



LOOKING-GLASS WOMAN

Poems and Reflections

A Memoir

by Kathy Vaillancourt



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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).

