

LIFE WRITING

Spring 2026



Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Louisiana State University

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Class Instructor: Versa Stickle

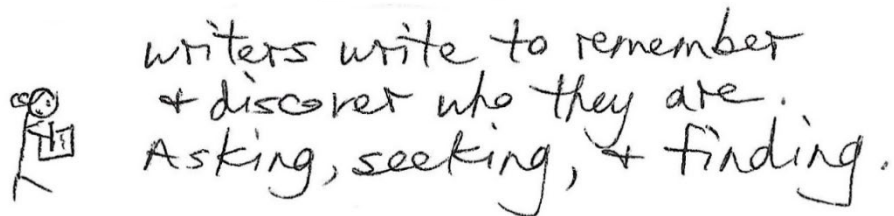
Foreword

This is a collection of stories written by participants in the LSU OLLI "Life Writing" class facilitated by Versa Stickle, a longtime attendee and class leader. During February and March 2026, we gathered to share our stories, sometimes following a writing prompt, and enjoy coffee and snacks. The wonderful attention we provided to each other, and the murmurs of appreciation and encouragement were heartfelt and often transcendent.

Enjoy these vignettes and remember to write and share your own stories.

-- Kathryn Perry, Baton Rouge, LA

Cover art by Kathleen Louper



--Versa Stickle

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Louisiana Tales



Whiskey Bay Adventure

Robin Rowan

When my grandson was younger and his Nana was living in Lafayette, Louisiana, we did our best to share him on weekends and decided that a good meeting place to make the switch would be the rest stop near Butte La Rose. It was an easy on and off spot from Interstate 10 with plenty of parking and a nice visitors center. For several years you could have found us there on most weekends.

The stretch of highway between Baton Rouge and Lafayette is notoriously unpredictable for traffic snarls that can tie you up for hours at a time since the Atchafalaya Basin Bridge over the swampy land is frequently the site of major traffic accidents. On one of my return trips, I found myself in that situation. As traffic turtled along, I grew impatient and frustrated that I couldn't get home. I called Gina to explain my predicament and declared that once I got off that horrid bridge, I would find some other way to get home that did not include the interstate. She advised against it and encouraged me to stick to the route I knew.

I continued to grow increasingly irritated that there was no hope on the horizon of ever getting up to highway speed. It was getting late in the afternoon on a winter's day, and my patience was running low. After a seeming eternity, I finally made it to the end of the bridge and lo and behold, there was my escape opportunity. I knew I had been advised to stick it out on the interstate, but the lure of another way home was just too much and as soon as I could take the off-ramp at Whiskey Bay I did.

It felt promising to be able to move forward, and as I circled around the exit ramp, I felt a sense of relief and confidence. I anticipated a short drive along the bayou that connected Whiskey Bay to Krotz Springs over on Highway 190. It was called Highway 975, which sounded civilized to me. The "highway" was paved as I started out and as I began to drive through the Sherburne Wildlife Management Area, which consists of over 46,000 acres in the Morganza Floodway system of the Atchafalaya Basin, I noticed that there didn't seem to be many cars. After the mess I had just endured on the interstate, it was nice to be traffic-free. I continued but soon realized that the pavement had ended, and I found myself on a gravel road. I was unfamiliar with Highway 975, didn't know how long it was, knew nothing of its reputation other than the fact that Whiskey Bay was known for being a dumping ground used by serial killers.

Surely, I thought, it couldn't be that far to Highway 190. I told myself that there was no reason to believe that I would happen to be on that road at the same time as a serial killer. I drove on, but the road was rough. South Louisiana had recently been through a rainy spell and the potholes in the road were filled with water. I slowed to a crawl, just like the speed I

had been making on the interstate, keeping my eyes always fixed on the road since there was murky water on both sides and I was not interested in getting personal with alligators or snakes. By then I was worried and decided to call home and admit that I had made a poor decision and would be arriving even later. I discovered that there was no cell service.

The sun was close to setting, shadows were lengthening, and I was the only person on that road. Worse yet, no one knew where I was. No one would think of looking for me in that wilderness. I gripped the wheel and followed what was steadily becoming a path, with areas so narrow from washed out gravel that I wasn't sure I could stay on solid ground. I was terrified that my wheels would slip off into the bayou or sink into the mud. There was no room to turn around, and neither could I back my way out. If the road ahead of me had been completely washed out I would be trapped. My only choice was to continue. I was afraid to go too fast in case I lost control, and I was afraid to go too slow and possibly get stuck in the muck. Glued to the steering wheel, I prayed I'd survive the mess I'd made for myself. Eyes wide, I pressed on until finally I came to the end of the eighteen-mile swamp road. When I saw the traffic on Highway 190 in front of me, I cried with relief and thanked God for civilization.

With cell service once again available, I called home and told Gina about my nightmare adventure. I apologized for not heeding her advice, took my lumps for making such a dangerous decision (I deserved the "I told you so" that time) and gratefully headed east to Baton Rouge, never so happy to see traffic and pavement.

Now, whenever I pass that road at Whiskey Bay on my way to Lafayette, I glance toward it and my stomach flips. I have absolutely no temptation to stray onto mystery "highways", at least by myself. From that experience I'm convinced that it's a good idea to listen to advice, to practice patience, and to check my tendency to be impulsive. I really hope I've learned my lessons. Gina says I can be stubborn as a mule. Mules aren't so bad. I could have used one on that road.



*Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint
of light on broken glass.*

— Anton Chekhov

JazzFesting

Kathleen Louper

Prompt: Saying “yes”

I hadn’t bothered to wear sunscreen, and it was sweltering. There was no shade; it was muddy and I should have been totally miserable. Instead, I was being transported to a very good place by the sights, smells and sounds surrounding me. I had accepted my friend’s invitation on a whim. We were both young college students at the time and when she mentioned that the event was also free or would have a next to nothing cover charge, I was all in. The year was 1972 and I was attending the first ever New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival that would be held out on the Fair Grounds Racecourse.

The atmosphere that day was totally New Orleans. Smiling people were swaying, clapping and dancing to the beat. Blankets were laid on any dry surface that could be found, making the scene look like some crazy giant patchwork quilt. I can’t recall specific performances and the stages were few. Finding anyone selling food and drink was nearly impossible. Bathroom facilities were scarce. Still by the end of that day, I was exhausted yet exhilarated, vowing to return the following year.

Somehow that following year turned into fifty-three years later, April 2025. By this time in my life I was retired, widowed, and just trying to piece my life back together. Then in early March I received a very interesting call from my Florida brother, Chis.

“Kathy, would you care to join Patricia and me at JazzFest next month? I’ll have weekend passes and all expenses but meals will be paid.”

“Uh, I think I can make room on my calendar for that, yes!”

“Great! I will get back with you on the details.”

Whoa, mentally I was already packing sunscreen, hats, umbrellas, ponchos and comfortable shoes. The weeks passed quickly and about 14 days before our adventure I got another call from Chris.

“Kathy, I ordered 3 wristbands but 4 came in the mail. Do you know anyone that would care to join us?”

“Hum, let me think about that and get back to you.”

Who did I know that would adore the experience of being surrounded by music, food and New Orleans culture for 4 days? Our California and recently retired sister, Jenny! Being a

former high school band nerd but moving away before she ever got the chance to get to JazzFest, she seemed like the perfect choice.

The hilarity was in the swiftness of her response. Using the phrase “shock and awe” would be the best way to describe her reaction. I would say that it took her less than ten minutes to book her flight. This was meant to be!

As I’ve gotten older, time spent with my siblings is always precious, and the days spent with two of them in New Orleans created countless memories. Each morning, packed with lawn chairs and backpacks, we left our downtown Hampton Inn and walked to Canal Street to meet the daily JazzFest shuttle bus. Once aboard we would be driven and dropped off inside the fairgrounds, our wrist bands would be scanned, and we would head to the stage to claim our spot for the first performance.

How did we select where to go from the many, many choices? Thursday night was easy because it was a performance by John Fogarty, formerly of Creedence Clearwater Revival. This event had special significance because after many years Fogarty had recently won a lawsuit to claim back the rights to his own songs and this would be his first time sharing them once again with a live audience. Oh, and it was also the week of his 80th birthday! He did not disappoint, and the crowd could tell that he was loving these moments as much as we all were. So many songs, so many memories.

Each day brought indescribable music from fiddles to washboards, most of it glorious. Irma Thomas belted out her tunes, Harry Connick, Jr. tickled those ivories, Mardi Gras Indians danced down the street to Jock -A-Mo, and second lines were formed. Also, each new day brought bigger crowds. The positive energy out on that Fairgrounds for four days if ever harnessed would light the entire state for quite a while, I suspect. Besides the music there was wonderful food, original art, and many craft displays. The whole experience is almost indescribable.

We were also very, very lucky. We never did have to sing “Who’ll Stop the Rain” and when New Orleans weather wants to impress it does and it did. Those four days were so perfect that if I were invited again this year or any time in the future, I just might have to decline. Who knows? But then again, I have been known to say, yes.



Photo by Kathy Louper

I Could Have Walked Away

Helen Groves

Prompt: I Could Have Walked Away

When I began my career in child welfare, a master's degree in social work (MSW) was not required. Several years into my career, the Child Welfare Department decided to seek accreditation. One of the accreditation requirements was that a certain percentage of staff hold MSW degrees. We did not come near to meeting this requirement. Incentives were implemented to encourage staff to obtain MSW degrees. I know that educational leave was provided, and I believe that some tuition assistance was also available. Of course, I wanted to take advantage of this opportunity.

I was living and working in Monroe at the time. The only schools offering MSW degrees were LSU, Tulane and Grambling State University. I didn't want to move to Baton Rouge at the time, and I couldn't afford Tulane's tuition, so Grambling was my only opportunity to take advantage of this opportunity to get my MSW.

I completed a Grambling application, and had my transcripts sent to Grambling. I thought I would be admitted with no problem. I was a little surprised when I got a letter from Grambling scheduling an interview with the dean of the School of Social Work. I'd never been required to interview for an educational opportunity, but I certainly didn't expect any problems with the interview.

I told all my friends about the interview, got all dressed up in my most professional outfit and drove to Grambling confident that the interview was a mere formality.

The Dean of the School of Social Work was a very nice man, and I felt the interview was going well. And then, he asked why I wanted to attend an HBCU.

HBCU? I rolled the letters around in my head but came up with nothing. Finally, I apologized to the dean and told him I wasn't familiar with that acronym. I wish I had the vocabulary to describe the look on his face when he said, "Historically Black College or University." "Oh," was nearly my complete response, but then my brain shifted into gear and I was able to talk coherently about the disproportionate representation of Black children in foster care and my desire to find ways to support Black families so that children could remain in their homes.

The dean's facial expression became a little less dismissive, and I thought I might have redeemed myself. But, as I was driving home I realized I had no chance of being accepted at Grambling. When I got home, I called several of my friends and told them the bad news.

One of my friends told me she and the dean had been friends for years and she didn't believe that my interview would be held against me. I didn't believe her!

A few days later, I had a letter from Grambling. I started to put it directly into the garbage, but I was too curious.

I opened the letter. I had been accepted into the Grambling MSW program! I was thrilled. I called all my friends again, this time to give them the good news.

I did go to Grambling, had a very long career in child welfare and received several promotions that I wouldn't have been eligible for without that MSW degree. And I got a Grambling t-shirt that I sometimes wear to this day!



*The secret of it all is to write... without waiting for
a fit time or place..*

— Walt Whitman

A Good Friday Gone Bad

Robin Rowan

It seemed like a perfect day to go somewhere interesting. I had recently moved back to Louisiana, having decided in February of 2011 that there were much warmer climates than Nova Scotia's, and many reasons to reintegrate into a culture I had enjoyed for many years. No disrespect to my Canadian roots, but other than lobsters and scallops on the East Coast, and my favorite butter tarts in Ontario, there isn't much about the cuisine to hold my attention and shoveling snow on a daily basis was less than charming. Best of all, I was reigniting a relationship with my soon-to-be spouse that I suspected would lead to exciting new adventures.

As we were still both working full-time, most of our early escapades took place on weekends. By April, we were enjoying some of the most beautiful weather of the year but anticipating the misery of increasingly hot and humid conditions we decided to use available free time on Good Friday to make a day trip to New Orleans. We had both been there repeatedly, exploring the French Quarter, the Garden District and many amazing parts of the most unusual city in the country but neither of us had ever been to the infamous St Louis Cemetery No. 1, and that day, it was calling our names.

We didn't hurry, stopping to enjoy a shrimp po'boy and a cup of gumbo at one of the many local establishments before heading over to the area just outside the French Quarter known as Treme. Historic Treme has been called the birthplace of jazz, was the first African American neighborhood in the United States and is the site of one of America's most famous graveyards, the City of the Dead, our destination for the afternoon.

It's not unusual for us to frequent graveyards, since our investigations into our own genealogies often call for tracking down our ancestors, but neither of us has Louisiana ancestry. Our curiosity that day was that of typical tourists wanting to see for ourselves a place that has drawn in the living and the dead since its establishment in 1791. Its above-ground, white-washed tombs encase the remains of some of New Orleans' most well-known sons and daughters including Homer Plessy who was the plaintiff in the civil rights Plessy v Ferguson Supreme Court case, the first mayor of New Orleans, and most famously, Marie Laveau also known as the Queen of Voodoo.

Marie Laveau's reputation as a witchy character was an embellishment, for in her time, in the 1800s, she was a well-known and highly respected leader of the Creole community. A free woman of color, she was known for her compassion toward the imprisoned, reputedly providing comfort and prayer to those locked in death row at the Cabildo. Her beauty salon attracted the wealthy, connected women of society and she was much sought after for advice. A Catholic woman, baptized and married at St Louis Cathedral, she was also a

practitioner of Voodoo. Adding to her mystique, she sold gris-gris bags of magic herbs in Congo Square.

With only a tourist's knowledge of the cemetery, we entered the gates around two o'clock and bypassing a group that was listening intently to their tour guide, we meandered through the tombs, stopping to take pictures and noticing all the details of the extraordinary place. Eerie, not only for its no longer living inhabitants, but for the condition of some of the crypts that were damaged, exposing their contents, the cemetery drew us far to the back. Eventually we noticed that we no longer heard the voices of the tourists and, feeling rather alone, headed back to the entrance, stopping to see Marie Laveau's tomb with triple x's carved into its plaster and a collection of small tokens placed at her grave in thanksgiving for wishes granted from beyond. Having satisfied our perhaps morbid curiosity, we made our way to the gate only to discover that it was closed and locked.

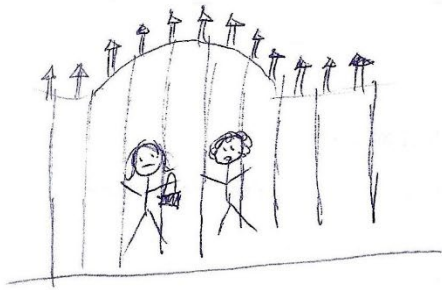
It wasn't a gate to be challenged, at least by two mid-fifties women not prone to scaling something eight feet tall, and we stood there, captive like a couple of monkeys at the Audubon Zoo, acknowledged and waved at by those passing by but clueless about how to get out. I decided our best option was to call the police. Having done so, we could only wait and chat with the small crowd that had gathered to witness our shame. I'm sure that some tourists have pictures to verify our tale. Several of them had hoped to visit the cemetery and were disappointed that it had closed at 3:00. One European couple, who had apparently been imbibing on Bourbon Street, were not to be deterred by a tall gate. First the young male climbed up and dropped into our enclosure, and then the female, clad in a skirt, did likewise, subjecting us to a show worthy of Mardi Gras as we stood below. We were a spectacle.

As we stood there, wondering how this would end, the groundskeeper of the cemetery happened to drive by. Seeing the unlikely scene after closing hours, he made a quick U-turn and with keys jangling, headed to the gate and set us free.

Thankfully, our zookeeper arrived before the police and spared us the further humiliation of explaining ourselves to the law. Curiously, since 2015 it is no longer legal for anyone to explore St. Louis Cemetery No 1 apart from being on a guided tour. They say it's to prevent vandalism of the tombs, but I wonder if perhaps others found themselves captive among the dead and the groundskeeper has lost patience. We couldn't have been the only ones, could we?



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like monkeys at the Audubon Zoo

Who We Are



I Need to be More Greek or Spaniard

Sandra Zaid

Then I would eat salads with freshly harvested tomatoes, unpasteurized cheese, and crushed olive oil. I need to be from Europe. I need to be Greek.

Greeks love huge family gatherings, nature, reading their classics, and moderation.

I want to pursue their order, balance, and moderation.

Says the Greek aphorism: "Nothing in excess" –*Meden agan*.

Bye, bye to the American way of more is better.

Goodbye to Netflix, Amazon Prime, DoorDash, Uber Ride, and Walmart delivery.

Goodbye to Costco, Sam's Club. Instead of buying mega-packs of toilet paper for a year, I would buy a decent-size pack of toilet paper for the month.

I like the Greek style.

Drive a small, four-cylinder, two-door car.

Read Socrates and Plato and the Stoics with a purpose.

Treat foreigners with a mellow attitude.

Talk for hours with friends in our local cafe.

I've been to Greece. It's beautiful and ancient. It's historic and wise.

I want to be wise like Greece.

I would be crazily involved in the tribe--my family; hug and double kiss everyone, have an opinion on everything, choose my nieces' boyfriends and choose my nephews' wives.

I swear I'd be the best aunt in Greece!

Come to think of it, I prefer Spain.

Spaniards are loud, they argue about everything, I would be free to argue and yell and not be sued for it. Their conversations are more like political banters—sans the politics.

I would yell like them with no risk to lose the reputation of an educated aging woman.

Educated people yell in Spain.

I want to be a Spaniard.

They avoid hard work, unapologetically so.

I want to work just enough. The minimum.

If I had a job...If I owned a business in Madrid (because that is where I would live) I would go home at 2 pm for lunch.

I would eat and then sleep.

I would take a three-hour siesta

A lazy siesta. Everything would be at a standstill for three hours.

After the siesta I would regain a small, cyclical liveliness and go back to work.

But only for one or two more hours.

And only after a few cups of strong coffee.

I want to drink Rioja wine with my family in Spain.

Every night.

I've been to their houses during my visits to Spain.

I want to live in a house like theirs.

Or maybe, in a house like the Masters.

I want to live inside Madrid's museums in front of Picasso and next to Salvador Dali.

I want to be Spaniard because the Spanish spoken in Spain sounds more original.

It's a direct and cultured Spanish; the one I speak is baroque, full of vagueness and overly flattering. That's how I learned it. Everything is in diminutives. It's so diplomatic that it creates confusion. The listener doesn't understand the responses from Latin American Spanish. But the Spanish spoken in Spain is loud and clear!

Thinking about it. That is too much for me to bear.

I'm sorry, but I can't.

I can't not be American.

I can't be Greek or Spanish.

I'll stick with speaking and writing my Latin American Spanish.

I'll stay American, here in the United States.

I have a fascination with the country that adopted me almost three decades ago.

America is intense. Not the news. It's intense in generosity, in music, in culture, in literature, in food, in freedoms.

I'll stay a Spanish-speaking American from the deep south.

I'll stay in Louisiana; a place where time flies and quiet things happen.

Here I learned to let go of the past, of what once was; learned to enjoy pop culture and everyday things, the mundane. I learned to eat fried alligators and to stop using the blinkers when turning right or left.

In Louisiana I learned an English I never knew was spoken in this country.

If I were Greek or Spanish, I'd miss out on so much.

I'm sorry, but I can't.

Neither Spanish nor Greek. American by choice!



Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart.

— William Wordsworth

I Was Looking for an Elixir to Cure Invisibility

Jeff Sibley

Prompt: Seemingly insignificant, but it affected everything ...

Sometimes insignificant decisions can affect your life in unexpected ways. Like a boat traveling over a long distance, just a minor adjustment to the tiller will have large effects over time.

In high school, I was shy and lacked self-confidence, especially with members of the fairer sex. I had spent a year at this school, and I still felt invisible. I felt like I didn't belong.

I wasn't a jock; I ran cross-country and wasn't very good. I developed a strategy to increase my odds with girls. I would take typing. To tell the whole story, I was also taking all the shop classes I could... woodworking, welding, and drafting. Being a poor reader and worse speller, I felt my future was in the blue-collar sector. The typing strategy did get me quality time with girls. I was one of two boys in the class. I was too shy to leverage the opportunity. I was comfortable in class, but when I saw one of my typing friends in the hall, I acted invisible even though she had stopped to talk to me. It was awkward. What I got out of typing was much more valuable! I learned to type.

You can never judge the impact a decision will have on the future.

While typing was seen as a clerical skill in the late 70s when I was in school, it opened a door for me that wouldn't have been as easy to open had I not been able to touch-type. Because of my shop skills, I was hired into R&D as a technician, running pilot plants for a major chemical company. As an R&D tech, we were expected to build, modify and maintain the units we ran. When we started migrating control of these units from setpoint loop controllers to computers, I was there. I took to the computer code, DowTRAN in this case.¹ Writing software for process control was a new skill set that few college courses addressed. When the need arose for a new part-time role maintaining the code for the unit I was assigned to, I was tapped to fill it... I had an instinct for the logic, and I could type! I had never been a fast typist, but I was accurate and when typing syntax accuracy is more important than speed.

¹ DowTRAN: A computer code developed by Dow Chemical designed to run on the inhouse developed process control system MOD. The code was a FORTRAN like structured text specific for chemical process control.

That class and some others I took at night at the local university opened the door to a role in R&D Computing, where I spent the next 30 years of my career. When I retired, I had a group of engineers and instrument technicians supporting the automation needs for Dow Chemical R&D on the Gulf Coast.

As I look back, typing class didn't cure my invisibility but was the catalyst for my career in R&D computing.



Photo by [Thom Milkovic](#) on [Unsplash](#)

There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed.

— Ernest Hemingway

“No, I’m Sorry, I Can’t”

Virginia Yarbrough

Prompt: No, I’m sorry, I can’t.

When I landed in the quaint fishing town of Charleston, Oregon, a big-city girl from a big family, who had been raised by saintly parents and steeped in medieval religion, there were some things I could do, and a few that I could not.

I could stand in rubber boots with the other ladies at the cannery dressed in oversized aprons and shower caps at a stainless-steel table, where loads of freshly steamed shrimp were waiting to be shelled.

I could help my friend on his boat, breathing in the diesel-tinged salt air, as we pulled in the long lines of salmon. Always relieved when we came into port, I was grateful for any storm that was powerful enough to keep us from going back out to sea again.

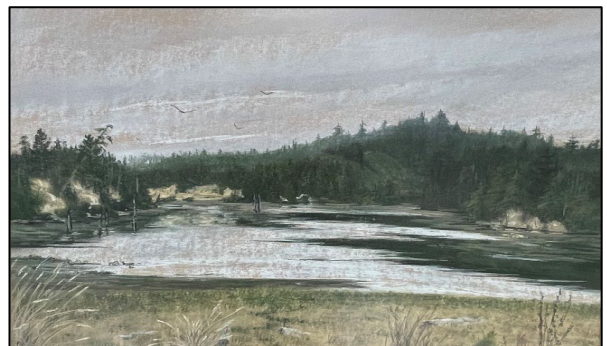
I could carry on easy conversations with half-drunk fishermen, while I tended bar at the “Derelict Lounge.”

I could walk every day among old-growth timber, protected from the constant rain by the hood of my foul-weather jacket.

From my kitchen window, I could watch hundreds of sandpipers fly in glistening formations over the mudflats.

I could listen to the winds howling over Seven Devils Road and to the groan of Charleston’s swing bridge as it opened to let a boat pass through.

I could enjoy visiting with the neighbor kids who lived in a school bus near the abandoned sawmill at the end of our gravel road with their mom, Phyllis, and her friend. The kids in Charleston were loosely supervised and free to roam in the weeds and wild places, and sometimes I joined them. One day, we risked climbing the dilapidated water tower that overlooked the vast Pacific Ocean and its entrance into Coos Bay’s harbor. Since half the wooden slats were missing, we had a marvel of a view.



South Slough, Charleston, Oregon--Picture by Jo Barton

I could visit with the outsiders who came into Charleston. One summer, I worked at Davey Jones’s Locker, a small grocery store in the heart of town, and watched the non-stop

caravan of tourists in campers, who headed down the road to Cape Arago or to the state park. What interested me most those days was each new long-haired wanderer, arriving with dreams in his eyes, looking for work and a place to alight.

But one thing I could not do was to stay away from those guys, especially after a cervical biopsy disturbed my equilibrium. Those suspicious cells turned out to be benign, but the worrying experience that threatened my reproductive future turned me into something ravenous. I could not stop hooking up with every suitable and unsuitable male who struck my fancy. For a year or two, this hunger took over my life.

One evening, Phyllis from down the street confronted me. We were at a neighborhood bar when she took me to the side and delicately requested that I stop seeing a certain fellow who was the love interest of another woman. I was shocked, not by the revelation that this man had someone else—which was news to me—but by Phyllis's impertinence. I stared at her wide-eyed, saying not a word.

But had I responded that night, I might have told her and anyone else who wanted me to stop my unconstrained, self-indulgent life,

"No, I'm sorry. I can't."



Finding My Tribe, My Community

Donni Shields

I was a Foreign Service kid. That meant my family moved a lot. Every couple of years, we packed up and went somewhere new. A new country. A new school. New people. New ways of doing things.

So, I grew up believing that moving was normal—and staying in one place was unusual.

I remember visiting my cousins in Staten Island. They had lived in the same house their whole lives. Same neighborhood. Same routines. And I was honestly surprised. I didn't know people could do that.

They had roots.

I had a suitcase (and a carryon bag).

Moving taught me many things. I learned how to notice people. I learned how to listen before speaking. I learned how to fit in quietly. When you're new a lot, you pay attention. You try not to take up too much space.

When people asked where I was from, I often paused. There was a simple answer—and then there was the true one. The true one usually took longer than people expected.

Friendships came quickly and ended quickly. You learned to care, but also to let go. I learned how to say goodbye with a smile, even when I felt sad inside.

As a child, I learned to be what people needed me to be. Calm. Polite. Adaptable. A chameleon. I could walk into a room and understand it very fast. But I didn't always feel understood myself.

When I went to the U.S. for college, I felt like a stranger in my own country. I tried to belong, but something always felt a little off.

I told myself I didn't need roots.

I told myself I had wings.

Even in my career, I was transferred to new communities, new locations having to adapt to each situation. I was good at starting over, meeting people. But starting over can also be a way of not staying long enough to be known.

Later in life, I retired and moved to Baton Rouge.... And something different began to happen. I joined a variety of groups (from theater to sports, to foundations to clubs.) I

joined OLLI and took classes. I met people who weren't interested in my past, so much as my presence.

Two years ago, I signed up for the life writing class.

I didn't think of myself as a writer. I just knew I had stories, stories I had always wanted to share. When we shared our stories, something gentle and important happened. People listened. They didn't judge. They didn't rush. They stayed.

And I realized something.

Community isn't something you're assigned to.

It's something you choose.

It grows when you show up, and keep showing up, just as you are. You don't have to be someone you aren't.

That it's okay to stay.

That it's safe to be known.

That belonging doesn't mean giving up who you are.

At home, I have accumulated a lot of stuff, boxes of things. They have not all been unpacked. I keep emails longer than I probably should. I like taking pictures of the moments. I don't want to get rid of any of it. We had to travel light growing up. Now it's my security. I don't want to forget one small day or anything anyone has said to me.

I still know how to pack quickly. Some lessons stay with us.

But now, I'm learning something new.

Sometimes, finding your tribe isn't about traveling farther.

It's about finally letting yourself be home.



I write to discover what I know.

— Flannery O'Connor

Life Stories



Land, Sea and Sky

Kathleen Louper

I believe in magic and sometimes, with the grace of God, I can make it happen. “Land, Sea and Sky” was the title of the weeklong watercolor workshop that I had joined with my daughter, Sarah, and my mother, Lorraine. This would be a trip involving three generations learning together how to capture glimpses of nature on paper using water, brushes, and paint. Since the Ventura Pier would be just footsteps away from our Holiday Inn lodgings, there would be no excuses regarding a source of inspiration. It was all there.

The first day of class I tried not to feel intimidated, so I just decided to enjoy the experience of being together with my mother and daughter. My then eighty-six-year-old mother had been doing watercolor for years and in fact, had attended previous workshops at this very location. What she hadn’t been doing was getting out much lately, so this would be a welcome change of scene for her. Meanwhile, daughter Sarah had been experimenting with watercolors and oils since the age of fifteen. For her, this was a renewal of artistic skills that she had pretty much abandoned in adulthood. As for me, I was a total novice. The last time that I had picked up a paintbrush for fun was in elementary school, a very, very long time ago.

As we entered the Bay View Room together on that first day, many budding artists had already claimed a spot at one of the white covered tables. Charging ahead pushing her shiny red walker, Mom led our little group to the places where we would sit for class all week. Mom and I were sharing a table with Sarah situated directly behind us.

We started our first class as Mom had predicted—making color wheels to see how simple red, blues, and yellows could turn into colors extraordinary and exquisite. My sixty-six-year-old self was like a kid again. I opened my new palette of suggested watercolors and quickly became fascinated as the colors bloomed on paper before me. Minutes turned into hours quickly and by the end of our first day, my mind was whirling with excitement and questions. I wasn’t very successful those first few days. My palm trees refused to sway but instead stood like stiff sentinels. Trying to create waves was a blur of color with no foam or crest. I was a mess and so were my paintings. Thursday was our last full day of instruction and involved the use of a synthetic, plastic material called Yupo Paper. We were told that its shiny, slick surface would hold on to vibrant colors, but that pencil sketching could not be removed and that any fingerprints on its surface would keep paint from sticking. Anxious but still willing to experiment, I started a picture of a swimming sea turtle based on a photograph. Step by step and letting the paint dry between each new addition, I ended up with something that I had created and really liked.

Friday was Art Show Day. We were asked to mat two of our finished pieces to be exhibited in the hotel lobby for the general public to see. I chose a forest of trees and my sea turtle. Since our afternoon was free, Sarah and I decided to take a walk around the seaside town of Ventura and buy some souvenirs. I had my phone in my backpack. While strolling it buzzed and rang twice but the caller left no message and it was from an unrecognized number. With the third call from the same number, I decided to answer. The call was from my mother, using the instructor's phone.

"Kathy, where are you? Diane has been trying to reach you for the past 30 minutes. A man and his little boy want to buy your sea turtle painting. Get back here!" What??? Sarah and I hightailed it back to the lobby. My mother was there waiting for us, beaming. "You have no idea how special this is! Hardly anyone actually wants to buy any of our paintings. How much will you ask?"

Clueless, to say the least, I hunted down our instructor and asked for her advice. She gave me what she thought would be a fair price and pointed to the father-son pair eating their lunch. As casually as I could, I approached the two, introduced myself and told them my asking price. Dad said that he would have to think about it for a few minutes, we traded phone numbers and I went back up to my room. My sea turtle didn't go home with that little boy, after all, but instead it is displayed proudly where it really belongs, with me, in Louisiana. So, you're probably wondering about magic. I guess I could say that the magic was in the making of something totally unexpected but truly, it was the joy of discovering a new world, the world of watercolor.



Writing is the painting of the voice.

— Voltaire

Timmy and the Shadow of Death

Kathryn Perry

Timmy was one of my favorite cats growing up. We found him as we did all our cats, hungry strays wandering in our yard. We think people dropped off their unwanted cats at the farm up the hill. We had no other explanation for the stream of unclaimed cats in our quiet suburban neighborhood.

Timmy was all black with a small white patch on his throat. One eye was glassy and disfigured—he must have gotten hurt in a nasty fight. We didn't know if he would regain his sight in that eye, but Mom prayed for him and he recovered completely, though he had a small patch of fur missing above his eye. I remember he was so hungry he gobbled up cold green beans straight from the refrigerator. That is a desperate carnivore.

Timmy was gentle and loving with me and my sisters, though less so with our other male cat Misty. They fought regularly and avoided being in the same room. They came and went using the cat door and terrorized the outdoors by night and dined on cat food and slept indoors during the day. It was a cat's life.

One night Timmy appeared in my dream. He was on a ledge, threatened by a shadowy figure in a black robe. Then Timmy morphed into my younger sister Barbara and I became truly alarmed. In the dream I defended my sister from the figure of Death and began singing a church hymn. "All power is given unto the Lord; in Him we place reliance. The hosts of death before Him fly; we bid our foes defiance." The Grim Reaper figure faded away and my sister was saved.

The next morning, I am given the news. Timmy was found dead under a bush just outside my window. He had a large bite on him, we think from a dog, but we never knew for sure. I mourned Timmy deeply, but I appreciated how his death was shrouded in the mystery of my dream. Had I sensed the presence of death? Did Timmy trade his life for my sister's?

This was no ordinary cat and no ordinary death. Go with God, Timmy. Know that you were loved deeply, and I wish I could have saved you from your untimely death.



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Random Thoughts on Growing Up--Claiborne Elementary School

Thornton Cofield

A China Berry Tree was located on the front right side of our house in Shreveport, LA. Estimated height from my eyes when I was about 9 years old was about 12 feet high with a horizontal limb about 8 feet high. I still remember the address, 2739 Dupont St. and it was located one block from the First Baptist Church which was brick and had white columns. Our house was also about 1 mile from the State Fair Grounds.

One of my first memories was climbing up the China Berry tree and swinging on one of the limbs while holding on with my hands. I could almost touch the roof and the house we were living in. One day, while my brother was playing somewhere else, I decided I would hang upside down from the horizontal limb of the tree. It was easy but the minute I hung upside down and felt the exuberance of looking at everything upside down I thought I better right-side myself. It was fun!

The first inkling that I was in trouble was that I didn't know how to get down. I tried to grab the limb that my legs were looped over with my right hand by bending forward with my torso but by that time I was tired and couldn't grab the limb with my right hand. I tried with my left hand but that didn't work either. I stayed there for a little while, resting, and trying to figure out what to do. If I slipped and fell headfirst, I knew what would happen.

On the same street but on a slight upward hill and to the right of the Baptist Church was the home of one of my friends. We were in the same grade at Claiborne Elementary School. He was living with his grandmother at the time. Although we never talked about why he lived with his grandmother I met his mother only once at the department store where she worked. We went to school together from the first grade until the end of our fifth grade when my family moved to Houma, LA. We played baseball and while in the 5th grade our elementary school received football equipment and uniforms and we played our first set of games with other schools. I was underweight to qualify to play but since I was the best of the litter, once I finished my final running laps the coach put me in as right guard. We lost every game.

My friend and I played football on the school team and for a time after football we played baseball together. We were close as boys could be and in the 5th grade he told me what he was going to be when he grew up. He wanted to become a Baptist minister, and he became one and served in Shreveport, LA. I never saw or heard from him again since the 5th grade.

On one of my many trips driving out West I showed my present wife where I used to live in Shreveport. I lived there over 60 years ago. Nothing appeared the same, but it was. The Baptist Church was still there, but the signage was in Spanish. The three blocks of houses

on Dupont Street leading away from the Baptist Church and toward Claiborne Elementary school looked as if they had not been renovated over the past 60 years. My wife and I were surprised that people were still living in the houses. The block of homes which made up the city block our house was located was now a parking lot for the Baptist Church. The Polio Ditch was now a two-lane highway. Parents told us kids that you could catch polio by playing in the ditch and hence the name. Most of us did not play in the ditch, which was lined with concrete, but neither did we want to catch polio. I remember taking the sugar cube with the polio vaccine at our school sometime in 1950s. I don't remember the color of the vaccine.

Claiborne Elementary School

Claiborne Elementary School was built in 1923! It is now a Fundamental Magnet Elementary School catering to a diverse population.

Two episodes stand out during my schooling in Shreveport. Both were funny then, but I am sure they would not be as entertaining today for any audience.

As we were entering our classroom from recess, we had some stragglers as usual. It was the second grade, and I was seated in the middle row when all of a sudden there was a boy and a girl wrestling on the floor in the front of the classroom. One was a blond hair girl on the floor with a boy classmate. I don't remember what was being said but the gist of it was that he wanted to kiss her and she didn't want him to. The teacher walked in at that time, hauled the boy up by his arm and asked them what was going on. The girl told the teacher he tried to kiss me, and I didn't want him to. Believe it or not I don't remember what happened next although I don't remember the boy being absent from school.

This next event I remembered more of the details. We were in the 5th grade, and it was late in the school year of 1955 since I was sitting in the second row. I got new glasses at the beginning of the school year and as the school year progressed, I moved up from the last row to the first row so I could better see the blackboard. I got new glasses only at the beginning of the school year. Our teacher was in the room, and it must have been my 5th grade teacher since it was not Ms. Price, my 4th grade teacher, nor was it my 3rd grade teacher who was pretty and wore perfume.

The room was relatively quiet when we heard a loud "boom" and saw a small cloud of smoke from the back of the room. The teacher quickly walked to the back of the room asking what happened. She grabbed Happy's arm (that was his real name) and holding his finger straight rushed out of the room with him and told the class not to move or talk. Some of us thought it was funny because Happy was always doing stupid things. The teacher came back to our room without Happy. We resumed what we were doing before the disruption. No Talking.

Later Happy told us that while the teacher was reading or something, he was trying to get the lead bullet out of a .22 when his compass point struck the back of the shell. The bullet went off and must have set off the rest of the gun powder and as a result his trigger finger had some skin scraped off, a little blood, and he got a trip to the principal's office. Some of us asked what his parents did to him when he got home. Happy told us that they were not as mad as when he set the curtains on fire in his room. Even then most of us knew that Happy was not normal.

My story ends with me being sent home from Claiborne Elementary for several days for bumping a kid's arm when he was holding a pencil and the pencil point pierced the corner of his eye. He did not lose his eye, but my parents were not happy with me. I, too, got to spend several days at home.

Oh, how did I get down from the China Berry Tree? I don't remember but I never tried hanging from a tree like that again.



No one else sees the world the way you do, so no one else can tell the stories that you have to tell.

— Charles de Lint

The Game of Life

Donni Shields

People always ask me, “Who are you?” and “Where are you from?”
And I always think... how much time do you have?

Because the truth is—I am from everywhere.

I’m the daughter of Robert and Louise Shields. My father was from New York. My mother was from Texas. So, I grew up with equal parts grit... and “y’all.”

After they got married, my father joined the Foreign Service—and that decision turned our family into a lifelong adventure.

There were six of us kids. Each born in a different country.
I was born in Mexico City, Mexico—but that’s just the beginning.

We grew up all over the world—different homes, languages, foods, customs. We learned early on how to walk into a room full of strangers and feel okay. Not because we were fearless... but because we were used to beginning again.

People ask, “Where did you go to school?”
And I say... “Yes.”

Sometimes we were in a local school. Sometimes homeschooled. Sometimes... no school—because we were either moving, or there was a revolution or war in that country, or it was just Tuesday..

I did go to high school... well, pieces of it.
France. Nepal. Back to France. Then Turkey.
Honestly, I’m not sure if I graduated, but my transcript needed a passport.

But the most important things I learned...
They didn’t come from books.

They came at 5:30 in the morning...on a golf course... with my father.

My father loved sports—but golf was different.
Golf was where I got him... all to myself.

I started when I was four. No golf cart—he walked, and I ran behind him like a small puppy.

At first, my only job was: “Watch where the ball goes.”
Which, honestly, is still excellent life advice.

By five, I could play—but I could only choose one club for the entire round.
Nothing builds character like trying to drive with a putter. Or to putt with a drive.

By seven, I had my own little bag—three clubs.
I thought I was a professional. A very under-equipped professional... but still.

My father had the most beautiful swing I've ever seen. Smooth. Effortless.
The ball would just take off—straight down the fairway like it had someplace important to go to.

And when he putted... I was convinced there was a magnet in the hole.

What made it extraordinary was that—he had survived polio as a teenager.
His left arm was thin, almost without muscle.

And yet... he had a perfect swing.

"Keep your arms in," he'd say. "Just like me."
Sometimes he'd wrap his belt loosely around my arms to teach me the feeling.

Which led to me telling my mother,
"Pop belted me on the golf course."

She did not find that funny.

I had to explain... quickly.

Every Saturday morning, no matter where we were in the world, we had our routine.
Up before sunrise. Out the door by 5:30. Just me and my father

There was only one rule:
I could go—as long as I didn't complain about the chores I was given when we got home.

My mother believed in hard work. No one was exempt...
Be late?
You're cleaning toilets.

We played all over: Scotland, Ireland, Bermuda and all over the United States.

In Peru—llamas carried our clubs.
In Tunisia—the greens were called "browns": combine olive pits, sand and oil and flatten it down.
On military bases—we ducked for airplanes.
And in Louisiana—we watched for alligators... which really improves your focus.

When I was ten, my father said,
“Now I’m going to teach you the real game.”

Not just golf.
Life.

He said, “You have to play the ball where it lies.”

Because he wasn’t just talking about golf.....

He would say—
You don’t get to choose every situation.
You don’t get perfect conditions.
You don’t get a redo on every bad shot.

But you do get a choice.

You can stand there.....
Or you can step up and take the shot.

Then came the rest of the lessons—
Don’t just swing and hope. Things work out..... Focus, adjust,
Failure will come—learn from it. Don’t let it take the shot for you
Fear will ruin your shot before you even take it.

Practice matters-but perfection isn’t the goal.
Ask for help. Listen to others. Keep learning.
Play honestly—because who you are matters more than how you score.

And most of all...
Keep playing.

Eventually my parents retired to Pinehurst, North Carolina.

Whenever I visited,....my mother would offer normal choices—shopping, lunch, cleaning
toilets.

My father would look up and say,
“Tee time is at 5:30am... is that still good?”
And then he’d wink.

And in that moment...
I always knew—

He was NOT really asking about golf.

He was asking,
"Are you still showing up?"
"Are you still in the game?"
"Are you still trying?"

So now, when people ask me,
"Who are you?"
"Where are you from?"

I can finally answer.

I am from the world.
I was educated by the world.
And I was shaped—deeply and forever—by my father... and the game of golf.

Because in the end—
No one gets a hole-in-one on every hole.

Not in golf.
Not in life.

But you still have to step up, take your swing...



Illustration by ChatGPT

The Letter that Affected our Life

Bill Stickle

Prompt: Seemingly insignificant, but it affected everything ...

I picked up a letter from my mail slot in the Biology Department at Slippery Rock University on a late Friday afternoon in February 1970 before driving to the YMCA in Butler, Pennsylvania to take a PADI lesson for SCUBA certification. The letter from Kenneth Michael, department chair, said my contract to teach for a third year would not be renewed. The school was establishing a Geology Department, and my position was being converted to a geology hire. I was devastated. Western Pennsylvania was my home. I graduated from Slippery Rock. My parents lived 20 miles away in New Castle. Versa and I had a two-month-old daughter Sarah.

I applied for other university jobs without success, so I accepted a postdoctoral position with my PhD advisor at the University of North Dakota for the 1971-1972 academic year. My job search was successful in the spring of 1972. I accepted an offer to give a seminar from the Zoology and Physiology Department at LSU. The job posting had three expectations:

1. Teach Human Physiology –

I had a Medical Physiology Minor for my MS degree from the University of South Dakota.

2. Develop a marine biology option in the Department.

I had taken an Oceanography Institute at the University of Alaska, and my PhD dissertation was on “Seasonal Changes in the Reproductive Physiology of a marine snail *Thais lamellosa*.” That research was initiated at the University of Washington’s Friday Harbor Laboratory where Versa and I spent a year.

3. Run the PRECOL Environmental Toxicology Laboratory funded by eight oil refineries in Louisiana. The laboratory used bluegill fish as bioassay animals to test the toxicity of refinery wastewater.

As an undergraduate at Slippery Rock, I worked in a lab that studied the effects of acid mine waste discharge on freshwater streams and their fish communities in western Pennsylvania and studied the effects of water pH on catfish at the University of North Dakota.

I could check all their boxes and after giving a job seminar and visiting campus, I verbally accepted LSU’s job offer. Interestingly, the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory in Georgia offered me a job the next week.

I had a rewarding 43-year career at LSU. Versa and I have been in love with Louisiana since our arrival in 1972 and our children and their families live nearby. The journey to this blessed life began with a devastating letter.



*Start writing, no matter what. The water does not
flow until the faucet is turned on.*

— Louis L'Amour

Love and Family



My Funny Valentine

Myrna Bergeron

A creative Valentine's Day gift from your Sweetheart truly exhibits his romanticism. My one-of-a-kind Valentine the year before Hank and I married was a subscription to Field and Stream Magazine. We did enjoy spending time outdoors on the water fishing; what else can I say as explanation. However, an ad in the magazine gave us an idea for our Honeymoon locale, a dude ranch in the Ozark Mountains which featured fishing trips on the White River.

Our 10:00 AM wedding in historic St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans was on a warm, White River morning followed by a traditional reception at the Officer's Club of Camp Leroy Johnson on Lake Pontchartrain.

Off we drove in my in-law's new Chevrolet Impala heading toward our Honeymoon destination in Mountain Home, Arkansas. The caterers had packed a basket for us with sandwiches and snacks along with two bottles of Champagne. The car was not air conditioned, but I do not remember feeling uncomfortable, however the champagne did notice the heat and with a deafening POW the recorked bottle exploded. That Chevrolet was perfumed with wine for weeks.

Coming from flat land Louisiana to the curves and ups and downs of the mountain highways in the Ozarks was a little stressful for us. This was 1955 so there was no wide, modern Interstate Highway System. Just at dusk we came down a steep hill on a blacktop road that ended at a river's edge where we stopped and got out of the car to watch a small ferry boat slowly coming our way. As it got closer, we could see that it was a hand operated, one car, wooden barge attached to a cable stretched across the river. The boat came to shore where the lone attendant lowered a ramp for the car aboard to drive away making room for our vehicle. There was no motor on the ferry, the attendant angled it to be propelled by the current of the water. The ferryman told us that we were in the town of Calico Rock and that Scott Valley Ranch was just a few miles further.

The Scott Valley Ranch house was a large rustic log cabin style building set in a beautiful pine forest. There were scheduled activities each day from horseback riding to square dancing.

A night fishing trip was planned for us on one of the deep lakes formed during the construction of Bull Shoals Dam. We met our guide at the boat launch, and he provided the tackle we were to use. His boat was a flat bottom John Boat with an outboard motor. When we arrived at the spot to fish the guide placed a light over the side of the boat into the water and explained to us that within a few minutes little fish would be attracted to the

light and begin swimming in circles attracting larger fish. We caught a cooler full of fish, mostly Crappie I believe. The workers at the Ranch cleaned and froze our fish for the trip back to Louisiana.

It gets chilly at night in the mountains, so the thermos of hot coffee provided by the Ranch was welcomed. There was only one cup therefore the three of us shared it. As I was taking a sip of coffee the guide told us that he had been a patient at the Tuberculosis hospital in Hot Springs. I hope he didn't see the look on my face; being a recently graduated Registered Nurse I was "freaking out". That was the last drink of coffee for Hank and me.

Scott Valley Ranch closed around 2015 but Field and Stream Magazine is still being published and we are still married. My husband Hank has become somewhat more romantic because a big box of delicious chocolates was my Valentine last year.



The first draft is just you telling yourself the story.

— Terry Pratchett

The Uninvited Guest

Estella Champion

We had finally arrived after spending all day cramped in the car. We left the Mississippi highway and were now traveling on a long winding road. It felt to me and my sister and brothers like a roller coaster -- up, down, hard turn to the left, hairpin turn to the right, gravel crunching under the tires, trees looming overhead. My dad would blow the horn constantly to warn any vehicle which might be coming from the opposite direction. Several head-on collisions had already occurred at these blind curves. We had reached our destination after what seemed like forever, four kids closely confined in our car, pulling our pop-up camper. This was the third time we had made this journey. I can't remember for certain, but I think I was about 14 years old.

Our destination was Oxford, M., home of Ole Miss University. My uncle was the only doctor in what was still a country town. They would one day name the elementary school after him, Bramlet Elementary. This trip was before interstate highways, but the journey there was not boring. The rolling hills, pine trees, red clay and the Kudzu appearing as giants on the roadside kept us fascinated. The narrow road finally opened up to reveal an inviting home on a beautiful 40-acre lake, surrounded by the woods. All of my dad's 2 brothers and 3 sisters and their spouses would be there with all of my cousins, 23 of us, and maybe a few extras. A flood of people and a few dogs poured from the house to greet us and help us unpack.

From the camper we would pull out two mattresses on which the girls slept on the floor in the living room. The adults got the bedrooms. The boys slept in the bachelor quarters across the road from the spacious home located on this beautiful, private lake. To this day I've never been allowed in the bachelor pad, an old hunting lodge, and have no idea how all the boys fit in there.

We all had someone our age to play with in and on the lake, into the woods, or in the house. All went great that Friday, as we got reacquainted and found our group. So many people had to be fed 3 meals a day, entertained, bathed, put to bed. It was a very happy time. What made this particular reunion so memorable is what went so terribly wrong.

It was Saturday afternoon and, after a feast set out for lunch, all the adults left the lake house to visit some relatives in town, leaving all of us kids at the lake unattended. After a bit I started to feel sick. It got worse and worse until I ended up in the bathroom, lying under the toilet on the cold tile floor, exhausted from upchucking my insides. And though I didn't know it, soon after I fell ill, many of my cousins were similarly dropping. Our adults were summoned to return to the mess, but soon they too were succumbing to the malady. I was found by some adults still lying on the floor, only to hear my Aunt Suzanne surprisingly

say, "I never thought you looked like your mother, until now!" Really? Now? Is that supposed to be a compliment?

As I said at the start, my Uncle Gene was the town doctor, and quickly my misery ended with a syringe in my rear, followed by blissful sleep in some adults' bed. I don't know an exact number of casualties because I was the first to fall and the first to get shot, but it was more than half of us. I was told that the sick were treated by my uncle, as some healthy adults washed sheets and towels, others manned buckets. Uncle Gene "cured" each of us with his medicine bag and put us one by one to healing sleep.

On Sunday morning, as though nothing had happened, we all got up, had breakfast, and went as a group to the only Catholic church in Oxford, at the university, and then each family headed home to Louisiana.

The culprit for our collapse was later determined to be salmonella in the ham. It was found only after my aunt and uncle once again served the leftover ham to my poor cousins, only to all fall ill again. Laboratory analysis identified the cause. It was truly a reunion never to be forgotten!

As a final note, unfortunately that wonderful home with so many memories would go up in flames by a fire which started in the chimney one cold December night. My cousin and his family got out unharmed, but it was a sad day for all my extended family.



Knock Knock Knock

Susan Barkulis

In big cities like Chicago people pour out of their apartments and homes onto sidewalks, streets and parking lots paved with cement.

In the concrete jungle though, children often find green open spaces in the landscape of their neighborhoods and in the landscape of their minds.

It was summer break, our days would be supervision free - that is until mom could find a babysitter willing to take on 5 little rascals while she was at work. It was a risk to leave us on our own, but there was no other choice.

Not knowing how long our freedom would last, my older sister (age 7) and I (age 6), hatched a plan for the first day of summer break.

It was Monday. We anxiously followed our mother into the bathroom as she put on her make-up, then to the bedroom where she put on her waitress-ing uniform, it seemed like she would never leave, car keys had to be found, lists of things to clean had to be reviewed, rules on this and that until finally she walked out the door.

Dutifully we gathered our 3 younger siblings and with the same authority as our mom, we reviewed the rules and the list of chores as they nodded their heads up and down. Clearly anticipating their own freedom from their bossy older sisters.

As we headed to the door, promising to be back shortly, we were fully aware that all 3 siblings had already begun to construct tents in the dining and living rooms using tables, furniture and a whole mess of sheets. Before officially departing, we discussed the tent making, both concluding it was harmless and a good activity to keep them busy and happy.

We hit the street, Higgins Rd. a busy bustling Chicago street, lined on either side with long never-ending city blocks and city sidewalks.

Determined to walk beyond the familiar, like the sausage shop and the tavern called the spot, the Kroger's, and the laundromat where Santa made appearances at Christmas.

We arrived at the last familiar place, a sprawling cemetery with a massive iron gate separating city walkers on all sides from the graveyard grounds, where we occasionally held sessions of hide-and-seek or dangled feet from the large tombstones while munching on a snack.

But on this day, we passed the cemetery and entered into the unknown and unfamiliar.

Suddenly, my sister called out while pointing to the other side of the street. “Look over there, look at the color things laying all over the empty lot!”

Oblivious to the busy street, the cars, the lights, and crossing lines, we shot across the road to the other side where we discovered the strangest library we'd ever laid eyes on.

Bounded together like books, the pages contained colors and textures, tight weaves and loose weaves, patterns that shifted darker and darker. We discovered the eye-pleasing, touchy-feely world of carpet samples. Books and books of them, hundreds of loose ones too.

“Can we take them?” I asked my wise sister. “Let's ask the people in the carpet shop” she responded. Hand in hand we walked to the shop next to the vacant lot but the store was closed. A notice hung on the door - “closed due to fire”.

Brimming with her smile she said “Yes, yes we can, let's go”

Back to the lot, we sifted through the mountains of books and loose samples, creating and claiming our own precious piles.

Forever with the questions I blurted out “Hey what do you think we can do with these? Look at this one it's so soft and beautiful.”

As sisters might do, we dropped our samples and rallied toward the center of the rainbow to consider our options.

Almost in the same breath we announced – “We can sell these, why not there's all kinds of things people can do with these.” “Like what?” Well, this question did rattle us – but we rallied again each offering exceptional examples for ways to use these carpet samples. Mats at the door, paintings on the wall, linings for dog houses or baby cribs, possibly house slippers with a little work.

Clutching the best samples under our arms, another question pops out of my mouth. “So how much should we ask for?”

We settled on our prices while heading down the street, past the Dunkin Donuts and a flower shop. We took a right onto the tightly packed block lined on either side with little brick bungalow houses.

She and I would separate, each taking one side of the street and meeting up at the end of the block.

Knock, Knock Knock - no answer.

Knock knock knock no thank you.

Knock knock – the door opened, I swallowed hard when the woman followed by 3 very small children appeared in the doorway.

“Well, what have we here? What can I do for you?” said the young woman in a flowered dress.

Extending my arms to reveal more of the goods, I said in a voice unrecognizable “good morning, my sister and me are selling these beautiful pieces of carpet that you can use for your home.”

“Okay, let me see what you’ve got here - Oh that’s nice, I wonder what I could do with them, do you have any ideas?”

OMG my mind went blank – I couldn't find any reason – when one of the children shouted, “Mommy I want that one!” while the other child tugged at her dress, pointing a finger at the red and black sample.

Saved by the children's own imaginations, the mother embraced the excitement around here, dropped the question about what and asked .. “Um how much do you want for them?”

In a professional manner (I must have seen somewhere) and without hesitation I informed her of the prices, 5 cents for singles 10 for the books.

“That sounds like a pretty good deal, I’ll take them all.” Nearly dropping the samples, I repeated – “you’ll take them all”?

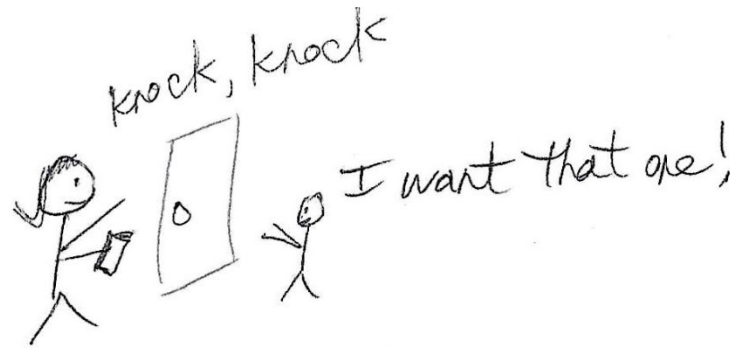
“Why yes, I tell you what - is 60 cents good enough for everything?” I nodded my head up and down vigorously. The children whooped, grabbed their samples, and flew back into the house. Before exchanging the carpet samples for the .60 the lady of the house looked directly into my eyes with a kind of seriousness I had not yet seen and said, “Now you and your sister can finish up and go straight home – right?”

Basking in my good fortune I nearly forget about my sister on the other side of the street. Bouncing toward her I saw a few carpet books still under her arm, she was not smiling.

She was a bit sad - I put my arm around her shoulder and said it’s alright, we worked together and we got 75 cents. Holding hands, we ran to the carpet sample graveyard, deposited her unsold samples – promising each other we would return the next day with carpet samples in hand and a new row of houses to visit.

Knock Knock Knock. The next day didn't happen until 16 years later, the carpet samples may have been swallowed up by the earth, but not the imagination. Somehow I was tapped on the shoulder and found myself in the always challenging, always magical world of

community and union organizing. A world of work that more often than not started with the simple sound of Knock Knock Knock.



*Creativity is a combination of discipline and
childlike spirit.*

— Robert Greene

Dad Moves In—Part One

Kathryn Perry

Dad was born on Friday the 13th, which might explain a few things. I'm not superstitious since my favorite cat was black, and I never cared about stepping on cracks or walking under a ladder. Shoot, my dad was born on Friday the thirteenth and he never thought that was unlucky. He had five (beautiful) daughters and a long life lived with the only woman he ever loved. Dad thought he was a very lucky man.

Dad moved into assisted living in Baton Rouge on Wednesday, July 13, 2011. The building's main compressor for the air conditioning was broken, and the air was heavy and humid. My sister and I signed and initialed mounds of paperwork with my sister reading most of the fine print on each sheet. I initialed whatever was put in front of me including something about giving away my firstborn. No problem, that's why I had a second child.

Despite being promised special care during his first weeks and paying over six grand a month, Dad didn't get evaluated until Friday afternoon, didn't receive his AM medications on Saturday and didn't get a shower for almost a week. "Nice shower", he said, showing off his bathroom on Tuesday. "Of course I haven't used it yet." Right in line with the other snafus his brass nameplate arrived more than a month later showing him as "Macloim" Reynolds. Maybe to distinguish him from the other Malcolm who lived across the hall.

Dad's first night at dinner on Thursday was not auspicious. I popped in to say hello and found Dad seated at the "men's table". I babbled away, unaware of the glares directed at us from across the table. Suddenly one of the men erupted. "YOUR DAD DON'T FIT IN HERE!!" Excuse me?

"HE DON'T FIT IN HERE!!" the man across from me repeated. "Are you his daughter?"

Straightening my back (and wishing I had a beer bottle to break) I replied that I was.

"Well, someone needs to tell him..." "I'm not telling him anything sir." "...not to wear his hat to dinner."

"Aw, would you just forget about that", grumbled Dad.

"Lady, you need to tell him..."

"You'd think it was still the Civil War down here," Dad muttered. (Dad, you are so not helping).

“Sir, I’m not going to get in the middle of this.” The old man across from Dad was slapping his thigh and laughing like he was gearing up to watch a good fight. Then I saw the red Phillies cap hung like a matador’s cape on the back of Dad’s chair.

“I’ll be right back Dad”, I said, grabbing the offending hat and escaping from grumpy old man circle of hell.

I found out the angry man’s name was Joe Foe. Jo-fo? That can’t be right. No, turns out it was Cajun—Joe Lefaux. My oldest sister thought I was making it up. You know, Pepé Le Pew, Joe Le Feaux. She thought my Cajun spelling was especially inventive. But that was the real spelling. I don’t make this stuff up.

Dad long remembered the older man who told him not to wear a hat. “That’s the guy who got upset about my hat,” Dad would say—pointing to the facility’s oldest WWII veteran who stormed the beaches at Normandy (“we were just kids,” I heard Lefaux say). I didn’t see the sense of the whole commotion.

Tip to Northerners: either take off your hat at dinner or do not even consider retiring in the south. You won’t fit in.

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### **Dad Moves In—Part Two**

Dad moved to the “memory care” unit on October 13 (there’s that date again), and I had to concede that Joe Le Foe was right. Dad did not fit in. How much so was made painfully clear by the administration. I said it was like Dad was at the bottom of the class in assisted living and he’d be at the top of the class in memory care. The director replied, “oh no, he won’t be at the top of the class.” To make things worse she told me not to bother telling him he was moving from the second floor to the first because he wouldn’t remember it anyway. Years later, with no prompting from me, he would point to the elevator and say, “I used to live on the second floor.” Won’t remember, indeed.

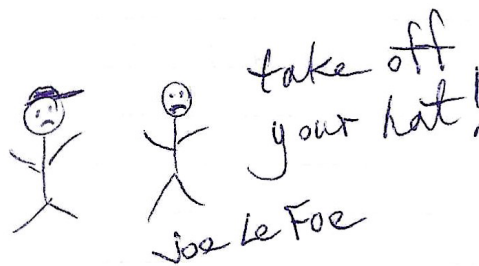
My dad had a degree in chemical engineering and could converse on any number of subjects, especially music from the 30’s and 40’s. But Dad was humble to a fault. “My wife was the smart one,” he’d always say. “She got all A’s and could speak five languages.” I’m pretty sure Dad’s family thought his older brother was “the smart one” and Malcolm was a little slow. Dad said a chemical engineer was just a plumber with a handbook. He didn’t believe me when I said they’re worshipped like gods here in petrochemical industry world. “Ah, all they do is look up stuff. I wanted to be a chemist.” Like his wife and brother. My son was gob smacked when he found “The Chemical Engineering Handbook” on dad’s bookshelf. “There really *is* a handbook!”, he exclaimed.

At first Dad was one of the favorites in assisted living, but I think he got downgraded a few notches after some angry and confused outbursts. Loudly demanding a second dinner or dessert. Arguing with the caregivers about changing his clothes, even when soaking wet. Refusing to take a shower, throwing his pills. He tried to bite the caregivers when they bathed him. Heck, he tried to bite me at the ER when a nurse was trying (repeatedly) to insert a catheter for a urine sample. Hard to fault him there.

I think his blood sugar levels changed so much that they affected his behavior. Everyone else thought he was an Alzheimer's patient with good days and bad. I'm pretty sure he had dementia complicated by diabetes and over-medication. I suspected Lyme's disease (his dog had a bad case up in Pennsylvania and was on antibiotics when she arrived in Baton Rouge. Then his daughter's dog that lived in that same house developed Lyme's). Dad wasn't presenting any Lyme disease symptoms, and the test was too expensive so that was that. In hindsight I should have paid out of pocket for the test. But you know about hindsight.

The caregivers seemed to enjoy his two-word all-purpose sayings. "Jeepers creepers!" "Holy smoke!" "Aw, geez!" "Judas priest!" When asked how he was doing he usually replied "great, great!" Asked if he'd like something to drink, he'd say "that'd be swell." Some of my favorite expressions growing up were "smile when you say that" or "thems fightin' words" (after receiving criticism), "you do nice work but not much of it" (okay, not my favorite), "I yam what I yam and that's all that I yam" (his life philosophy) and his all-time go-to "he who hesitates is lost" (often after he had grabbed the last serving of dinner or dessert).

His life had ups and downs, bumps and disappointments. I wouldn't wish dementia on anyone, but he was himself to the end and is remembered with love by many in my church. Dad, for someone born on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, you were a pretty swell guy.



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*A word after a word after a word is power.*

— Margaret Atwood

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## **My Father Has No Kidneys (How Can He Live?)**

*Jacqueline Esco*

My dad was father and mother to us. Wherever we went, we were with him. We ate and played together. He cooked, cleaned, washed, and ironed for us. He had us right there working along with him.

Everything was going along OK until dad started having a lot of trouble with his blood pressure. It stayed high. I understand now it was at stroke levels. In and out of the emergency room, in and out of hospital stays. He would get better for a little while then back to the in and out of ER, hospital routines. We stayed with our grandparents during this time. It was scary, not knowing, not really understanding what was happening.

The day came when dad had to start dialysis. That was a scary word. What is dialysis, what is going to happen to our dad? He went through the process of surgery on his arm so that he could start dialysis.

It was hard and trying because he didn't want to accept this. He was a young man with three little children depending on him. His parents had to step in and care for us on a regular basis.

The diet he had to follow was really hard for him, because it took away just about everything he liked. And the most trying thing was he was sitting in a place with a lot of old, sick-looking people. He was the youngest one in there, in his mid-twenties. He was depressed. We couldn't play like we used to. He was tired a lot. As time went on he got a little better and went back to work.

Then the day came when he was admitted to the hospital again. This time he had to have an operation to remove one of his kidneys. Another scary time for us, not really understanding.

He came through the surgery well. He continued to do dialysis. He recovered well, went back to work, and life was like it used to be; us playing and sleeping on the floor on Friday and Saturday nights.

### Good News

The doctor called to tell dad that they had a donor, to get to the hospital right away. Dad received a kidney. The surgery went well. Before long he was almost his old self again.

Then another hill to climb. Dad got sick; back to ER—he had a very bad cold. The doctor gave him the wrong medicine and killed the kidney. He was sick again and back to square one. As always he recovered in no time. Life went on.

### Then

Again, we are faced once more with upset, pain and confusion. Back in the hospital, this time to have his one and only kidney removed due to cancer. With no kidneys how will he live? What will happen to us?

The surgery went well. He recovered and went back to work and caring for us.

I need to interject that earlier dad stopped following the dialysis diet and adopted the attitude "I'm going to eat what I want but not much. I will be temperate, but I will no longer deny myself." This may not make sense, and the medical staff did not and does not agree; but when he made that declaration he was not in the hospital on a regular basis as he used to be.

People started telling him he was like a cat with 9 lives.

I am happy to say my dad is in a much better place. He is doing as well as can be expected. He still works, only two days a week now, he is independent and content. The doctor wants him to be placed on the schedule for another kidney, but he says he's doing OK, he has lived like this for 30 years. His children are grown and independent. His grandchildren are healthy and happy, and he feels blessed. And he's OK with that.

my dad had no kidneys... but life went on.  
I will eat what I want.  
A cat with 9 lives.



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*Successful writing is one part inspiration and two parts sheer stubbornness.*

— Gillian Flynn

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## **Two Fathers:**

**Two very different times in history, Two very different upbringings, Two very different definitions of fatherhood**

*Madelon Kelly*

When I broke my arm in first grade, my father told me to go into the bathroom and run cold water over it. I never remember his helping my mother with housework or reading us a story before bedtime. I never remember his coming to school when I had a sports event or a part in a play. He would draw pictures for our valentine cards for our classmates, and he designed and drew birth announcements for my children. When it came to using his prodigious art skills, my father was always available. He hollowed out and then carved a very large magnificent pumpkin which I wore on my head while the rest of my body was dressed in a black leotard and black tights. After the weight of the pumpkin and the smell of the pumpkin around my head for an hour or two of trick-or-treating, I had no appetite for the candy I had collected when the evening wound to an end, but I was very proud of my magnificent costume that was certainly not anything like that of any other child in the neighborhood.

It was certainly not that my father didn't love us. I know he did. It seemed that after working all day in an architectural office, he felt that when he got home it was his time to read and to rest. He grew up in Amherst, Massachusetts with an erudite professor father who I suspect never played with him and a southern mother who had help with all the housework and all the child rearing. He was a pilot in World War II and came home a hero which also may have molded his sense of duties as a father.

My mother, on the other hand, cut off from being able to pursue her own career, took parenting to extremes. She ironed our bathing suits. She read to us all the time, even reading Jane Eyre out loud to all of us when I was very little. I remember clearly being terrified by the picture of Rochester's insane wife in flames jumping to her death after she set the house on fire. All those books certainly enriched our lives, but when I had to help with all that ironing in the middle of the heat of the New Mexico summer in a house that didn't have air conditioning, I was less convinced about the benefits of her parenting techniques.

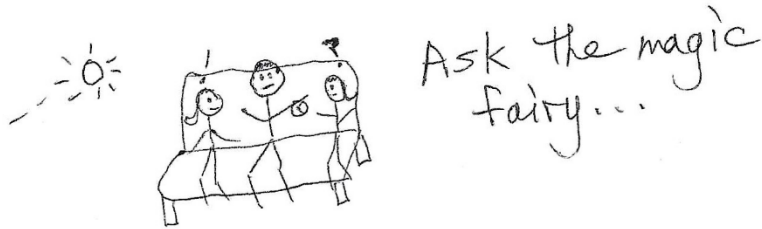
My husband, Ray, grew up in very different conditions and was altogether a very different person. Both things contributed to making him an extraordinarily wonderful father. When he was five years old his own father was killed on the New Jersey Turnpike when the bus he was driving next to blew a tire and collided with his car. His mother was left on her own with four children, three boys and a girl who was at the time a three-year-old toddler. All three boys took it on as their mission to help their mother and protect her from anything

that would upset her. Ray's father had gone to West Point and so to please his mother, Ray applied there too. He had one eye that was almost blind and thought somehow because he clearly excelled at the other elements of his West Point interview, he would receive an exemption for his weak eye. When, in the middle of the eye test, the examining doctor said he had to leave to take a call Ray did not understand that this was the exemption; he didn't realize that he was supposed to use the doctor's absence as an opportunity to get up and memorize the eye chart so he failed the eye exam. He opted instead to go to Swarthmore College, founded by Quakers, it was the diametric opposite of West Point, and when he fell in love with a pacifist vegetarian, his mother was sure that his days of taking care of her had come to an end.

He, of course, always loved his mother, but establishing his own family gave him the opportunity to use his creativity and imagination to be sure that his own daughters had a magical childhood. He convinced them there were "Cricks" living underneath the floorboards in our house. To feed the Cricks, his daughters had to leave treats including toenail clippings, dog hair and yellow jellybeans placed under a cup or bowl. After sufficient quiet time in an empty room, the Cricks would emerge to eat the treats and when the children removed the bowl, the treats would be gone. They had been replaced by a note thanking our daughters for their kindness and consideration of the lowly Cricks living under their feet. Another creature who inhabited our house was the Feather Fairy. Often in the afternoon Ray would sit on the couch in the living room with a child on either side and a book on his lap. He realized that as the afternoon sun streamed in through the west facing windows, he could get it to reflect off of the face of his watch to make a bright spot on the wall. With very subtle movements of his wrist, he could make the spot on the wall move up and down or from side to side. The children learned that they could ask the "feather fairy" yes or no questions and the feather fairy would respond. It took them some time to figure out the source of this magical fairy.

Putting the kids to bed at night was another source of entertainment. We were both teachers so we always both had schoolwork to do in the evening. As a result, we took turns taking the kids up to bed. I was a complete failure at this job. Eventually Ray would hear the sound of someone descending the stairs. When he looked up, he saw the children's faces peaking around the corner while I was sound asleep in their bed upstairs. Ray also was a failure but for a completely different reason. Lying in their bed, he would cover his face with the covers. Sometimes when the kids pulled the covers back, they would find a sweet grandmotherly character full of comfort and love, but sometimes when they pulled the covers back, they would find a terrifying monster, and they would run screaming from the room. Downstairs I would think to myself that settling down to go to sleep would be a long time in the future. But of course, the children loved it.

Ray died of ALS as a young man. He lived barely long enough to see his younger daughter graduate from college, but he missed out on seeing his daughters pursue their dreams in their professional careers, and he missed getting to know his four remarkable grandchildren. I think to myself, almost daily, about how much he would have enjoyed these developments. When he was dying and while he still could talk, he said to me one day in a voice I can still hear in my head, "It wouldn't be so hard if I didn't love it all so much."



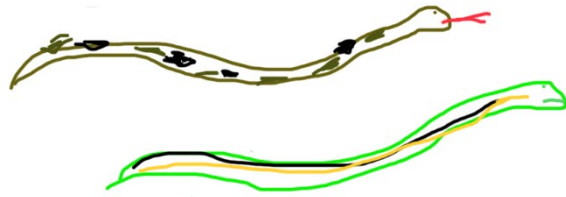
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*We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect.*

— Anaïs Nin

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## Sketches

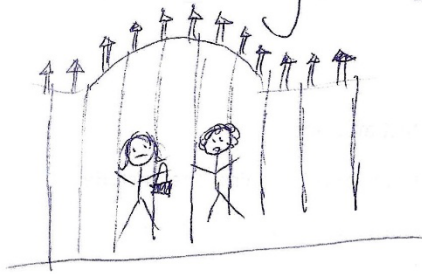


Mom - 96

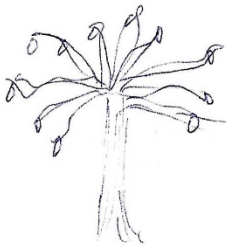
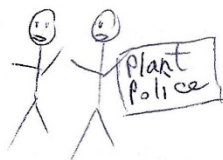


semi sesqui centennial

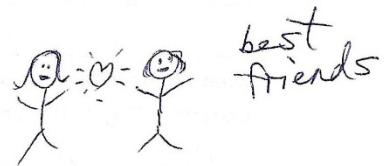
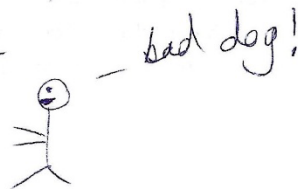
75 yrs



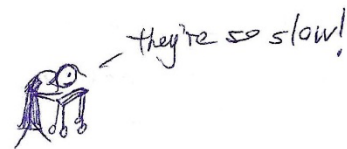
like monkeys at the Audubon Zoo



no pepper trees allowed!



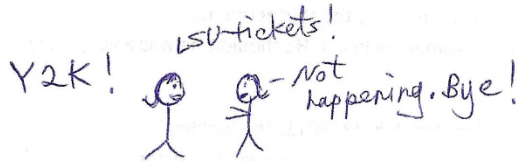
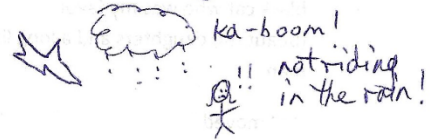
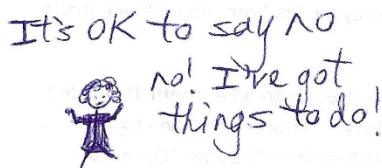
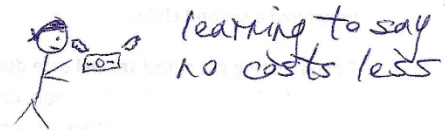
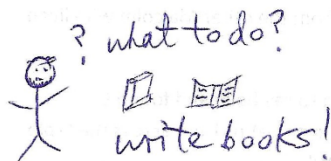
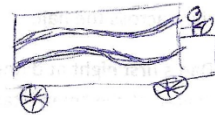
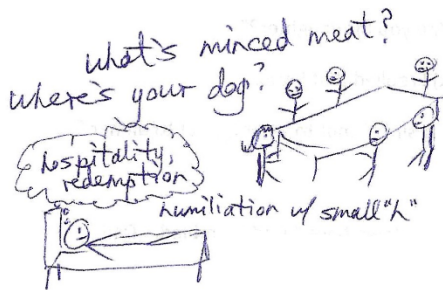
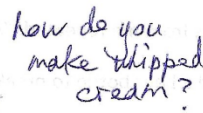
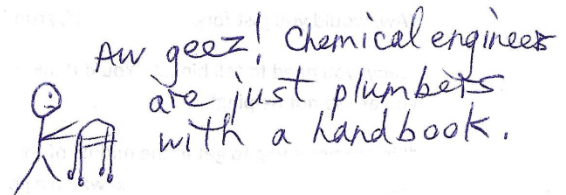
I left the perfect town



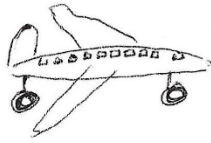
my perfect neighbors?



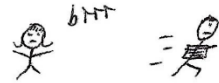
God stands at the door + knocks.



mechanical difficulties...



Let me off...



I only have one working  
eye but I see 20/20.



I was wet with contempt.  
Get yourself home safe.



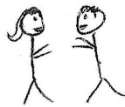
Give me one reason to stay here  
but none remained.



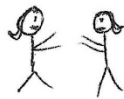
I was like a tumbleweed



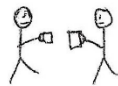
I dare you to get married!



After 20 years I left.



one is silver  
and the other gold



love your neighbor

I chose the French horn.

Robin Rowan

Going to Turkey ... was the dress rehearsal

Trish Kaplan

This is the final rehearsal

Danni Shields

we moved to a high rise.  
22 flights in Detroit - too much!

Diare Diaab

My dad had no kidneys ... but life went on.  
I will eat what I want.  
A cat with 9 lives.

Jacqueline Eco

The first one to go gets their choice.

Jeff Sibley

taking my son to visit special places

Going to Oxford, Miss.

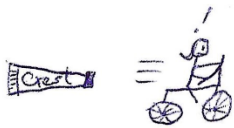
Estella Champion

you look like your mother



Innocent until proven guilty.

Diane Owens



that's not how  
you do it.

Madelon Kelly



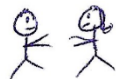
I'm ready.

Marrin Broome



We were married  
68 years.

Myrna  
Bergeron



marriage is preparing me for  
final rehearsal

Bill  
Stickle



8th grade



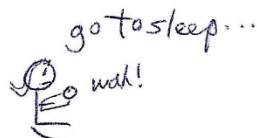
just use this belt.

Kathleen  
Louper



next time is  
for real!

Paula  
Stephens



This is the final  
rehearsal.

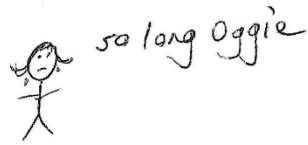
Virginia  
Yarbrough



The flame.  
The present.  
No future.  
Just now.

Susan  
Barkalis

It is important to listen...



Myrna  
Bergeron

Sad news...



Dad, dad,  
I love you.

Will the world be the  
same after the pandemic?

Paola  
Stephens



sunset in Jordan  
daily call to prayer

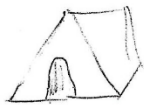
light beige  
dark beige  
dusty beige

Sandra  
Zaid



I learned to type.

Jeff Sibley



My desire to pee evaporated.

Madelon Kelly

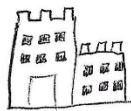


I'll be on later flight.



Perfect!

Diane Diaab



I lived here in a  
past life. I belong there.

Castles choose people.



babysitting at 50¢ per hour.  
quite a nest egg.

kicking pebbles so they could see more of the world

Robin Roman

Mom told me to say I was an only child.



I changed school & it  
changed the course of  
my life.

Trish  
Kaplan



the porch light + smudge pot returned  
me to a place where I belonged

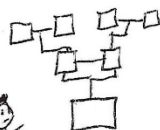
Martin  
Broome



I almost returned to work. I worked  
on a house & met my future wife.



-why are you  
doing this?



An only child of an only child of an only  
child who had an only child.

climbing my family tree



Kathleen  
Louper



God + religion are not the same

Virginia



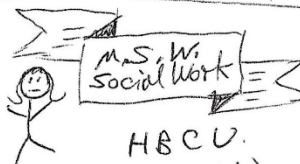
cornflakes + bananas



Susan  
Barkulis

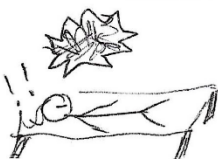


Geology Dept.?!



HBCU.  
Gambling

Helen Groves



writers write to remember  
& discover who they are.  
Asking, seeking, & finding.

Versa  
Stickle



I'm the mother of two.  
One with me now and  
one in heaven.

Sandra Zaid

I learn life wisdom + drink  
coffee with my classmates at OLLI.  
This is real now.



piano lessons were  
always fun with  
Fern.

Helen  
Groves



OLLI Life Writing class, Spring 2026