



# LOOKING-GLASS WOMAN

Poems and Reflections

A Memoir

by Kathy Vaillancourt



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A Memoir

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ISBN 0-9761154-0-9

Published by Kathy Vaillancourt  
19600 Ronnerud Lane  
Blanchardville, WI 53516

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*Cover and Illustrations by Greg Bykowski*

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# PRELUDE

In his book The Wisdom of Memoir, Peter Gilmour of Loyola University Chicago writes that memoir is "examining, reflecting on, and sharing one's life events" and that "creating memoir is an artistic combination of memory, reflection, and imagination." The sharing of my life events began over thirty years ago when I read bedtime stories to my children Michelle and Shannon. Every night, after I read pages from classics like Heidi and Robinson Crusoe, they asked me to tell them stories about my childhood. "What books did you read when you were a little girl?" "What was it like living with seven brothers and sisters?" "What was your favorite toy?" "Did your mother read you stories at bedtime?" "What school did you go to?" "Who was your best friend?" Some stories I had to tell over and over, like the one about Tony the bully burying my face in a snowbank and how my brother Denny saved me. I never tired of re-telling stories, because I always recalled another important detail about the event. Thanks to my children's unwavering curiosity and interest in my life, I was able to sift through the fine grains of memory and discover gems from my past, much like a child digging in beach sand and uncovering unexpected treasures like sand dollars and pennies.

Over the years, the telling of my story evolved from oral history to poetry. After publishing over a

dozen poems in magazines and journals, my husband Dan suggested that I collect my poems in a series of memoirs. Although I liked the idea, I wasn't sure if small groupings of poems would be enough to tell my story. I talked to Peter Gilmour about my reservation, and he led me to Ross Talarico's Hearts and Times. In this extraordinary book, Talarico transcribed the oral memories of senior men and women, some over one hundred years old, and then created poems from their stories. Before each poem he wrote a brief essay explaining its background. These essays inspired me to write reflections before each section and poem in Looking-Glass Woman, reflections that gave more insight into particular periods of my life.

Looking-Glass Woman celebrates my life as little girl, young woman, married woman, and mother.

# LITTLE GIRL



## Introduction

*To most people, my grandfather Edwin "Poppy" Moore was a distinguished newspaper editor and columnist.\* To his grandchildren, he was a wonderful white-haired wizard. He wrote letters in yellow crayon from the Golden Goose, who promised us gifts of frog skins on our birthdays. He pulled pennies from our ears and noses. He made candy canes appear in our pillowcases. But his greatest magic act took place every Saturday night, when he conjured up his invisible genie, the Gin-Gin Man.*

*I awaited my turn to meet the Gin-Gin Man outside the bathroom next to the kitchen. My heart grew butterfly wings and fluttered in my chest. My stomach did back flips and somersaults. Then Poppy's sweet voice called, "Kathleen! Oh, Kathleen, my lovely queen, you may enter now."*

*I opened the door and saw Poppy sitting on the toilet throne wearing a king's red crown made of paper and waving his wooden cane like a magic wand. I stood in front of him and he whispered, "Close your eyes real tight and hold out your hands, palms up." I closed my eyes so tightly that my nose and top lip crinkled. I held out my hands and wondered if the Gin-Gin Man would notice that they were shaking. Poppy gently tapped his cane on the floor and chanted, "Gin-Gin Man, Gin-Gin Man, come, come, as fast as you can! Little Kathleen is pretty and sweet. Come! Come! And bring her a treat!"*

*Poof! Something light landed in my hand, and I opened my eyes: a roll of rainbow-colored candy wafers! I looked*

*at Poppy and said, "Where is he? Where is he? I want to say thank you to the Gin-Gin Man." I got down on my hands and knees and peeked behind the toilet. I told Poppy to "pretty please get off the toilet" so that I could see if the Gin-Gin Man was swimming in the toilet bowl. I looked under the toilet plunger. Poppy laughed and said, "Only I can see him, Kathleen, and right now he's sitting on your left shoulder and smiling at you."*

*Ah, what magic, believing with all my young heart that a candy fairy was sitting on my shoulder!*

*Poppy died shortly after he created the Gin-Gin Man. My seven-year-old heart was broken, and I hunted around the house for days, looking for his book of magic tricks, hoping to find a potion to make Poppy reappear.*

*\*Edwin A. Moore's newspaper career spanned forty-eight years (1906-1954). He was the state editor of the Portland Press Herald for twenty-five years, and upon his retirement at seventy-two he penned a thrice-weekly column, "All In a Lifetime."*





## *FIRST PAYCHECK*

My father was a small man, about five feet eight inches tall, 145 pounds. By day he constructed and repaired billboards along Maine highways, and two nights a week he bundled newspapers and loaded the heavy stacks on a delivery truck. In addition to his paying jobs, he built wooden airplanes, go-carts, bookshelves, desks, and closets for his eight children. No matter what we asked him to build, he never turned us down, never complained, never asked for anything in return. The most I could do for him when I was a little girl was to rub his feet at the end of a long work day. But I always wanted to do more, like buy him a car so he wouldn't have to take two buses to work, or buy him a new television so he wouldn't have to shake and curse the old "idiot box" every day, or buy him a pile of lumber so he could build a big workshop instead of squeezing himself and his tools into the small one-person cubicle in the cellar. My first paycheck wasn't enough to make even one day's payment on any of my wishes, but I still felt the thrill of having enough money to buy my father the biggest T-bone steak at Mangino's grocery store one September evening in 1961.

## *FIRST PAYCHECK*

I was fourteen  
first paycheck in hand.  
Daddy's cupboards were bare  
bills to pay  
ten mouths to feed.

I ran to Mangino's grocery store  
heart beating  
like hummingbird wings.  
I wanted to surprise Daddy  
with a T-bone steak.

I met him in aisle three.  
He was reaching for an oatmeal box  
his hands cracked  
like sun-dried leather  
another hard day  
of fixing billboards.

He didn't speak  
only stared  
when he saw  
the steak  
and paycheck.

"You spoiled the surprise,"  
I told him.  
Daddy cried  
in the cereal aisle.

## *HEART MURMUR*

When flus, colds, chicken pox, mumps, or measles hit our house, the eight of us fell sick one after the other. My mother climbed the fifteen-step staircase carrying tea and toast, soup and crackers, ginger ale and applesauce, but we were never happy. "There's not enough sugar in my tea." "My toast is cold." "My ginger ale isn't fizzy enough." "What's that brown thing in my applesauce?" I often felt hot and cranky, because I had to sleep with my sister Janet, who always moved to my side of the bed. My mother never heard me when I asked her to make the fever and Janet go away. She was too busy changing Denny's sheets because he threw up, or she had to make more tea because Laurie spilled hers, or.... But one day I came down with a non-contagious disease, rheumatic fever. For the first time ever, I was sick alone. My brothers and sisters were at school, and every weekday for a month I had my mother to myself. I don't remember much of the pain and fear I felt when I had rheumatic fever, but I will never forget my mother's healing and loving touches.

## *HEART MURMUR*

I'm nine years old  
and I just got home  
from the hospital.  
Dr. Davis says  
I have rheumatic fever.  
He says my heart  
is very sick.  
My heart feels okay  
but I'm very tired  
and my legs and arms and back  
hurt so bad that sometimes  
I cry.  
I have to stay home in bed  
for a month  
and take penicillin pills  
and naps  
every day for a year.

Mama fixes a bed for me  
on the living-room couch  
so I won't feel lonely  
upstairs in my bedroom.  
She covers me  
with a pink blanket  
and she puts two pillows  
under my head.  
Next to the couch  
is a coffee table  
with my Mickey Mouse  
coloring book and crayons

Annette Funicello paper dolls  
Nancy Drew mystery books.

Mama tucks the blanket  
under my chin  
and she kisses my nose.  
"I'm making you a nice cup  
of hot tea and some toast."

This is the first time  
ever  
I'm home alone with Mama.  
Denny, Paula, Nancy, and Janet  
are in school.  
Baby brother Stephen  
is with Nana  
my grandmother  
who lives up the street.  
Daddy's at work.

The teakettle whistles  
and POP goes the toast.  
"Put lots of milk in my tea"  
I say to Mama.  
"And some extra sugar  
pretty please."

I feel like a princess  
when Mama puts the tray  
on my lap.  
The margarine is melted  
into the toast

just the way I like it.  
The tea is warm and sweet.  
"Thank you, Mama."  
She smiles and says  
"Later we can share  
a powdered jelly doughnut."  
Then she puts a cardboard sign  
that says "Bakery"  
in the front window.  
At ten o'clock  
"Red" the bakery man  
will see the sign  
stop his truck  
ring our bell  
show Mama a big box of  
doughnuts  
cupcakes  
eclairs  
cookies  
and Mama will pick out  
a big fat doughnut  
and share it with me.

Mama's in the kitchen again  
and I hear  
the SWISH of the broom  
the CLINK of the dishes  
the CLUNK-CLUNK-CLUNK  
of the washing machine.  
Mama turns on the radio  
and I giggle and spill my tea  
when she makes her voice

real  
deep  
and sings "Sixteen Tons"  
with Tennessee Ernie Ford.  
I fall asleep to  
"Saint Peter don't you call me  
cause I can't go."

When I awake  
it's one o'clock.  
Mama brings me  
a toasted cheese sandwich  
and a bowl of tomato soup.  
She cuts the sandwich  
into pretty squares  
and she blows on the soup  
to cool it.  
"You were sleeping  
when the bakery truck came"  
she says. "But I saved you  
a piece of doughnut for dessert."  
I clap my hands and shout  
"Goody, goody!"  
Mama tells me not to get  
too excited  
or I'll wear myself out.

After lunch Mama rubs  
my sore legs and back.  
Her soft warm hands  
help me not to cry  
and make me feel sleepy again.



CLICK

The furnace turns on.

Mama goes across the room  
and stands on the heating vent.

Her blue dress blows up  
like a hot-air balloon  
and it looks like she could  
fly away.

Pretty soon

my brothers and sisters  
and Daddy will be home.

Mama and I won't be alone  
anymore.

I wonder if there's enough  
air in her dress  
to carry us off  
together  
forever?

## *FIRST LOVE*

It happens every summer. A gull screeches overhead as I walk along the shores of Lake Michigan in Chicago, and memories of my childhood summer days on Casco Bay in Portland, Maine rush in like the tide.

With my bedroom window wide open on the ocean side, I woke up each day to the morning screeching of sea gulls, somewhat like a farmer wakes up to the crowing of a rooster. I didn't mind getting up early, because I wanted to be at East End Beach by 9:00 A.M. to get an early start on a full day of sunbathing. Back then, I believed lying in the sun was good for me. I packed egg salad and bologna sandwiches, my homemade suntan lotion of two parts olive oil to one part vinegar, transistor radio, blue and white striped blanket, and yellow towel. I threw my beach survival kit into a paper bag, and I washed a McIntosh apple to eat on the ten-minute walk to the beach. The sea gulls followed me to the beach, swooping down and diving at my hand, hoping to get a bite of my apple. I would shoo them away and hide the apple under my shirt, bending down to my waist to take a few bites. By the time I reached the beach, dozens of sea gulls were circling above me, and dozens more were prancing along the shoreline. Some were pruning themselves by dipping their beaks into the salty water and washing their white feathers, others were pecking the sand for dead fish, bread crumbs, potato chips, candy,

anything. I laid out my blanket close to the water and hid my sandwiches in my towel so the sea gulls wouldn't smell them. They strutted around my blanket when I put the olive oil and vinegar on my legs, arms, and face, and I threw handfuls of sand at them to keep them away. They left for awhile but came back again...strutting, prancing, pruning, just like the boys did, when I turned thirteen.

## *FIRST LOVE*

When I was ten  
I met him at East End Beach  
in Portland  
Longfellow's "beautiful town  
by the sea."  
"I'm Tom," he said  
as we walked along the low-tide shore  
mud oozing between our toes  
gulls squawking at our feet  
begging for lunch.  
I was too shy to speak my name  
but I stayed by his side  
and helped him gather clam shells  
to decorate his sand castle.  
He made me a garland of dry seaweed  
and placed it on my head.  
"I crown you queen of my castle."  
When his fingers touched my hair  
I looked into his green eyes  
and whispered, "My name is Kathy."

The following summer  
we met at high tide  
and dove off the rocky point  
screaming "Jiminy Cricket"  
when our sun-drenched bodies  
hit the icy sea.

One day he chased me with a jelly fish  
and threw it on my back.

I cried.  
He gave me a beach towel  
to dry my tears.  
"Sorry," he said.  
Later we floated on our inner tubes  
and drifted along the shore.  
He held my hand  
when waves as strong as crowbars  
tried to pry us apart.  
He gave me his Red Sox baseball cap  
to shield my sunburned face  
and we laughed  
when he pulled the brim down  
to cover my freckled nose.  
In August he bought me a ten-cent ring  
and asked me to be his girl.  
I smiled and gave him  
my left hand.

The summer of my twelfth year  
we met at a downtown wharf.  
He paid my fare and we climbed aboard  
the Peaks Island ferry.  
The boat swayed and rocked  
and we staggered to the bow  
like dizzy children  
after a merry-go-round ride.  
A chilly northeast wind  
blew goose bumps on my skin  
so he put his arms around me.  
I looked up at him and asked  
"How long will the ride be?"

He lowered his head to answer  
and our lips touched.  
The kiss was salty like the sea  
but it was sweetened by our love.  
"How long?" I asked again.  
"Forever," he said.



## LOOKING-GLASS WOMAN

I was raised Irish Catholic, and I learned at an early age that one of the biggest sins was masturbation, or, as my mother delicately put it, “playing with yourself.” After I touched my breasts out of curiosity, I was confused. Was this what my mother meant by playing with myself? Had I just committed a sin? There was only one thing to do: go to confession and ask for forgiveness. But how could I possibly tell dear gentle Father Knox that I had stood on the toilet seat in my bathroom, naked, looked at my fourteen-year-old body in the mirror, and.... Scared and embarrassed, I reviewed the Ten Commandments to see which one had something to do with sex. Ah, yes, the seventh commandment, “Thou shall not commit adultery.”

I trembled as I knelt in the confessional. I did the usual “Bless me Father for I have sinned” routine, and then I decided to slip my major sin between the little sins so it wouldn’t stand out. Right between “I talked back to my mother twice” and “I swore two times,” I said, “I sinned against the seventh commandment once.” Fr. Knox gasped and coughed. Then he said, “How old are you?”

Ten minutes later, after delicate questioning (I never had to say exactly what I did), he sighed in relief. I thought he would give me a whole rosary to say as penance, but I suspect he was so relieved I hadn’t



committed adultery that he gave me only five Our  
Fathers and ten Hail Marys.

*LOOKING-GLASS WOMAN*

I stood before the mirror  
naked  
the oak-tree branch  
outside the bathroom window  
tapping  
on the glass  
like my mother's words  
rapping  
on my conscience  
"It's a mortal sin  
to look at your body."

How old was I then?  
Fourteen?  
Young enough  
to believe in  
sin and hell.

I started to walk away  
from the looking-glass woman  
but she smiled  
and beckoned me to stay.

I felt no desire  
only curiosity  
when my fingers  
stroked the cherry-stone nipples  
where a babe's soft lips  
might rest one day.  
"Two little miracles"

I whispered.  
My hands drifted  
from my breasts  
and circled  
the soft round hill  
of my belly.  
"Will a baby ever  
live here?"  
I lowered my hands to...

CRASH!!

The oak tree  
snapped  
its gnarled branches  
like my mother's voice  
crackling  
its guilt-ridden warning  
"You'll get pimples  
and go blind  
if you play with yourself."

I shouted  
"I don't want to play  
I want to explore!"  
But the look of confusion  
(or was it shame?)  
in the eyes of  
the looking-glass woman  
silenced me.  
I covered my body  
with a pink flannel robe

and said  
"Another day...maybe."



# SISTER



## Introduction

*Climbing the pear tree in the backyard of my childhood home symbolized for me what it was like to be the fourth of eight children. I would be halfway up the tree when my older sisters and brother reached the top. I would look up at them, wishing I were as fast and strong as they were. Then I would feel tugs on my ankles and hear a chorus of small voices, my little brothers and sisters, begging me to wait for them. Caught in the middle of the family, I was either looking up to my three older siblings or being looked up to by my younger siblings.*

*One day, however, we had to grow up. It didn't matter who was the first, fourth, or last born. We all had to face heartbreaks we never dreamed of when life was as simple as climbing a pear tree.*

## *SOLDIER GIRL*

Daddy always said that my sister Paula was “one cool cucumber,” especially when she had to take care of her baby brothers and sisters. Poor Paula. It seemed that every time Mama and Daddy walked out the door, something happened to one of us that required stitches or tetanus shots. One day, Janet tripped over her shoelaces on the front sidewalk and split her chin open. Another day, Denny was playing pirate in the backyard, and he had to walk a plank, which had a six-inch rusty spike in it...yes, it went right through his foot. Then, while I was falling on the small ice rink in our backyard and splitting my head open, Nancy was putting her arm through a door window while chasing Denny and his friend Billy through the house (it took seventy stitches to close up her arm). The blood fell on our clothes and on the floor and we wailed, “Please God I don’t want to die,” but Paula never panicked. She would calmly tell one of us to scoot to find Mama and Daddy, she would clean our wounds and reassure us that we weren’t going to be meeting Saint Peter that day, and then she would sigh and say, “Well, kids, I think we’re in big trouble again.”



## *SOLDIER GIRL*

Her name is not in history books  
she never won a Purple Heart.  
She rises everyday at 5:00 A.M.  
to a Big Ben reveille  
and marches  
to the beat of  
wash  
dress  
eat  
pack your lunch  
march, girl, march  
left right  
left right  
out the door  
to battle  
a new day  
alone.

She has no weapons  
to wipe out  
the nightmare of  
the drunk driver  
who launched a bomb  
at her blue-eyed son  
and buried her under  
fragments of grief.

The enemy  
despair  
hovers in the trenches

of her sorrow  
but this soldier girl  
keeps marching  
left right  
left right  
then climbs into  
her Toyota tank  
and inches along city streets,  
mine fields to her now.

She stops at a red light  
and stares at  
the frail old man  
stumbling off the curb  
the war in his belly  
written on his cardboard sign  
"Help me. I'm hungry."  
He limps to her window  
and she gives him  
her tuna salad and apple  
not enough to put meat  
on his bones  
but enough for him  
to live another day.

He says, "Thank you, ma'am"  
and tips his newspaper cap  
as he hobbles away.  
The light turns green  
and a red car  
like a bullet  
shoots in front of her.

She rests her forehead  
on the steering wheel  
and wonders how much longer  
she can march  
alone  
left right  
left right.

NANCY  
1944-1997

In our Munjoy Hill neighborhood, my older sister Nancy was the resident tomboy. By the age of twelve, she ran faster and climbed higher than any boy on the block. With her green eyes flashing and her sun-bleached pony tail swinging wildly behind her head, she raced around the block on summer nights, several yards ahead of the boys, and she climbed to the top of the pear tree in our backyard before any of them had time to scale the bottom half of the trunk. While her girlfriends were anxiously waiting to graduate from training bras to the real thing, Nancy ran around bare chested, using the training bra my mother gave her as a slingshot! She was so strong and fast and fearless that I thought she would live forever.

NANCY  
1944-1997

You went away  
in early spring  
a forty-year-old widow  
traveling alone  
heading west  
(Arizona or Colorado, I believe)  
looking for the spirit  
of your dead husband Bud.  
Mama said it was grief  
that made you lose your mind  
but I understood why  
you didn't want to let Bud go.  
He was your first taste of  
love  
an elixir  
to your mangled body, heart  
and soul.

When you first met Bud  
he asked  
"Why are you so sad?"  
He cried  
when you told him  
how the tall blond blue-eyed  
monster  
you ran away from  
but still feared  
abused your body  
to satisfy his sick desires

called you dirty  
said you were a whore.  
In your twenty-year-old  
innocence  
you took three baths a day  
to wash away  
the invisible grime.  
Now you were taking  
three valiums a day  
to cope with the pain  
and shame.

Bud chased away the monster  
with playful jaunts  
on the fog-draped beach  
racing you in and out  
of curtains of mist  
kissing your nose and forehead  
when you tripped  
and fell  
into his arms.  
He shared  
his lemon meringue pie  
and put two extra lumps of sugar  
in your tea.  
He painted your portrait  
lingering on  
your sea-green eyes  
your long brown sun-streaked hair  
pausing between brush strokes  
to say  
"You are so beautiful."

Then he made love to you  
carefully  
tenderly  
holding you  
until your sadness and fear  
disappeared.

You told him  
the last time  
you were this happy  
was the summer  
of your twelfth year  
when you climbed the pear tree  
in our backyard  
bare chested and barefooted  
hair tied in a pony tail  
with yellow twine  
blue jeans cut off at the knees  
an old green mop handle for a spear.  
You pounded your boyish chest  
and yelled like Tarzan  
calling all your friends  
to come play "jungle."  
I was always the first to come  
your little sister  
who loved you so.  
You let me walk  
beside you  
carry your spear  
fix your pony tail  
when the wind untied it.

I wonder if today  
your pear tree  
is a mountain top  
in the Rockies  
if you're pounding your chest  
yelling like Tarzan  
trying to call Bud  
back to you.

He won't come  
but I would  
if only I knew  
where you were.





DENNY  
1945-1984

It happened forty-six years ago, but I can still see the evil smile on Tony's face right before he pushed my head into the snowbank on the corner of Montreal and North streets. I can still feel the terror of not being able to breathe when his hands held my face in the snow. Just when I thought I was going to die, his hands suddenly let go of my head, and I was pulled from the snowbank, gasping for air. I heard, "You sonavabitch! If I ever catch you near my little sister again, I'll knock your block off!" It was Denny! My big brother! My hero!

Later that night, I knocked on Denny's bedroom door to thank him again for saving me. No answer. I went back to bed, and just as I was falling asleep, my right arm slipped off the side of the bed and dangled near the floor.

WHAM! A hand reached out from under the bed and grabbed mine! I was too scared to scream. Then I heard giggles from under the bed and a few seconds later Denny's voice, "Gotcha good!"

That's what it was like growing up with Denny. One minute he was my hero, the next minute he was my tormenter. But he always remained the big brother I adored.

*DENNY*  
*1945-1984*

Denny...  
the third of eight children  
(I was the fourth)  
the first-born son  
(the first child to die)  
tall and skinny like a white birch tree  
(did you know I basked in your shade?)  
eyes brown and sad like a basset hound's  
hair spiked and gold like wheat.

You were a "funny" kid  
nervous, timid, always hungry  
sneaking downstairs in the middle  
of the night to feast on grape jelly  
sandwiches. One night I followed you  
and found you leaning against the  
waist-high bread drawer, yelping like  
an injured pup. Mama came running  
and Daddy soon after and it wasn't  
until a month later that you were  
brave enough to tell me you had caught  
your penis in the drawer. Oh, how we  
laughed when you said "penis,"  
recalling how Mama told us it was a  
hot dog that should stay in its bun  
(and a vagina was a pocketbook that  
should always be closed).

You were a paperboy  
for three or four years and you hid  
your money in a shoe box under your bed.  
Sometimes you let me touch the  
quarters, dimes, and silver dollars  
but only after I raised my right hand  
and said three times "Honest-to-god  
I'll never squeal about Denny's shoe box."  
(Do you know I still have the quarter  
you gave me for keeping my promise?)

You weren't a strong boy  
but you were brave, especially  
the day you punched Buddy Willis  
on the arm when he pushed me down  
and I scraped my knees. Buddy  
outweighed you by twenty pounds  
and he laughed when he gave you  
a bloody nose...but you never cried.

You were eighteen, barely a man,  
when you told Mama you were going to  
be a daddy. No college now, only  
sweaty monotonous construction work to  
feed your little family. I helped you  
pack the day you left home and I cried  
and hugged you when you gave me your  
empty shoe box. (Do you know I still keep it  
under my bed?)

When I was twenty-five  
I moved 1500 miles away and we wrote

and phoned to keep in touch. Five years later I ate dinner at your house (broiled hamburgers, mashed potatoes, green beans) and you buttered a piece of white Nissen's bread and smothered it with grape jelly. You smiled at me when you put the bread on my plate and I laughed and choked on green beans when I remembered your little penis caught in the bread drawer.

When you were thirty-nine brain cancer slowly destroyed your body and mind. One day I was feeding you vanilla pudding and you spit it in my face. "Get in your goddamn car and drive to hell," you screamed. I wanted to tell you that I was already in hell watching you waste away but instead I leaned over and kissed you on the nose the only part of your body that didn't hurt. Then you wept and grabbed my hand and said in the little boy voice of long ago, "I don't want to die, Kathy."

For several months after you died I dreamed of you filling your old shoe box under my bed. In each dream you put something different in the box--a grape jelly sandwich, a quarter, a hot dog and bun.

Then you smiled and put the shoe box in my hands. As you walked away I cried, "I don't want all this stuff. I want you!" It took me awhile to understand that all the "stuff" *was* you and that you had never really left me.



# MARRIED WOMAN





## *Introduction*

*June 21, 2002*

*Dearest Dan,*

*Thirty-five years we've been together, but that first year still pops up in my mind like it happened this morning. Remember when our parents said our marriage wouldn't last, because we were only twenty and had known each other for only nine months? I'm sure you recall asking me to marry you on our first date. And don't tell me again, Mr. Wise Guy, that you asked every girl to marry you on the first date and that I was the only fool to say yes! Ah, the dances, the kisses, the nights on the beach – six months of fun-filled romance. Then in September you left for Paris to study at the Sorbonne for a year. I can still feel the deck of the Queen Mary (her last Atlantic crossing to Europe) under my feet, the smell of your blue cotton shirt as we hugged our goodbyes, your sweet voice calling me your brave girl because I wasn't crying. (I wasn't brave. I was distracted by the sound of my heart breaking.) Do you find it hard to believe we were so lovesick after we parted that two months later we had each lost ten pounds? How could we wait until June to get married? With the help of the kind French family you lived with, you found a way around the no-married-student rule of the study abroad program. You came home at Christmas, we married on December 30, and two days later we flew to Paris.*

*What better place for a newly married couple to live in Paris than the tiny studio owned by the sister of the*

*famous French sex goddess, Brigitte Bardot! Ou-la-la! The French food wasn't bad either. Your student allowance was meager, but it included daily meal tickets at a local restaurant. For the other meals, we raided neighborhood stores for crusty baguettes with Camembert cheese, hardboiled eggs, demi-baguettes stuffed with cheese, ham, pickles, onions, tomatoes, and olives--can you believe we ate all this stuff! --and for dessert we shared a gooey, seven-layer Napoleon. Our big accomplishment was to savor a glass of Beaujolais and not get tipsy.*

*Do you remember, my darling Dan, the theatre, opera, cinema, and the walking and traveling during those six months? Student tickets to just about everything were so inexpensive we went out four nights a week. Remember the roasted chestnuts we shared the night we saw Carmen? And what about the magical walks along the banks of the Seine River, the kissing under the Arc de Triomphe, the hugging in the Luxembourg Gardens, the praying in Notre Dame Cathedral, and the posing for artists at Montmartre? I'm sure you'll never forget the three weeks traveling by train around Europe during Easter break. Oh, how we laughed when you were propositioned by a prostitute in Amsterdam, and when my derrière was pinched in Rome! When we returned from our trip, we were both happy and scared to learn I was pregnant.*

*We had about two days to think about life with a baby, and then the May 1968 Paris student and worker riots began. I can still see the blood and shredded skin on your face from being clubbed unconscious by police on your*

*way home from classes one day. Thank God your friend Didier was there to drag you into an alley before the police threw you into a van and deported you! I can still hear the rubber bullets whiz over our heads on the way home from the pâtisserie one evening. Didn't we hide under a Deux Chevaux car for two hours? And what a thrill it was to hear Jean-Paul Sartre speak to the striking students at the Sorbonne! (Remember how we laughed when he wiped his runny nose on the sleeve of his sports jacket?) When the riots spread and virtually closed down the city, we worried about our safety. On June 6, 1968, two weeks before our scheduled departure, we sailed home on the Queen Elizabeth.*

*Dan, you sometimes ask me if I am happy, if I long for the exciting days of Paris, if our life together, now, has the same adventure and romance? Oh, Dan, how can those days compare to us sledding by moonlight, planting trees while singing the Beatles' "I Want To Hold Your Hand," skinny dipping in Yellowstone Lake, watching our children, Shannon and Michelle, grow into parents, playing hide-and-seek with our grandsons, Tyler, Derek, and Jonathan...shall I continue, dear sweet Dan?*

## TREESONG

By the time I was seven years old, I was familiar with the story of the world's most famous tree. I had looked at pictures of it in a Bible story book, I had heard Father Knox preach about it at Sunday mass, and I had listened to my mother and her friends whisper about it at the kitchen table while they drank Tetley tea and puffed on Winston cigarettes. Like them, I wondered why Adam and Eve hadn't stayed away from the tree with the forbidden fruit, especially since God had given them so many other nice things to eat. I got my answer when I was eight years old.

It was the summer of 1955. On most days, my friends and I met in Susan Donley's yard to jump rope, play hide-and-seek, and mother our rubber-coated baby dolls. Susan's yard was paradise to us. Not only was it one of the few yards in the neighborhood that had grass and flowers, it also had plenty of food and drink. On the west side of the yard, there were four small trees bulging with sweet red cherries. Next to a bunch of red rose bushes was a green picnic table filled with a large pitcher of lemonade and a plate of chocolate cream-filled devil dogs. And right smack in the middle of this Garden of Eden stood a twenty-foot apple tree with branches drooping from the weight of age and green apples.

The queen of this yard was Susan's mother, Grace, who told us to eat freely from the cherry trees and the goodies on the picnic table. "But stay away from the apple tree," she warned us. "The green apples will poison you with bad cramps and the trots (diarrhea). And for godsake, don't climb the tree! It must be one hundred years old by now, too old and brittle to hold all you kids. I don't want you falling and breaking your heads."

Naturally, we were intrigued by the tree and its forbidden fruit, stealing glances at them now and then, wondering what those little green apples tasted like and whether the branches would be strong enough to hold us. But we obeyed Grace's warning, until one hot August day when the sun coiled its rays around our bodies like serpents, luring us to the shade of the apple tree. As we approached the tree, its branches waved up and down in the wind like arms, welcoming us, beckoning us to come and eat and rest in its arms. Broken bones and cramps and trots were forgotten, and we climbed the tree, grabbing and biting into green apples, faces twisted in puckers. In the middle of our third apple, we heard, "Susan, Kathy, Janet!" Grace Donley, all ninety pounds of her, was coming out of her house to bring us more lemonade. When she called our names, we tried to hide behind the tree leaves on the branches, but it was too late. Grace appeared under the tree, lemonade pitcher in one hand, the other hand pointing to the back gate for us to leave. We dropped to the ground like

falling apples, and ran with heads down and hands covering our sore stomachs, little Eves banished from the Garden of Eden.

## TREE SONG

*December 8, 1980  
The night John Lennon died  
a man fell apart  
slept four hours a night  
slammed doors  
gagged on his food  
turned away from his wife  
afraid of the blackness  
filling his heart.  
He didn't know  
how to tell her.*

April 28, 2000, Arbor Day  
Their favorite Beatles' song  
"I Want To Hold Your Hand"  
is playing on the radio.  
They sing along  
hold hands  
dance out the door  
grab two shovels  
plant an oak tree  
in their valley  
build a fence  
so deer can't eat it.

One day  
he finds her  
sitting in the dirt  
feeding the tree Miracle-Gro  
stroking its withered leaves  
straightening its bent back.

"It doesn't look good," she says.  
"But I think I can save it."

He looks at the mangled tree  
and says, "My God!  
It looks as bad as I did  
the night John Lennon died."  
It wasn't the death  
of his favorite Beatle  
that wrecked him.  
It was losing  
his mother  
his brother Bobby  
in one short year.  
Just like that  
"poof"  
they were gone.

He says  
"Did you know  
that your arms were like branches  
sheltering me from my pain  
that your kisses  
were like water  
to my parched heart  
that I will be  
forever thankful  
that you stood by me  
strong and tall and beautiful  
like the majestic oak  
this little tree  
will one day be?"



He coughs  
kicks the grass with his sneakers  
whispers  
"Did you know  
that I was afraid  
you would leave me?"

She reaches up  
holds his hands  
brings them to her lips  
kisses them  
tells him  
"I love you."

He sways  
like a tree  
in the wind  
falls into her arms  
happy  
to be rooted  
in her heart.

## MOONSLIDE

It was the night Dan and I went sledding by moonlight. We stood by the wood burning stove brushing snow off our socks, hats, and mittens, laughing and chattering about how we couldn't believe that fifty-two-year-old farts like ourselves had been playing outside in the snow past midnight. We took off our wet clothes, wrapped ourselves in a blanket, and snuggled on the couch to watch the full moon shine through the window. I sighed and said, "I should write a poem about tonight." Dan startled me when he replied, "Yes, yes! And call it 'Sledding By Moonlight' ...and make it a FUN poem!" I smiled when I heard the loud emphasis on the word "fun." Dan, my number one fan and editor, had been after me for a while to tuck a few fun poems among the serious ones. "Of course it will be a fun poem," I said. "It's all about us playing in the snow." At least, that's what it was supposed to be until....

*MOONSLIDE*

3:00 A.M.  
the morning of  
my fifty-second birthday.  
I wake  
to the wind  
whistling  
singing  
humming  
at the window.  
A full moon  
shines in my face.

I sit up in bed  
and look out  
the west window.  
Footprints and sled marks  
crisscross  
a white hill.  
Two snow angels  
lie in the backyard  
wings touching.

I reach  
under the bed  
and pull out  
a red wooden sled  
with silver runners  
a birthday present  
from Dan  
my husband

friend  
lover  
for thirty-two years  
who lies beside me  
smiling in his sleep.  
Perhaps he's dreaming  
about us sledding  
at midnight  
by moonlight.

I close my eyes  
and we're sliding  
fast  
faster  
whoosh!  
down the hill  
Dan's hands  
gripping my shoulders  
his teeth  
nibbling  
kissing  
my ears  
the icy wind  
numbing our noses  
taking our breaths  
away.

We're bouncing  
over snowdrifts  
laughing  
like ten year olds  
believing

life is forever  
death a fairy tale  
the sled  
a magic carpet  
flying above  
the snowy peaks  
of Sugarloaf Mountain  
where we first  
kissed.

Whish!  
Boom!  
The soaring sled  
falls  
on a frozen creek.  
We roll over  
the ice  
fannies bruised  
necks sore  
arms wrapped around  
each other.

The wind whistles  
at the window  
and calls me  
from my reverie.  
I push the sled  
under the bed  
and the green quilt  
slides off  
my bare legs.  
Moonbeams spotlight

wrinkles  
spider veins  
stretch marks.  
I crawl under  
the quilt  
and listen to the  
ticktock  
ticktock  
of the Big Ben  
alarm clock.  
Is it telling me  
that time is  
no longer  
on my side  
that I am getting  
old?

Ticktock  
ticktock  
four o'clock  
time to  
wake up Dan  
and go sledding  
again.



## *REBIRTH*

I didn't want to think about it, but after Dan's two cancer surgeries (they got it all, thank god) I tried to imagine life without Dan. Who would cook me a fried egg sandwich on toast, cut it in little triangles, make it taste like filet mignon, when I was tired and hungry? Who would drive to the grocery store at 11:00 P.M., twelve miles away, in a snowstorm, to buy me seedless red grapes, my favorite remedy for a sore throat? Who would wake me at midnight with a kiss, carry me to the window so I could see moon shadows dance in the wind? Who would lift the heavy recliner and move it in front of the fireplace, wrap me in a blanket, bring me a bowl of shredded wheat, raisins, and rice milk, tell me funny stories, when I was feeling overwhelmed or sad? Who would stand behind my computer chair, peek over my shoulder at the poetry I was writing, rub my neck and shoulders, tell me to keep up the great work? Who would.... Dan just peeked over my shoulder, and told me to stop all this sad talk. "I'm not going anywhere," he said, "at least not until you finish writing the book!"

Do you see why I would miss him?



*REBIRTH*

July 15, 2000.

11:15 P.M.

He finds her crying in the bathroom  
sitting on the toilet seat cover  
hugging a green bath towel.

"Are you sick?" he asks.

"Did you have a nightmare?"

She blows her nose on toilet paper  
tells him a hot flash woke her.

"I went to the bathroom

put cold water on my face

looked in the mirror

and saw a stranger

with graying hair

bloodshot eyes

wrinkles curving around

her eyes and mouth."

He kneels in front of her

puts his head on her lap

his arms around her waist.

"Maybe it's the damned  
fluorescent light," she says

"makes me look like an aging ghoul

reminds me that I am

on the other side of fifty

closer to St. Peter

than to the stork.

One day I am going to die  
*me*  
and there is nothing  
not a thing  
I can do about it."

He stands  
wipes her tears with his fingertips  
lifts her from the toilet seat.  
"Come," he says.

"Where are we going?"

"To the lake," he says  
matter-of-factly  
as if they went there  
every night at midnight  
she in her nightshirt  
he in his jockey shorts.

Midnight.  
They stand in the water  
chin deep  
under a moonless starlit sky.  
He kisses her hands  
lifts her arms  
takes off her nightshirt  
ties it around his waist.  
"What if someone comes?" she asks.  
He puts his fingers on her lips  
kisses her nose  
whispers "You are my beautiful

menopausal mermaid.”  
She puts her head on his shoulder  
hugs him tight.  
He tells her everything will be alright  
they’ll get through this together.

She lifts her feet from the sandy bottom  
his strong arms holding her up  
the cool water soothing her.  
She wonders if this is what it’s like  
to be a fetus in a womb  
floating  
safe  
secure  
loved.  
He kisses her neck and ears  
tells her “I love you.”  
She is reborn  
in his arms.

# MOTHER



## Introduction

*When I was pregnant for the first time at twenty, I wasn't afraid of giving birth to the baby or of motherhood. After all, I was the middle child of eight children, and I had helped my mother take care of three of my younger siblings. Poopy diapers, spit-up milk, snotty noses, 103° fevers, skinned knees, crying on the way to school, and fragile hearts were daily facts of life. And, thanks to my mother's baby-making genes (her nickname was "Eileen the baby machine"), my pregnancies and deliveries were predicted to be easy.*

*I did inherit my mother's baby-making genes--both my pregnancies and deliveries were a breeze. Okay, I admit that during the delivery of my son, when I had no anesthesia – god only knows why not – and the intern groped inside me to check the position of my son's melon-sized head, well, I called him a bastard. But I didn't scream the word, I merely grunted it as I searched the gurney for a weapon.*

*Yes, I had the body to carry my son and daughter and to bring them safely into the world. And I had the experience to know how to feed them, burp them, and change their diapers. But, oh, when my own kids had a 103° fever, a scraped knee, a bruised heart, cried "Mommy!" as the school doors closed behind them...that's when I discovered that upbringing and heredity had no way of preparing a woman's heart for motherhood.*

## *DID I EVER TELL YOU?*

It could have been a disaster letting Shannon skip two grades in grammar school. Sure, he scored at the sixth grade level on the standardized tests given in first grade, which meant he could handle the move intellectually. But how would he manage being two years younger than his classmates, two heads shorter, and god knows how many pounds lighter? I could already hear the taunts: “Hey, toothpick!” “Get outta my way, ya little squirt.” And then there was the problem of being so smart. More teasing: “How can a brain even fit in that little head.” “Hey, how about doing our homework since you’re so smart.” I asked Shannon for his input, because I figured if he was smart enough to skip two grades he had enough brains to voice his opinions and, maybe, his fears. But I forgot that six year olds have almost no concept of the future. All Shannon knew was that he was being singled out, and it made him feel special. He begged me to sign the papers.

Shannon experienced plenty of name-calling, but the names were affectionate ones. The girls and boys fussed over him like he was their baby brother. The girls called him their little “smurf,” and they loved to comb his blond hair and to tell him what beautiful blue eyes he had. He was “little guy” to the boys. And if anyone dared to bully Shannon, the older boys would send the culprits home with a black eye or split lip.

Shannon appeared to like all the attention he got from his classmates, but I often wondered if it was sometimes painful to be called the little guy. I guess it really doesn't matter, now that he's six feet tall, 175 pounds, and fussing over his own two little guys.

*DID I EVER TELL YOU?*

Shannon, did I ever tell you  
about the first time I saw you  
with your twin sons, Tyler and Derek?  
I was amazed  
blown away in fact  
when I looked at their tiny faces  
and saw your long black eyelashes  
your sapphire eyes  
your full-pink-kissable lips  
the brown hair  
on the crown of your head  
swirled in a perfect circle.

Did I ever tell you that your hands  
looked as big as baseball mitts  
when you picked up the little guys  
laid them on the changing table  
unsnapped their sleepers  
took off their soggy diapers  
lifted their pencil-sized legs  
cleaned and powdered their bottoms?  
I still marvel  
at how you took diapers  
twice the size of your baby boys  
and somehow wrapped them  
around their little waists and thighs  
neatly  
perfectly  
with no gaps for pee or poopy leaks.



Did you know that I cried  
when you bent your six-foot body  
over Tyler and Derek  
and kissed their bellies and toes?  
I kept staring at you  
wondering  
who is this man  
with the big mitts  
and gentle touch?

Shannon, did I ever tell you  
that when you turned and smiled at me  
called me "Grammie"  
there was something in  
your look  
your voice  
that brought me back  
to you, my little boy  
standing in the crib  
bouncing and laughing  
calling me  
"Mama, Mama"?  
I recall  
looking down at you  
tickling your chin  
tweaking your nose  
calling you  
my little Bozo the clown  
because your face was so round  
your cheeks so rosy  
and you were always smiling  
and making me laugh.

And, Shannon, did you know  
that even though you are thirty years old  
whenever I look at you  
I still see my little jolly Bozo?  
Yes, even today  
when I look up at you  
and call you  
"Daddy."



## YESTERDAY

“I wish I could be twelve forever.” Those were Michelle’s exact words the night of her twelfth birthday. She wasn’t able to explain why she felt that way, so I still don’t know what happened that day to make her so happy. She invited the usual guests to her party--her brother Shannon and her best friends Christine and Jeannie--and the party had the standard chocolate cake, vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce, raspberry Kool Aid, rainbow-colored candles and balloons, pin the tail on the donkey, and birthday gifts. Christine gave her a silver brush and comb set, Jeannie brought her a beginner’s make-up kit, Shannon handed her a crumpled dollar bill (“So you can buy whatever you want”), and I presented her with a tape recorder. I thought she would play with the make-up kit first, but she and the others couldn’t take their hands off the tape recorder.

For the rest of the day, the microphone was everywhere...in my face (“Do your funny burp, Mom! You know, the one where you sound like a frog”), under Dan’s nose as he napped on the couch (“Shannon, block his nose and see if he’ll snore”), in the living room heat vent (“Let’s see if we can hear the people downstairs”), and out the kitchen window (“Do you think Miguel will swear for us?”) I didn’t know they recorded each other peeing in the bathroom until Michelle played the tape for me later. She and Shannon rolled on the floor laughing

when the tape played the different variations of “tinkle, tinkle.” Michelle explained that they had put the microphone behind the toilet and then took turns in the bathroom. “We closed the door,” she said, to assure me that they were not perverts.

I’ll probably never know what made her so happy that day to want to remain twelve forever, but, now that she has her own child, I know she’s as happy as I am that she didn’t stay stuck in time.

## YESTERDAY

Yesterday...

Yes, it was yesterday.  
You were five years old  
holding my hand  
squeezing it so hard  
I wondered  
if you were eating spinach like Popeye  
behind my back.

It was your first day of school.

You didn't want to go.  
In the schoolyard  
you huddled so close  
I could hear your heart beat fast.  
You said  
"Mommy, cross your heart  
and hope to die  
you'll stay with me  
forever."  
I said  
"I can stay with you  
until the bell rings."  
I smiled.  
You cried.

The bell rang.

The teachers came  
helped the children  
get in line.  
You wouldn't let go  
of my hand.  
Miss Nancy smiled  
said "It will be okay"  
pried your hand from mine

took you away.

I left you.

I turned around  
walked a few steps  
heard you cry "Mommy!"  
one more time.  
I cried  
all the way home.

And that was yesterday.  
Yes, it was yesterday.

And now, today...

You are thirty-two  
and you say  
"Mom! I'm going to have  
a baby!"  
and I cry  
because  
yesterday  
you were five.

# GRANDMOTHER

You will soon meet Jonathan and the identical twins  
Tyler and Derek.

*To be continued...*







## ABOUT THIS BOOK

Binding: This book has been handcrafted by the author with a Gigabooks big press using the "invisible stapling" method with Zeller International Pro Bond™ solvent-free, non-toxic, biodegradable adhesive.

Pages: The pages were printed on a Brother 5140 Laser Printer. The paper is 24-lb. 104 bright Premium EnviroCopy™ recycled laser copy paper. Compared to standard copy paper, this paper

- requires 35% fewer trees to produce
- is 15% more energy efficient
- results in 13% fewer greenhouse gas emissions
- produces 32% fewer hazardous air pollutants
- generates 17% less solid waste and water pollution
- is acid and elemental chlorine free.

Cover: The cover is 10-pt CIS (coated on one side).

