gently behind her, and I close my eyes.

I see Janice descending the staircase in that blue dress; I am transported back to a time of pure, uncluttered love. I can still see her dark brown eyes

looking up at me; I can see her smile. I hear the music and feel her body next to mine. With my eyes closed, I can see the blue dress and my beautiful wife; I fall in love all over again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



David Cariens is a retired CIA officer--31-year career. Most of his time at the Agency was spent as a political analyst dealing with Eastern Europe. In this capacity he wrote for all levels of the U.S. government—from the President to the working level analysts and policymakers.

Cariens served in Eastern Europe and as an editor at the BBC-FBIS facility outside London. He headed the CIA University program to teach new analysts writing and briefing skills. He also served on the Agency’s Inspector General’s staff.

Cariens teaches Intelligence Analysis and Writing for the FBI, the U.S. Treasury Department’s Financial Crime Center (FinCEN) and has taught for members of the U.S. Intelligence Community.

Cariens is a victims’ rights advocate; he takes no money for his work on behalf of school shooting victims and their families.

For more information about Dave’s books and upcoming events, visit his website at:

WWW.DAVECARIENS.COM



A WEDDING TO REMEMBER

CINDY L. FREEMAN

One spring day in 1956, Mom announced that her cousin would be getting married in New York City. She said my older sister, Marion, and I would be allowed to attend the wedding.

For two naïve country girls who had seldom left our dairy farm in Central New York, it promised to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. When Mom added that our little brothers were too young for such a sophisticated affair, this seven-year-old felt ever-so-grown up.

I learned that Mom's cousin was to marry a Catholic girl. My childish logic deduced that "Catholic" must mean "rich" because Mom said the wedding would be a large, lavish affair in one of Manhattan's most elaborate cathedrals, and the reception would be held at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel.

We would need new clothes.

My mother started sewing immediately and spent every waking moment fashioning our elegant matching dresses of blue organza.

She took us shopping for patent-leather shoes, fluffy petticoats, white gloves, and Easter-style hats with blue velvet ribbons streaming down the back. Marion and I could hardly wait for our exciting experience. But I felt anxious, too, since I was unaccustomed to settings more sophisticated than our tiny country church with its peeling paint and rickety altar.

Finally, the anticipated day arrived. Mom packed our outfits in tissue paper, along with Dad's pristine suit and her own new dress of lavender taffeta--more creations from her Singer sewing machine.

After Dad studied a map with meticulous consideration, we piled into our navy-blue Nash Ambassador and off we went, headed for The Big Apple.

“I wished my patent leather shoes were strapless like Marion’s and that they had little heels like hers but grudgingly accepted Mom’s explanation of why older girls were permitted to wear grown-up clothes sooner than their younger sisters.”

After a three-hundred-mile drive that took most of the day, we arrived in The City. The tall buildings, unfamiliar odors, dense traffic, and deafening noise overwhelmed me. Amid honking horns and wailing sirens, hordes of people scurried in all directions. I could almost hear them chattering, “I’m late, I’m late! For a very important date.”

Dad located the hotel where we would spend the night and parked in an underground garage. The hotel was nothing like I had imagined. It was old and musty with no elevator to carry us to the third floor. We climbed and climbed until we reached the dingy room and tiny bathroom that the four of us would share. One window overlooked the busy street in front of our hotel and the other a dark, narrow

alley. A double bed, two cots, and a chair completed the room's sparse furnishings. I began to question my mother's interpretation of “lavish” and “elaborate” and was relieved to learn this hotel was not the Waldorf Astoria.

Mom had brought a box of Wheaties for our breakfast, along with a small, covered pail of milk. She opened a window and set the pail on the sill, so the cool night air would keep it from souring before morning. She had packed bowls, cups, spoons, and a small electric percolator, too. I didn't have to ask why we couldn't eat breakfast in the hotel's dining room, nor would I risk precipitating one of Dad's harangues about how ridiculously expensive everything was. Having lived through the Great Depression, he was frugal to a fault.

Sleep eluded me, partly because I was excited about the wedding, but mostly because of the blinking neon signs and relentless traffic noise. After tossing and turning for half the night, I devised a plan. I tiptoed to the bathroom, tore off pieces of toilet tissue, and, stuffing them in my ears, returned to my cot. I pulled the covers over my head and finally fell asleep. When Mom shook me awake the next morning, I felt groggy. As I slumped over the edge of the cot, trying to force my eyes open, I removed the tissue plugs from my ears. Mom, Dad, and Marion enjoyed a good laugh at my ingenuity, and I pretended not to revel in the attention.

We ate our cereal and unrefrigerated milk (which I left in the bottom of the bowl). Not a fan of milk to begin with, I couldn't stomach it at room-temperature. Mom washed the dishes in the bathtub while my sister and I donned our beautiful new frocks and accessories.

I wished my patent leather shoes were strapless like Marion's and that they had little heels like hers but grudgingly accepted Mom's explanation of why older girls were permitted to wear grown-up clothes sooner than their younger sisters.

My mother looked exquisite in her lavender taffeta dress with its peek-a-boo back and perfectly tailored matching jacket. She had worn pink, spongy curlers in her hair all night, and now the shiny brunette curls emerged from under her pillbox hat, framing her pretty face.

Dad had planned to wear his one-and-only navy-blue uniform, the suit he saved for weddings and funerals, but Mom insisted on making him a seersucker suit for the occasion. How different he looked without his usual farmer's coveralls, denim cap, and knee-high boots! He smelled good, too. Usually, I avoided contact with my father because he smelled like the farm animals and their waste. Now, I decided that, if invited, I would gladly accept his hugs and sit on his lap. Mom straightened Dad's tie, gave one final tug at the seams of her fine handiwork, and pecking him on the cheek, told him he looked handsome.

We re-packed our overnight bags and headed downstairs to the gloomy lobby to check out. As Dad was paying our bill, I overheard the clerk mention, with a chuckle, something about an Easter parade, but I caught only the tail-end of his comment. I was too busy watching the other guests who all seemed wealthy and important.

Dad located our car in the garage, loaded our bags in the trunk, and after checking a map of the city, drove across town. Having lived in the country his whole life, he complained about the traffic and city life. "Why would anyone want to live in a big city? It's so noisy, dirty, and crowded!" Mom tried to read the map while placating Dad, pointing out sights to her girls, and reminding us to be on our best behavior. Finally, we located the mammoth Gothic cathedral where the ceremony would take place.

When Marion and I spotted the austere stone building, we were held spell-bound by its grandeur. We had arrived an hour early, giving us time to walk about the grounds and appreciate the impressive edifice that filled a whole city block. Dad mumbled something about "rich people showing off" but I paid little attention. I was engrossed in my fantasy of princess brides, prancing horses, and gilt carriages like I had seen on *The Wonderful World of Disney*. Inside the stone-walled courtyard surrounding the property, I spotted a lush manicured lawn dotted with elaborate fountains, stone benches, and colorful flower beds. On that perfect summer morning, sunlight squeezed through the leafy tree limbs, spotlighting a verdant stage below.

Soon a long white limousine pulled up to the curb. Only in television movies had I seen such a posh

vehicle. Out stepped the most exquisite bride! If truth be told, her long face with its sizable aquiline nose wasn't especially pretty, but her gown with its yards of luxurious fabric, long train, and filmy veil made up for any deficit in the bride's countenance. A sparkling tiara like the one in my recurring daydream held the veil in place. As the young woman arranged her ample skirt, I noticed the hem retained its perfect circular shape with the help of a hoop that bobbed to-and-fro when she walked. I wondered how she had managed to squeeze it through the car door.

Next, the bridesmaids alighted, one after the other, carrying generous bouquets of white roses and trailing greenery. Marion elbowed my arm as if to say, "Do you see what I see?" We stood in silent amazement as six identically garbed attendants exited, and a sea of pink chiffon poured onto the sidewalk. Six satin headpieces balanced atop the women's matching up-dos. Like water billowing from a fountain, pink netting erupted from each headpiece where it was fastened with a sprig of baby's breath. As graceful pink waves flowed up the steps, disappearing into the church, I was sure I would never again witness a more enchanting vision.

Once we stepped inside, Marion and I could scarcely contain our wonderment. Surely, we had entered the set of one of Ziegfeld's elaborate, over-the-top stage revues we sometimes watched on our black-and-white TV. I peeked from behind Mom's skirt into the endless nave, feeling dwarfed by the high arched ceiling with its flying buttresses. The entire cavernous space was awash in white flowers, flickering candles, and billowy pink bows. When a tuxedoed usher offered his arm to my mother, Dad fell in step behind the pair. In a moment of panic, I realized no one had briefed me as to proper etiquette for such a formal occasion. Would Marion and I be escorted by ushers? Were we supposed to follow behind our parents or wait for the usher to return for us? Would Dad give us a signal? Fortunately, my sister, always the acting cruise-director, grabbed my arm and nudged me forward.

Once our family settled at the end of a pew about halfway down the long aisle, I discovered I couldn't see past the extravagant hats adorning every woman in front of us. So, Mom allowed me to stand in the aisle. "Stay close," she warned, pulling me snugly

against the side of the pew. Soon glorious pipe organ music poured from every crevice of the hallowed space. Again I stood in awe. “Close your mouth,” Mom whispered, tapping my chin.

Marion giggled into her cupped hands and rolled her eyes as if to say, “You’re such a dweeb!” Before I had a chance to scowl at her, the music halted. I jerked my head this way and that way to see what was happening. At the rear entrance, the bridesmaids stood in perfect pairs, waiting for a signal. I turned toward the altar, where the tuxedoed groom and four groomsmen moved into place. Next, two ushers walked the long aisle toward the back, unrolling a white cloth runner along the floor. “Squeak, squeak,” it sang as it passed row after row of guests. Once the ushers completed their task, the music resumed, and the pairs of bridesmaids processed in seamless synchrony. Step-touch, step-touch, step-touch. I was tempted to reach out and graze the inviting pink clouds as they passed, but I resisted, sensing that such a brazen move would jeopardize my prime vantage point. For once in my young life, I was content to remain an invisible observer.

Only the flower girl took notice of me. As she and the tiny ring-bearer passed, the girl smiled and dropped a few rose petals on my shiny new shoes. I responded with a slight wave of my gloved fingers, and for the first time since arriving, felt almost like I belonged in this opulent setting. When the miniature couple reached the front, the music stopped again. Now the bride and the man I assumed was her father appeared in the arched entrance at the rear of the church. An open door behind them framed their silhouettes in halos of sunlight. Like they had rehearsed it, the congregants stood with a unison “whoosh” and the music resumed, this time with increased grandeur.

With the bride’s face now covered in white netting, she was a lovely sight, indeed. Awash in multi-colored sunbeams, she and her proud escort began their long, slow procession toward the chancel. When the bride’s skirt brushed past me, I hugged the pew to keep from being knocked over by its voluminous fabric and swaying hoop.

Finally, the couple reached its destination and the interminable service began—Mom called it a Mass. It was boring, especially since the priest spoke in a

language I didn’t understand. The chant-like singing was strange and unfamiliar, causing my seven-year-old imagination to stray to thoughts of my own future wedding. I would be the most beautiful bride! My train would flow for miles, my veil trimmed with delicate lace. Masses of flowers and cascading greenery would fill the church. Oh! The church—that sad little country chapel with its peeling paint and an aisle so short that, even if we marched very slowly, my father and I would reach the rickety altar before the organist finished her introductory fanfare. Never mind. I’d have plenty of time to work out the details.

Halfway through the Mass, a collective gasp jolted me from my reverie. Glancing around to see what was happening, I noticed most of the women covering their eyes and snickering into their gloved hands. I climbed down from the pew to reclaim my observation post.

When the bride and groom knelt at the altar for the most dignified part of the service, no one was prepared for the scene before them. It was obvious the wedding planner had not predicted what would happen to the bride’s hoop-skirted gown when she dropped to her knees in prayer. There, encased in a perfect round frame for all her guests to see, was the bride’s silky white underwear, garters and all. Frantically, she reached behind, trying unsuccessfully to lower the hoop. I stared aghast at the sight, unable to fathom how a bride, on her most important day, might ever recover from such a horrifying turn of events.

With heads bowed and eyes closed, the wedding party stood oblivious to the bride’s embarrassing display. But, as soon as the priest uttered, “Amen” and heads bobbed up, all denial vanished. Now, the maid of honor and her court scrambled into position, trying to salvage whatever dignity they could. Two attempts to lower the bride’s skirt failed. Each time the hoop sprang back to its cylindrical shape. As a befuddled priest tried to carry on, the attendants formed a barrier of pink chiffon around the bride’s backside. At last, decorum was restored. That is, until attention shifted to the aisle where a seven-year-old girl stood gripping the pew and shaking uncontrollably.

How the urge managed to possess me so completely, I can never explain. The shaking started in my toes and worked its way up in powerful giggles. With a muffled slap, both hands flew to my mouth, but there was no containing it. Like Mount Vesuvius spewing forth lava, gales of laughter erupted, echoing off the marble floor. Marion snorted into her palms, but our mortified parents were not amused. Mom pulled me toward her and, covering my mouth, pushed my face into her lap to shush me. When, at last, I regained enough composure to look up, the moment had passed, but not before I had thoroughly embarrassed my parents.

That was the moment the fantasy of my own wedding took a detour. Right then, I resolved that the skirt of my perfect princess gown would not include a hoop; and my guest list would most certainly exclude unpredictable children.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



CINDY L. FREEMAN

Writing is only one of Cindy Freeman's passions, along with singing, piano playing, teaching, and choral conducting. She didn't write her first novel until after retiring from a long career in music education and music ministry. But she has been writing poems, stories, and journal entries since she was knee-high to her elementary school librarian. Cindy also edits for High Tide Publications.

In her novels, Cindy tackles challenging social issues like child abuse, domestic abuse, substance abuse, and homelessness. But really her novels are about strong women overcoming adversity to find hope, help and healing. She wrote her latest book, *After Rain, Devotions for Comfort and Peace* in response to the pandemic. She and High Tide Publications are donating all proceeds from the sale of this book to Hospice House and Support Care of Williamsburg, Virginia.

Cindy and her husband, Carl, live in James City County, Virginia. They have two amazing children and five favorite grandchildren.

You can learn more about her writing journey on her website:

WWW.CINDYLFREEMAN.COM



LADY LOUISE

GWEN KEANE

The sun had risen, and although it was early May, the intense heat sank hard into the human flesh lying on the pavement. Amy's office window overlooked the alley. Her office building was next door to the CVS Pharmacy on Massachusetts Avenue at DuPont Circle in Washington, DC, where Margaret kept house.

Amy and Margaret had met six years ago when Margaret worked for an interior design company two blocks from Amy's office. Margaret, vibrant, happy and very talented helped decorate Amy's apartment. Amy liked her ideas, but they never became close friends. Sometimes they met at Starbucks and over a coffee discussed the newest design trends.

Then Margaret disappeared. Amy assumed she had gotten a new job and moved on. But three years ago when walking to work, Amy saw a bag lady. She recognized the woman with wire-like gray hair resting at her waist and her long willowy figure as Margaret. She was clothed in layers of garments. Amy tried talking to her, but Margaret did not speak rationally.

After weeks of observing Margaret's movements, Amy learned that she went to the church around the corner on Tuesdays to bathe or wash her clothes. So, when the top layer of Margaret's clothes got dirty, she discarded it in the trash can at the corner. Margaret had always been an inventive person.

Margaret slept sitting up against the brick wall within view of Amy's office window. When awakened, she immediately felt around for the CVS plastic bags that held her treasures. Occasionally she stood, walked toward the street, and turned around to study the placement, height, width, and depth of each bag. Sometimes she even moved a bag, but most of the time Margaret seemed satisfied that each bag had been appropriately placed and that her artistic talent of having once been a professional decorator showed well.

On this morning, like all week-day mornings, Amy went to Starbucks and bought two coffees, one for Margaret and one for herself. As she approached Margaret, she saw that she was not quite awake. Slowly Margaret leaned forward in response to Amy's soft voice calling her name. Opening her eyes into the blinding sun that burned against her skin, she tried to focus on the face of the young woman stooped down in front of her. Margaret struggled to adjust her eyes to the sunlight while Amy continued to speak softly. "Margaret, Margaret, it's me Amy. Here...I've brought you some hot coffee and a muffin. It's your favorite Margaret, cranberry orange."

Now fully conscious, Margaret responded to the creature that had just placed a cup of hot coffee and a brown paper bag beside her.

"Who the hell do you think you are--coming into my home--invading my privacy? Margaret? I know no Margaret! I am Lady Louise! Move on! Get out of here! Get out of my face! Did you hear me? I said, "Get out of my face!" It was the same every morning.

Amy backed away and while walking to her office still could hear Margaret's raging voice. "Bitch! Why does she keep coming here day after day, calling me Margaret? How many times do I have to tell her I am Lady Louise? This is my home! I've got so much work to do. I just can't stand these stupid ass people who are always getting in my face."

At the office, Amy, in spite of the heat, raised the window a little, so she could hear and see Margaret. She thought of herself as Margaret's guardian. How silly was that! She really didn't know this woman and certainly couldn't be responsible for her. And what if someone harmed her or she got sick on a weekend? Amy wouldn't be there for her. But, she just could not turn her back on the woman.

Amy looked down at Margaret and watched as she tightly wrapped her fingers around the paper cup. First she picked it up, sniffing the contents, and then she took a sip. This was Margaret's ritual. "Well, it seems okay. Not bad coffee and it's even hot. Guess the whole world must now take their coffee with two sugars and cream. How else would my coffee be just as I like it?" Using her index finger and thumb, she held up the corner of the paper bag then set it back down. After peeping inside, she removed the muffin. "Oh, thank you, little brown bag. Just what I like--my favorite." She took a bite. "Delicious." Margaret then abandoned the coffee and muffin.

Amy still could hear Margaret speaking loudly. "Now that I've been interrupted from my pleasant state of being, I guess I'll tidy up the place. Can't get my work done when I'm surrounded by clutter. Clutter interrupts my concentration. But I really don't live with clutter. I live with my treasures."

Margaret slowly opened the CVS bag next to her and removed an empty plastic water bottle. As she examined it she continued to talk loudly. "Look at this. Hum, an essential element of life. Good. I like powerful words." Continuing to converse with herself, Margaret wondered aloud why anyone would throw away this bottle. She then examined a candy bar wrapper, "Because everyone knows candy is bad for you and Lady Louise, who possesses power, didn't eat the candy bar. Someone else did."

“Judy, Judy, my precious pet. Are you the one who ate the candy? I see teeth marks on the wrapper or maybe they belong to one of your friends. I hate the others you hang out with, Judy. You need to be more careful. You know that mean man comes around here all the time looking for you. I always protect you, Judy. I tell him, ‘No rats here! Bug off, you S.O.B!’ Ha! See Judy? I am a powerful woman with special powers. I am Lady Louise.”

Now, having lost interest in her rat, Margaret began to stare at the filled upright CVS plastic bags that surrounded her. “Oh, too many treasures to look at today. I think I’ll sit here in my little home and... just think.” Suddenly, she sat up straight. “That’s right! Today I start my campaign. I am going to keep people from making right turns on red.” Her words were silenced when she noticed the stranger standing at her feet staring down at her.

Amy, who had been intent on answering emails, forgot about Margaret until she heard her thunderous voice.

“And who the hell are you? Why are you looking at me, mister? Haven’t you ever seen a lady before? Don’t you dare come any closer! This is my home, and I did not invite you here. Can’t you see I’m a very busy lady?” As Margaret’s voice increased in volume, Amy returned to the window.

“I am a powerful lady!” Margaret shouted. “I make things happen. That’s right! No more right turns on red! As the man backed away and ran, she continued to shout. “I am going to stop all of that from happening...all over this city! A lady needs to feel safe when she crosses the street! Do you understand? I just said no more right turns on red, you stupid coward! Run you bastard! I didn’t invite you into my home! Go away, you evil sick person!

Amy, looking down from her window, watched the man back away and run.

No longer bothered by human interference, Margaret again picked up her cup of coffee. Slowly she sipped it and watched Judy and the other rats devour her muffin. “Damn coffee’s cold. Why can’t I ever get a good hot cup of coffee?” Margaret tilted the cup and watched the liquid splash onto the pavement.

Clouds formed and the sky darkened. A soft rain began to fall. Picking up the empty CVS bag that no longer held the discarded water bottle or candy wrapper, Margaret pulled the bag down over her head, and began to doze off mumbling something about trash bins and cardboard boxes.

The last thing Amy heard Margaret say before she fell asleep was “And tomorrow I will stop traffic because I am Lady Louise.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



GWEN KEANE was born and raised in the Northern Neck of Virginia. She has a Master’s Degree from Georgetown University in Public Administration. She retired from her federal career as a civilian employee with the U.S. Navy, with ten years as the Deputy Inspector General for the Naval Sea Systems Command. She has written three books: *Swan Wait*, *Local Color*, and *How Cowboy Found His Forever Home*.

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THE PERILS OF A PRE-TEEN

EDWARD W. LULL

My folks did not have an easy life. They were married in the high times of the twenties, but faced the hard times of the thirties as parents of three young boys. My dad never got to high school; he had to be an earner. His father died in his forties, leaving his mother with five children to raise. During the Great Depression, Dad was a guard at the Pennsylvania State Penitentiary, a piano mover, a truck driver, and finally a full-time traveling salesman.

My mother migrated from an orphanage in Canada, to a nurse trainee in Buffalo, to a telephone operator in Pennsylvania, and finally to a full-time mom. For her, having birthed three boys in less than four years, and with none of the modern appliances or conveniences, running a household was indeed a full-time job.

With this bit of background, let me move forward to the early nineteen forties. It was summertime in Northeastern Pennsylvania, and my brother Bob, age ten, and I, age nine, enjoyed hiking. One day Bob proposed that we explore “the jungle,” a section of woods filled with trees and vines that resembled a scene from a *Tarzan* movie. It was sunny and the hike there went quickly; it was only a couple of miles from home. As we entered the forest, the dense growth hid the sun and made hiking slow and tiring. Suddenly, we broke into a clearing with no trees, just a small field of straw. While resting, Bob produced a book of matches, and said, “Let’s build a campfire.” He must have had the campfire idea in his mind from the start, or why else would he have brought matches? Instead of stating the obvious--what a bad idea it was--I said, “Good idea!”

Bob found a circular strip of metal from an old wooden barrel and laid it in the middle of the field, announcing that the ring would prevent the campfire from spreading. Remember, this was a field of straw! The campfire looked rather nice...for about ten seconds, after which we both began stomping on the flames that failed to appreciate the fact that they were supposed to remain inside the ring. Within a minute, we were running full throttle to avoid the hell we had created. On the way home, we heard fire engines. We agreed that there was no possibility that this incident could end well. Our strategy: tell Mother everything and depend on her mercy and protection.

Mother listened patiently, asked a few questions, then said, “Each of you go to your room, close the door, and stay there until I call you. I can’t promise anything, but I will talk to the police *when* they come.” The two hours I spent behind that closed door reminded me that I was a felon and could spend the night in a cell. I stared at my bedroom door, wondering if the next person to come through would be my mother with a ruler, my father with fire in his eyes, or a policeman carrying handcuffs.

When Mother called us to dinner, we came downstairs. Dad greeted us in the hall and said quietly, “I hope you boys learned something today.” That was it! Bob and I looked at each other, said nothing, but fought hard not to show the immense relief we felt. I don’t recall ever again speaking of this incident but have marveled at the restraint my parents showed.

A few years later, following up on an important employment opportunity, Dad took a job where his sales region would be Upstate New York and New England. We moved from North Wales, Pennsylvania to Greenwich, New York, a small village northeast of Troy. This would be the venue for my final formative pre-teen years. My two brothers and I made friends quickly and soon adopted this bucolic setting as home.

The summer after moving to Greenwich, my two older brothers and I had established good friendships with other boys in the neighborhood. One day, a friend of my brother, Bob, suggested that we go for a swim at The Cove. That sounded good, although we hadn’t been there before. Bob, his friend, and I hiked to the location for a refreshing dip in a peaceful cove in the fast-flowing Battenkill River. Bob was a swimmer; I hadn’t learned to swim yet.

I cautiously sat on a flat rock at the edge of the water watching the swimmers splashing around enjoying the coolness of the water on this hot day. I noted that the boys could walk across the outer perimeter of the cove without swimming. I reasoned that it would be shallow enough for me to walk across the cove closer to shore. As logical as this seemed, I was soon to learn--I was wrong.

Between the outer perimeter and the shore, I slipped into the water and began a dog paddle. About halfway across, I tired, stopped my stroke and let my feet sink; they did not touch bottom. My head sank beneath the surface; I hadn’t taken a breath. I panicked! I began gasping for air and flailing around. The prospect of drowning in the midst of other youngsters enjoying their swim seized me. Suddenly, someone grabbed me and tried to pull me out. Instead, with my adrenaline flowing, I pulled him under. In a blur of terror, I felt a strong hand come under my chin. It pulled my head above water and towed me to shore. They laid me out on a rock, coughing and spitting up water. I was saved by a Boy Scout with life-saving training. The one who got to me first, the one I pulled under, was my brother Bob.

Thoroughly shaken by the experience, that day I committed myself to: Learn to swim, I did; join the Boy Scouts, I did; learn life saving techniques, I did.

As time went on, the key part of the incident that emerged was not that an older, skilled lifesaver had pulled me out with apparent ease, it was that the first one to get to me and risk his life to save me was my brother. I haven't forgotten. I never will. Incidentally, we both agreed that to tell Mother about what occurred that day would serve no useful purpose--and would probably lead to a more restrictive environment. That would be an unacceptable outcome for us.

A year later, I had become a Boy Scout and had learned to swim.

As a skinny, twelve-year-old Boy Scout, I was tenting at Camp Wakpominiee in the Adirondacks for the second time. My brother and two friends planned to swim the length of Sly Pond, then back to camp. They invited me to join them; never being one to turn down a dare or challenge, I agreed. It was estimated to be a mile and a quarter, much farther than I ever swam before.

What was I thinking!

Five of us boarded the safety boat that would accompany us. At the end of the lake four of us slipped into the water and began with a crawl stroke. However, before swimming much time or distance, I tired and had to resort to less strenuous strokes (side or back strokes). Soon I was lagging the others, and the distance between us grew. As the leaders approached the turning point where they would change course and do the final leg back to the camp, I could hardly see them. The scout in the "safety" boat must have thought his mission was to outpace all swimmers back to camp; he was no use to me.

When I lolly-gagged around the turn, I saw the others leaving the water, walking toward tents; the boat tied up at the pier. I was now alone on Sly Pond, stick-like arms lead weights, and a feeling in my stomach that bordered on panic. Looking around the lake and the shoreline, I now saw absolutely no one. I rolled onto my back trying to relax and recommit myself to finishing - and surviving. From there on, I stayed with the slow strokes like the elementary backstroke where I barely had to use my arms at all. My glacial pace finally got me to the pier. I didn't

have enough strength to pull myself out, so I went hand-over-hand on the pier until my feet touched bottom. The fear had been replaced with anger. Looking for my brother, I wanted to accuse him of attempted fratricide. However, when I found him, remembering that he was my brother, I said, "Sorry I was so slow out there."

Later that year, we had a great snow storm in November. I had never seen such white beauty in my earlier years in Pennsylvania. I was in the sixth grade and Chester Gazerowski, my Polish, fourteen-year-old classmate, invited me to come to his farm for a Saturday afternoon. He would show me around the farm, introduce me to farm life, and later, we could hike in the surrounding woods. My dad drove me there in our green 1940 Chevy sedan.

Chester's father was not at home when we arrived, and later, when we were ready to hike, Chester produced two 22-caliber rifles for us to carry. His mother delivered some not-too-gentle words in Polish, probably voicing opposition to taking out the rifles. Chester responded in kind; apparently a teenage son carried more weight in the Polish household than I did in mine. So, off we went, rifles in hand; he had a clip gun, mine was a single shot.

After hiking through the snow for an hour or so, we began heading back toward the farm house. Since we hadn't fired the guns yet, Chester set up a piece of wood for a target, and we backed off and fired a few rounds. It was exciting since, at age twelve, I had no experience with guns. He then suggested we unload the rifles and trudge the final hundred yards or so across a meadow to his home. I removed my shell from the chamber and he removed his clip. However, he forgot to remove the round in the chamber.

Chester started fooling around with his rifle, pointing it at me, and *CRACK* his rifle fired; a searing pain in my groin sat me down in the snow. Chester panicked; he ran first toward home, then turned around and headed back toward me. I said, "Go, get help!" He ran to the house, screaming, and soon returned with his father who had come home while we were hiking. He was a small man but had the look of a strong, weathered farmer. They half carried, half dragged me across a field through slippery snow, up a steep embankment, and across a road, finally reaching the house and the warmth of their parlor.

By this time, Chester's eighteen-year-old sister had called my folks. As Chester and his father laid me on the couch, the sister said in a commanding voice, "Don't touch his foot." She had noticed my bloody shoe.

I touched my groin and groaned, "I'm shot here." Chester's sister hit the floor in a dead faint.

My memory is rather fuzzy at this point, but my parents arrived shortly thereafter, loaded me in the car, and headed for Cambridge Hospital at speeds that dirt roads were not built to handle. I later learned that I had lost over two quarts of blood, but I am happy to report that I survived. The bullet had severed some nerves, but no arteries, and lodged close to the upper part of my left femur. Doctors concluded that they could do more damage removing the bullet than it would cause if they left it where it was. To this day, seventy-five years later, I carry a souvenir of that bloody Saturday when I failed to "dodge a bullet."

I am sure my parents were pleased that I lived to see my thirteenth birthday. Not only had I emerged into teenagehood, but also, on that day, September 2, 1945, the treaty was signed with the Japanese on the deck of the USS Missouri, officially ending World War II. No birthday, before or since, did we have that much to celebrate! However, considering all the problems and scares I put my parents through, I wonder why they didn't take that opportunity to present me with a well-deserved birthday spanking that I would remember through teen-age years and beyond. Fortunately, I *did* dodge that bullet!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



EDWARD LULL was born in Pennsylvania and grew up in Upstate New York. He graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in the Class of 1955. His first career was as a Naval Officer with duty primarily in submarines. He earned a masters degree from The George Washington University in 1969. He retired from the Navy as Commander, USN in 1975.

After retirement from the Navy, in his second career he served in management and executive positions in small hi-tech companies in the Washington, D.C. area.

Ed began a third career as a writer at age 65. He is a former member of the Williamsburg Poetry Guild and The Williamsburg Poetry Workshop. He taught a Beginning Poetry Workshop for the Christopher Wren Association for three years. In 2008, he founded the poetry workshop, James City Poets, that continues operating today.

In 1999, Ed joined the Poetry Society of Virginia and served four terms as its President and ten years as an Executive Director. Ed attended and presented poetry programs at the annual V.A.T.E. Conference and presented poetry programs to numerous secondary schools throughout the Commonwealth. In 2012, Ed was presented the inaugural Emyl Jenkins Award "...for inspiring a love of writing and writing education in Virginia."

In 2002, Ed began a monthly program of poetry readings by invited poets on the first Saturday of the month; the Saturday Poetry Series is in its 18th year.

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THE LAST KISS

LYNN UNDERWOOD

An excerpt of a forthcoming novel entitled, *The Last Kiss*, this story explores characters from Underwood's other novels, who are now at the twilight of their lives. After Laura's passing, her spirit joins Billy in an attempt to rescue their granddaughter from an abusive relationship. Padre Juan, an enigmatic character in Underwood's other novels, talks to Laura about her vision predicting the future. The story explores how Laura Gladys' spirit rescues Billy from alcohol addiction and helps him rescue their granddaughter.

Her breath was broken and labored now. Her eyes closed, she remained just as beautiful to him as when they had first met thirty years before. Intellectually he knew she would not survive, but right now his heart did not agree with his intellect. Her heavy, gasping inhalation showed signs of the impending death. He knew he had to hurry to accomplish one last act of love.

“Laura, I love you,” he uttered, holding her white hand gently while reminiscing. The room was dark and quiet and smelled of disinfectant. It was empty except for the occasional hospice care nurse whose job at the moment was to ensure privacy for this couple. Joyce entered and touched Billy’s shoulder in an act of kindness he would just as soon do without. He didn’t need cheering up, for God’s sake. He had been with Laura for the last several hours, postponing meals and even bathroom trips until he couldn’t wait any longer.

Laura murmured something incoherent as her lips smacked repeatedly. He assumed it was the drugs. He then saw her lips purse, her tongue moistening her mouth. It was now or never, he knew. Just then, he recalled their first kiss. It was more of a peck on the cheek along with a cordial embrace, but it captured his whole being. He remembered having to struggle to maintain composure so the youthful beauty of fifty-one would not notice the effect she was having on him. He never let on or even told her later how much he was overwhelmed by her bidding him goodnight on that first date. And every kiss since seemed to have the same effect. “She was magic,” he whispered, then quickly scolded himself for using the past tense.

“Laura, you taught me how to love. I learned what love is from you,” Billy said, then noticed that Joyce had been in the room adjusting instruments at the end of the bed. When he locked eyes with her, she quickly lowered hers, appearing apologetic for her unintentional eavesdropping. He addressed her, somehow needing to explain himself.

“You see, I was divorced and an emotional wreck when I met Laura. I felt betrayed and lost faith in my dream of a happy life with a partner. I was hell-bent on remaining a bachelor for the rest of my life. I fell into drinking and drugs...to escape, I guess. That sure as hell didn’t work. Then one day, I heard Sheryl Crow’s rendition of Rod Stewart’s song, ‘The

First Cut is the Deepest.’” Pausing to glance back at his wife’s face, he continued, “In the song, there’s a line about trying to love again.” Now Billy’s tears dripped on Laura’s bed sheets. He noticed that Joyce remained immobile and transfixed on the story. So, he continued.

“I gave Laura my heart with that first kiss, and she’s taken care of me and nourished me with love ever since.”

He moved his gaze back to Laura. “I never knew what love was until Laura. She remade me. I felt whole again. I stopped with the bottle. Now I only drink on special occasions, and I don’t miss it. It had to be her love that saved me.

“I sometimes affectionately called her by her middle name, Gladys, ‘Glad’ for short because she always was. I told her how much she made me glad all the time. But the truth is that she made everyone around her glad. People were always drawn to her. She was the best.” The emotional pain in his viscera hit him as he realized he had done it again. He used the past tense, and yet this beautiful woman was still alive and still giving him joy with her blind gaze behind closed eyes.

“I will love you for the rest of my life, Glad.” As he bent down, a few inches separated their faces. He breathed in her scent as he had done so many times before and started tearing up again. He cradled her head with his two black hands and nuzzled her nose for a few seconds then moved to her lips which were still moist.

The kiss lasted only seconds but represented a lifetime for Billy. As he kissed his bride of thirty years, stillness overcame her body. He couldn’t let go. His head knew what had happened yet his heart refused to accept that she was gone. What was left was a lifeless shell of the warm human who had encompassed his entire world for a third of a century. Surprisingly, he felt happy! It shouldn’t be so, he told himself. He should be in mourning, yet he was filled with love and... happiness. How could this be?

Billy stopped crying and gained his composure as other hospice nurses entered, placing stethoscopes on Laura’s chest, verifying what they already knew. Knowing nods between them confirmed for Billy what he had felt during the kiss. Their last kiss.

He could not explain the joy he felt in his whole being. In fact, he felt absolutely giddy. He tried to mask it with a downward look so the nurses would not misunderstand his emotions. It was as if he were equally heart-broken and filled with bliss. It would be sometime before he could manage to wrap his head around the strange enigma.

“Mr. Woods, would you like some time alone with your wife?” Joyce asked. “We can leave the room for a few minutes.”

He knew he should answer yes to satisfy the societal custom, but to do so would be foolish. Laura was not there in that beautiful body. She just wasn't there. She was...somewhere else. He opened his mouth to reply. His tongue touched the roof of his mouth to say no.

“Yes, thank you. I would like some time with her.”

He found himself remembering a poem by Rumi, “but who is it now in my ear who hears my voice? Who says words with my mouth?”

The room emptied in a matter of seconds with Joyce leaving last after she removed the IV needle from Laura's arm.

“She looks *heavenly*,” he noted. He didn't know what to say to a corpse who had been his wife until a few minutes before. He started praying instead. It was awkward for him. He only went to church with Laura Gladys to be with her. His prayers for meals were rehearsed and rote. “Dear God, thank you for the blessings of the day and for this meal. Amen”

But this prayer felt different. He actually felt God's presence in the hospital room with him. It was strange. He heard himself speaking out loud, now looking around the room while still holding onto the bed rail. “God, be with me. Please stay with me. I need your help.” Releasing his grip on the bed rail and turning, his eyes swept the room as if searching for an elusive hide-and-seek player.

“You must know how I feel,” he added, now, staring at his shoes. “Helpless.”

He turned back to Laura's corpse and studied the shape of her face as he had done countless times before. “Oh Laura, I miss you. Please stay with me. Please.”

The door opened a bit to allow a sliver of light to cross the wall and window on the other side of the hospital bed. The nurse and an aide entered, and Joyce asked the most impertinent question. “Mr.

Woods, can we come in now?”

They're already in, he thought. *Why ask such a question?*

“Mr. Woods, we need to move your wife in a few minutes. It might be best if you waited outside.” He knew what they meant. They were preparing to take her to the mortuary. He slowly looked back toward Laura Gladys Woods. He noticed his teardrops on her face and suddenly became aware of the finality of the situation. This was the last he would see of his beautiful bride.

She had made arrangements, as he had, for cremation in lieu of a burial. She didn't want to sully the beautiful Earth with a needless metal casket. She wanted her ashes to be scattered in several locations. Billy had committed them to memory. First there was their beloved cabin in the mountains of the Shenandoah National Park, then the beach of the Outer Banks just after sunset when no one was around. She also wanted to reserve some ashes to be joined together with his remains after he passed away. Their ashes would be together in her family's plot in Suffolk, Virginia. It was a fitting tribute to their thirty years together. Billy agreed and had the same codicil added to his will. She had made it clear that she didn't care about a memorial service, but if he insisted, she wanted it to be joyous. She requested one hymn in particular, her favorite. It didn't have to be sung by anyone, she insisted, just played quietly. *Be Thou My Vision* was a Christian hymn of Irish origin from a poem written in the Eighth Century and translated into English in the early 1900s.

*Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art;
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.*

*Be Thou my Wisdom, and Thou my true Word;
I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord;
Thou my great Father, and I Thy true son,
Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.*

*Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise;
Thou mine inheritance, now and always;
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart,
High King of Heaven, my treasure Thou art.*

*High King of Heaven, my victory won,
May I reach Heaven's joys, O bright Heav'n's Sun!
Heart of my own heart, whate'er befall,
Still be my Vision, O Ruler of all.*

One verse had always resonated with Laura though Billy hadn't paid much attention at the time. The poet wants God to be his vision. He asks God to be present in his life whether he is awake or sleeping. Billy had always wondered what Laura found so compelling in that plea.

Inviting God into his life was not intuitive for Billy. Being a Recon Marine for ten years and seeing combat for three tours in Vietnam, often behind enemy lines, meant that his vision of God was something to be avoided...at all costs. To him, awareness of God's presence spelled doom, the end. But for Laura, he would do anything, even this most profound act of inviting God into his life. And he did. He followed her to church regularly and began to sense her innermost spiritual strength. In some ways, Laura led him to God. He saw her as God's primary ambassador. Her death sealed his arrangement with God to receive her and bless her for all eternity.

But now, he struggled with the whole God-thing. Was this merely a psychological construct in his daily life? It was not that he denied God's existence. It was more that he was not sure, even with Laura's constant urging. His answer was much like Galileo's: "I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use."

For most of his life, Billy had found solace in secular philosophy. His degree in the same subject never yielded much in the way of job prospects, but it broadened his perspective on life. He remembered a quote by Bertrand Russell that embodied his feelings on the subject. "And if there were a God, I think it very unlikely that He would have such an uneasy vanity as to be offended by those who doubt His existence."

Billy left the hospital, and as he walked toward his red Ford truck, he prayed, "God, you know my heart and my mind. Please help me keep Laura in my life." Then stopping, he peered up at the sky. It was a day or so after a new moon, and the sliver of lunar light was obscured by a wispy cloud, further darkening an already dark night. The celestial act reflected his

mood.

"God, I give up." His shoulders fell, and his head bowed in surrender. Shaking his head, he continued, "I don't know what I ever did to merit the love you showed me in Laura. I don't know how I will carry on. Please help me. I can't do this by myself."

He raised his eyes skyward just as the cloud passed, revealing a bright golden crescent that seemed to smile at him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



After thirty-four years, Lynn Underwood retired as a building official, having worked in local governments in four states and Washington, D.C. He also worked in foreign nations such as United Arab Emirates (Abu Dhabi), Afghanistan, Libya and El Salvador applying building safety principles. He sat on the Board of Directors for the International Code Council and was President of the Virginia Building and Code Officials Association.

Underwood has written nine non-fiction books about construction and the Building Code. A few years ago, he started working on a novel, *The First Stone*, his first foray into fiction writing. It was published by High Tide Publications in 2020.

He just finished building a cabin in Central Virginia nestled with a creek and a tall rock feature. His wife, Glenda and he live in Williamsburg where his other hobbies include astronomy, woodworking and photography.

Photo: Last Kiss Scultura Emilio Quadrelli, 1889, angeli di sfondo Bartolomeo Esteban Murillo, photoediting Giuseppe Tosto used with permission.



JANICE HOFFMAN



JOYCE CARR STEDELBAUER



SHARON CANFIELD DORSEY



MARY MONTAGUE SIKES

POETRY

HARBINGER

JANICE HOFFMAN

It's winter, yet the herons
and egrets stay close by
near local swamplands.
Flaming cardinals and
their duller mates pop color
into the bare branches
of the forest behind my home.
Their cousins, the rare indigo
buntings, will not return
with their brilliant blue till later.
Even the black-capped
chickadees will visit less.

But when I see the plain
brown robin, then I know
my spring catalog of birds
will return in full flock.
My early friend will come
and stalk and tug earthworms
from the ground with her
yellow beak, her blushing
breast catching my attention.
I'll hear her cheery song
and watch her hop around,
my favorite prophet sharing
hopeful omens for another day.

JANICE HOFFMAN

A LIFE PUNCTUATED

JANICE HOFFMAN

I relish the pauses in my life,
the commas, so to say—
I breathe, I rest, I refresh
with a cold glass of sweet tea
on the front porch
of my memories.

I run toward the colons:
the lists, the new beginnings,
the introductions and bodies
and conclusions of points
in time, the clarification.

I examine the question marks:
Why am I here?
What becomes of moonbeams
in the mornings?
Who still dresses in purple
on bright orange summer days?

I hate the periods, the ends
of things, moments, eras,
childhoods, milestones,
recollections, lives and loves
stolen far too soon.

But the exclamation points
scare me! Hey! Stop!
Wait a minute! They're sudden
signposts on railroad tracks,
flashing red lights,
sirens in the night.

Last weekend, I ran smack
into one: I had a heart attack!
My sentence is running out,
but I'm not finished, not ready
for that dash between my years
to end—that final punctuation.

FIRST LIGHT

JANICE HOFFMAN

Dawn is the friend of the muses. Latin proverb

The morning moon
peeks within our woods,

through still shadows,
and I hear predawn calls

among the trees as birds
echo to each other.

My dogs run toward the fence
to chase a fawn, to trail

a squirrel or rabbit, to track
the neighbor's cat, and

I am amazed. Even now,
I can see the smooth moon,

her curves rounding my sky,
a visual echo of pale luminescence

as pets and woodland creatures
regale at first light.

THE GREAT TOILET PAPER CAPER

(THREE-VERSE LIMERICK)

SHARON CANFIELD DORSEY

There once was a land held at bay
by illness that had come to stay.

We hid in our home,
too fearful to roam,
to wait for a healthy new day.

The virus of darkness did smile,
ran up and down grocery aisle.

What a great caper!
Stole toilet paper,
then hid it away in a pile.

We all wondered why it was gone.

Were we being used as a pawn?

Did powers that be
just trick you and me
into orders from Amazon?

TO HOARD OR NOT TO HOARD

SHARON CANFIELD DORSEY

Shortages come, shortages go.
The reasons are not always clear.
But why has toilet paper been
the shortage of choice for a year?

And what's the deal with Tylenol,
secured now behind lock and key?
I guess that means I should get more...
perhaps I should get two or three.

Today, there is no noodle soup.
Without it, how will we survive?
Next time I spot it on the shelf,
I'm going to buy at least five!

My bunker supplies grow and grow.
I've become obsessed with my stock.
I must stop this madness before
my boxes extend 'round the block.

OUR NEW WORLD

SHARON CANFIELD DORSEY

WE ARE FOREVER CHANGED...the coronavirus villain in this strange fairy tale is elusive, resilient, and deadly. It has taken control of our lives, locked us behind our doors. It has stolen friends and loved ones from us.

We will never walk into a movie theatre, restaurant or department store without feeling anxiety when we hear someone cough.

We will never again take for granted full shelves in grocery stores or the workers who keep those shelves filled.

We will have more respect for the skilled educators who teach and guide our children.

We will be more grateful for our jobs, even boring ones, that allow us to pay the rent and the electric bill.

We will appreciate being able to go to our doctor or dentist, get a haircut or manicure.

We will elevate all of those health care workers to superhero status along with Wonder Woman and the Avengers.

I WOULD LIKE TO THINK...we will emerge from this darkness more enlightened, more compassionate and more determined to contribute something worthwhile to our new world.

I hope we will be more aware of the “haves” and “have nots” and become activists for equality—in housing, in employment, in health care.

I hope we will finally decide that our first responders – teachers, police, firefighters, nurses – deserve to earn more money than baseball players.

I hope we will remember what clear skies look like and clean air smells like and join with the rest of the world in one last attempt to save our planet.

I hope we will all agree that science trumps conspiracy theories and refuse to be taken in by ignorance or misinformation.

I hope we will embrace the blessing of more time with our families and slow our lives enough to continue to play games and tell stories together.

I hope we will heal from the losses with stronger empathy and caring for all people.

TURQUOISE THUNDER

JOYCE CARR STEDELBAUER

Turquoise thunder still thrums in my being at summer's end,
storms lurk offshore, mysterious giants inhabit capricious clouds.

Summer seemed shorter than usual in spite of July heat
a tsunami slammed shut the door to kisses in May.
Born of sapphire skies and emerald seas, turquoise hides
deep in rock protecting pressured holding and folding
known only to the conies.

Melding fuses sea and sky into gemstone
consumes many suns setting, many moons rising.
Compressed pressure of rock on stone does not diminish beauty,
rather increases value like midnight black threads through matrix.
On this waiting day suspended between threats and warnings
feathered friends crowd my feeders and
opal butterflies trace the garden sailing freshening breezes.

Maximum winds threaten all life but slowing churning
turning back to sea spares some sandbagged coasts,
homes and crafts of all sizes are secured just as memories
of glorious sun-drenched days at sea and star-anchored nights
never to be forgotten under the milky way of tears.

JOYCE CARR STEDELBAUER

LIFE'S PUZZLE

JOYCE CARR STEDELBAUER

One-way streets
two-faced people
three point turn
four-way stop signs
five egg whites
six lanes each way
seven-mile construction
eight-mile tunnel
nine miles deer crossing
ten minutes late
road work
expect delays
double fines in work zones
one-lane bridge
next exit closed
rest stop under repair
power failure
Coke machine out of order
new traffic circles
yield to oncoming traffic
too fast
too slow
avalanche zone
watch for falling rocks
no left turn
no right turn
bridges freeze first
lookout point
no re-entry
don't feed the bears
mask up
social distance
wash hands
Zoom tomorrow

THE BALLOONS WILL FLY

JOYCE CARR STEDELBAUER

The balloons will fly, announced Al Roker with boyish glee
helmeted, a motorised tricycle, his grin as wide as 34th Street.

A blueberry morning, New York winds gusting wild and free
threatening Superman, Spongebob Squarepants and Smokey the Bear.
Snoopy keeps his eyes on the weather like a well-trained astronaut.

Yes the balloons will fly, but tethered on long ropes
sometimes high as fifty-five feet, but held closer to earth today
by marching clowns determined not to let them fly away.
Alas, Ronald McDonald suffered a gash in his long left leg
quickly rushed to balloon hospital, no need to pay.

Yes the balloons will fly, but will I?
I wonder how they are at fixing hearts? I have a hole in mine.
Grief Share classes warn of the dangers of flying solo
especially on holidays, actually almost any day,
But family and friends tethered me on strong ropes
of love, prayers and a parade of kindnesses.

Yes, balloons will fly and so will I
when Sinatra flies me to the moon
and lets me play among the stars
to let me see what spring is like
in Nerja, Jupiter and Mars.

UNDERSTANDING LIGHT

MARY MONTAGUE SIKES

I walked into the valley, and, there, I saw the snow fly.
My heart gathered forth the energy lost when I watched
A bird perched high on the limb of a white oak tree.
Wings furled, it called out to me to visit the leaf-covered ground.

This is a new journey, I said, clutching my paint brush close.
I must visit the far marsh and see the snow settle over the waters.
Brown and serene, they play magenta and purple, rushing always.
Colors plan my journey and dance among glimmering shadows.

The light is ever-changing, and I call for it to stay still.
It never does, just as peace will not be there for me or anyone.
Peaceful light among the trees reaches out to me
In a fury of forbidden sound that deadens itself beneath the leaves.

The light sings out in daytime hours with a flourish known by the trees.
Sometimes I listen to the song while my paint fills a canvas with delight.
When the colors dance and sing to me, I know the vision is truth
That one day all who see it will breathe deep in understanding.



UNDERSTANDING LIGHT - A PAINTING
40 X 40 CANVAS, ACRYLIC
BY MARY MONTAGUE SIKES



JANICE HOFFMAN

Janice holds degrees from Indiana University, teaches writing at the post-secondary level, and is published in the US and Canada. She is a member of several local and state writing groups, as well as the Poetry Society of Virginia for whom she edits *A Common Wealth of Poetry*. In 2020, the Indiana Arts Commission selected her work to include in its inaugural poetry archive.

Her books of poetry include *Soul Cookies* (High Tide Publications, 2019) and *Azaleas in October* (2021). Her children's books are *Four Fairy Friends* (2019) and *Cuatro Amigas Hadas* (2020) with *Four Fairy Friends Celebrate Christmas* forthcoming in 2021.

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MARY MONTAGUE SIKES

Monti is an author/artist who divides her attention between painting and writing.

A former correspondent for the *Newport News Daily Press* and the *Richmond News Leader*, Sikes is the author of hundreds of published feature articles and photographs.

Her paintings are in public and private collections in the United States, Canada and the Caribbean.

She is the author of nineteen books, including a series on famous southern hotels.

Her latest book, *Artful Angels*, is a collection of reflective poetry and Monti's beautiful artwork.

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SHARON CANFIELD DORSEY

Sharon is an award winning author. She has published fiction, nonfiction, juvenile fiction and poetry in magazines, newspapers, journals and anthologies. She is a member of National League of American Pen Women, Inc., James City Poets, Poetry Society of Virginia, the Chesapeake Bay Writers, and The Writers Guild of Virginia.

Sharon has received awards from Christopher Newport University Writer’s Conference, Poetry Society of Virginia, Gulf Coast Writer’s Association, and Chesapeake Bay Writers. She was a winner of the Art Lit Project, which displayed her poetry on the sidewalks of the city of Williamsburg, VA.

Sharon is author of four children’s books, *Herman, the Hermit Crab and the Mystery of the Big, Black, Shiny, Thing; Revolt of the Teacups; Buddy and Ballerina Save the Library; Buddy the Bookworm Rescues the Doomed Books*; a book of poetry, *Tapestry*; and a memoir, *Daughter of the Mountains*. Her poems are also included in an anthology, *Captured Moments*.

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JOYCE CARR STEDELBAUER

Joyce is a poet and author who lives in Williamsburg, Virginia.

She is the author of four popular inspirational books on biblical people:

- Have You Met Eve?*
- Have You Seen the Star?*
- Who Rolled the Stone?*
- Where are you Adam?.*

She has written two children’s books:

- The Awesome Alphabet Animal’s Party*
- The Angels Birthday Celebration.*

Her latest book, *A New Widow Learns - Batteries Not Included, Some Assembly Required* is due for release in May, 2021.

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