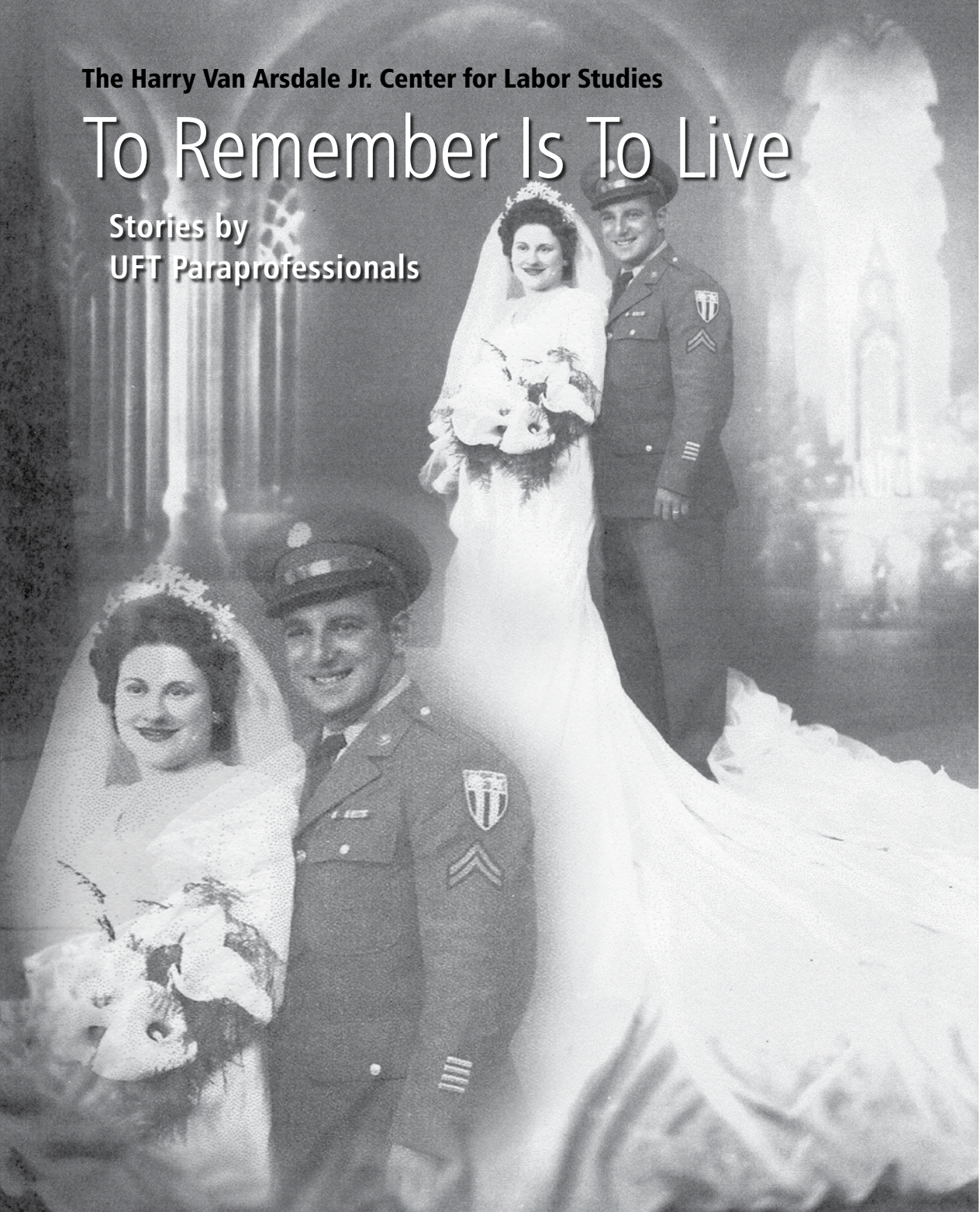


The Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies

To Remember Is To Live

Stories by
UFT Paraprofessionals



Cover photo: *The Wedding Dress*
Family photo provided by Yvonne D'Auria

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To Remember Is To Live

**Stories from the lives of public school paraprofessionals,
members of the United Federation of Teachers**

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**The Harry Van Arsdale Jr.
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Foreword

For the past three years, the Van Arsdale Center has published an annual magazine of student writing titled *Labor Writes*. It also has issued a series of occupational collections – volumes of writing by the members of a specific trade or profession. “To Remember Is To Live” is the fifth in this series, joining other separate collections, two by electricians, one by plumbers and pipefitters, and one by painters.

Each collection is different so it hardly needs to be said that this one is different, too. But this one truly is different. The most striking aspect of the contrast for me is the degree to which almost all the contributions are suffused with loss and longing. Maybe it’s a gender thing – most of the contributors to this volume are women. But why does that matter? Or maybe it is a trade thing. All the contributors to this volume spend their days encouraging children to learn to face and overcome their fears, that they might learn and be who they hope to be. Or maybe it is simply a fact of these lives – that they have had to live with more loss, from earlier on, than many of the rest of us.

Whatever the case may be, loss and longing are palpable presences in these pages. But so, too, is hope and beauty. And while I wouldn’t say that the one redeems the other, I would say that each enriches and enlivens the other. The losses are not maudlin and the hopes are not saccharin, probably because they sit side-by-side on the page, as they do in life. We meet the real. And it is us. There is an immediacy to these essays, and therefore a grasp, that I found impossible to evade. They got to me, as hope and beauty do; and not just once. They left me catching my breath, over and over again. And that is quite simply extraordinary.

We all live complicated lives, in many worlds, both among things as they are and among things as we wish them to be. It is the job of educators to prepare the young to come fully into this inheritance: so that they may understand what they have been given to the fullest extent possible; and so that they may appreciate what they owe, both to those who have come before and to those who will come after. There is much in these essays to instruct in that regard. I remember in particular Vinnie’s peonies; a strawberry cake, lovingly prepared by the whole family, each with their own role, for every birthday; and an eight-layer coconut cloud cake with chocolate drizzle, the specialty of the house. And, of course, the wedding dress. The significance of each of these things lies less in what they were, in and of themselves, than in what they became, for and with others. They marked the boundaries, both as limits and as starting points, of the lives they found and kept together; and they show us the way.

Finally, I think the fact that these essays have been written by paraeducators – classroom aides and assistants – who are among the least well-paid members of our instructional system, even though they work with many of the most challenged and challenging learners – is worth remarking. One goal of our program is to give individuals like these wondrous souls the opportunity and the capacity to tell their own story, and in so telling, to make their values and value known. Our survival as a culture of democratic hopes is surely more dependent upon them than anything the money-changers might do, however well-paid. We can and should all be grateful that these are the people who are teaching our children. They know how to live.

– Michael Merrill
Dean

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The Wedding Dress

by Yvonne D'Auria

Her father was the barber down on Bond Street in Brooklyn, New York, the year was 1934. His father was the iceman, who used to deliver the ice around the neighborhood. Alphonse would help his father sometimes with his deliveries. Grace would help her father in the barber shop, sweeping the floor and washing the towels. When the two men would stand outside and talk, Grace and Alphonse would play tag with one another. Grace lived on top of the barber shop. She had two sisters and three brothers, her mother had passed away when she was 13. Alphonse lived in the neighborhood and also had two sisters and three brothers. He too lost his mother at the young age of eight and was being raised by his grandmother and his father. Everyone knew everyone and life was good. You could walk through the streets and smell the aroma of all the different food that was being prepared for dinner. People would say hello and invite you in for a bite to eat. Grace and Alphonse became childhood sweethearts and this is how their love story began.

They went to the same school together and they hung out with the same friends. She was beautiful with her brown hair and he was so very handsome with his broad strong body. They made a beautiful couple and were very much in love. They would take long walks together holding hand in hand, go to the movies, the beach and sometimes take a ride in the car. Everyone was very familiar with seeing Grace and Alphonse together. His friends called him Bottles because he liked to use the empty beer bottles and line them up as target practice in his backyard with his BB gun.

Then it was 1942, World War II had begun, and Alphonse was called to serve his country. He was in the Air Force stationed in Burma India in the 490th Medium Bombardment Squadron, known as the Burma Bridge Busters. He was a parachute jumper. Before he went off to war, he asked Grace to marry him and gave her a beautiful engagement ring. His life in India was very exciting, but he always thought of Grace and she always thought of him. She wrote him every day, even though she sometimes did not hear from him for months.

He was very well known among his fellow platoon members, being something of a comedian. Everyone loved him. Including this little girl, who was about eight years old and who would come around where they would campout. He felt bad for her since she was an orphan. He wrote home about taking her back with him when the war was over. He would make sure that she would have food and a place to sleep. Unfortunately, it was a war and one day, while asleep on the floor, a snake bit her and she died. He was very upset and heartbroken over this. "What a short life this poor child had." He himself had gotten sick with what they called

dengue fever, but soon recovered and went back to duty. Grace was home taking care of her younger brothers and sisters waiting for the war to end and for her love to come home. The neighborhood was quiet with all the men gone. All the women went to work so that they could feed their families. It felt like forever but finally the war was over and the men were coming home. It was now 1945.

When Bottles came home, he brought home with him his parachute, which he had used many a time during the war. It was made of silk and was white. They wanted to marry right away, so Grace decided that she would use his parachute, that had brought him home safe and sound, as her wedding dress. She went to the neighborhood seamstress and together they made her dress. It was the most beautiful gown, with a long, flowing train.

Alphonse and Grace married on March 18, 1945, at Our Lady of Peace church in their neighborhood. When Alphonse saw how beautiful Grace looked and how beautiful her dress was, he knew this would last forever. The wedding was absolutely beautiful and everyone had a great time. They went away to Atlantic City on their honeymoon. They laid on the beach and once again took long walks, this time on the boardwalk as husband and wife.

After the honeymoon, the dress was neatly packed in a box and all its wonder and memories along with it. Although never forgotten, the dress always held a special place in Grace's heart.

It was June 5, 1949, and Grace and Alphonse had a beautiful baby girl. They named her Grace. She would always be daddy's little girl. On Feb. 5, 1953, Alphonse was born, a platinum blond baby boy. Oh, how happy he was that he had a son: like his father he would sometimes take him to work. Bottles was now a truck driver, driving big tractor-trailers full of toys. Once in awhile his boss would let him take some toys home to his kids. They had bikes, dolls and soldiers and cars. Life was good! They moved from their old neighborhood and bought a house on East 14th St., Brooklyn, New York. But, unfortunately, he got sick soon after and died on Oct. 21, 1967, at the young age of 45.

Life for Grace was hard. She now had to go to work to support her children and save her beautiful house. Alphonse was only 13 and missed his father terribly. He too took a neighborhood job to help his mother. Their daughter Grace married and had three sons. Then I married Alphonse and we had three sons also, who we love dearly. And we are now grandparents to a beautiful girl named Alexa.

As, for my mother-in-law, I was blessed to know and love her. She was one terrific woman who I will never forget. She just recently passed on Sept. 14, 2010. She thought about and loved her husband until the day she died. I had the honor of seeing this beautiful gown one day when she was cleaning out her closet. Oh, what a beautiful magical gown! Oh, what a beautiful couple!

The End of Summer

by Robert Cruz

September 2001 was not only the end of summer but the tragic end of America, my grandmother, my shiny, guiding light. It was the beginning of painful memories and of missing someone who was nurturing, caring and gave me guidance and inspiration. This end put me in a downward spiral that made me feel dark and angry. This lasted for many years. Stepping over into my dark side gave me a bit of clarity in a strange way. I had a chance to kind of step out of my everyday routine and look at things for what they were.

People have this tendency to find pleasure or satisfaction in worldly things or material things. What most people don't realize is that in this world it's the little things that count. Little things that people take for granted, like a sunny day, a beautiful tree. Something simple, like just waking up in the morning, is a great but unappreciated gift. When I was in a dark and angry place, I was able to focus on things in life. I analyzed things in my life, the things that were important and those that weren't.

Let's rewind this story to the end of summer in August, on a hot day in the middle of the Arizona desert. My two cousins and I were taking a spiritual camping trip out into the wilderness. These outings are good for my soul. Being in nature makes me connect with my inner self, and cleans me of all the poison and negativity that I absorb living in this concrete jungle. Standing on top of the Grand Canyon I got a feeling of peace and serenity. We were on our way down the mountain to an Indian reservation so that we could rest our heads on native land. This trip took us four hours down a winding canyon. After reaching the bottom of this hot desert we found this special stream on the reservation. This is not a regular stream, but a stream that was the color of the bluest ocean. It looked tropical and magical. This was our place to set up camp and wash away all the negativity that comes with living in the city. That night we just laid in the open air on our sleeping bags and talked as we looked up at the Milky Way and all the stars. The night was so clear you could see comets shooting by. We talked about life until our eyes fell shut.

The next morning we all had a feeling of being different, like the feeling of being a baby who falls asleep on it's mother's or grandmother's lap. It was a safe feeling. We found what we were looking for – total peace and tranquility. This type of meditation is what a person needs in order to get back into the daily grind we call life.

The return home was great; I was purified. It felt like the world was different. Little did I know how different my world would become. Not long after stepping off the plane, I was told that my grandmother was in the hospital with cancer that had spread throughout her whole body. They gave her two weeks to live.

The next two weeks, I spent at the hospital watching the woman who was always nurturing and caring. She gave me guidance and inspiration, and she wilted away before my eyes. She told me two things that would stay with me forever. At the end of my summer and her life, she told me, “Always keep moving forward” and “Never forget me.” These words are frozen in time and in my mind. Her name was America Cortez. Rest in peace, Grandma.

Come Eat

by J. Schweid

I believe “Come Eat” by Patricia Hampl in the collection *In Brief: Short Takes on the Personal* was a wonderful short story. I enjoyed the author’s descriptions of the home and family, her fond memories of food, her grandmother’s contrivances before, during and after Friday dinner. It was precious. I also enjoyed Grandma in general. She really reminds me of my own grandma in her attitude and her performance.

Their family reminds me of so many families I grew up with. Food is comforting when prepared with so much love and affection. I once asked my grandma and Aunt Emma, “Why do you do this? Why do you make so much food we can never finish?” Aunt Emma replied, “During the War (World War II) even with coupons it was hard to get ingredients to cook. We cooked momma’s food (my great grandmother) and we remember how grateful we were to be able to have so much food.”

I admit, it was all scrumptious, salubrious, and just so good. There is one story that is still my favorite 55 years later. One Sunday, after church, we stopped at the bakery for bread – rye, pumpernickel and, my own favorite, cinnamon raisin swirl. Then my grandmother and I went over to Aunt Emma’s, her younger sister’s house. We had tea and pastries, the little lemon curd ones and little mini pies. Shortly afterwards I was put to work. I polished silver, lots and lots of silver. Yes, cutlery, plates, tea pots, coffee pots, saucers and creamers! Grandma and Aunt Emma cooked. Actually, Aunt Emma had started cooking on Friday night, after she returned home from church. By 12:30, I was working as fast as I could. The linens were ironed; the table had its three leaves added to accommodate 12 to 14 people; the plates and crystal were set with napkins on the table – linens that were hand embroidered. Food and sewing in my house went hand in hand. You would cook and while you waited you sewed ‘fancy work’ – monograms, white on white. Once my silver polishing was done, I got to practice my sewing sampler. I waited quietly in the kitchen at Aunt Emma’s sewing table.

Our family arrived by 33. In our house, 4 p.m. was the magic time. If you arrived late, you heard about it in Aunt Emma’s special way of saying “no excuses.” She’d give us our to-go goodies, and if you missed the first course that course was left out of your package. I guess in her eyes if you were late, you weren’t going to be forgiven.

Now, in fairness to Grandma and Aunt Emma, the food was superb, but it was the desserts I waited for. No, no, no, not cookies, pastries or pies. It was the cakes. Even the names evoked awe. Great Grandma’s eight-layer coconut clustered cloud

cake. Eight layers of cake, with coconut custard filling and coconut icing almost like a giant snowball, then dark chocolate drizzled over the top. Picture if you will, a 5 foot woman, tiny in every way but her heart. I believe you must have a big heart in order to be a splendid cook; for it is all that love – and fresh coconut – that makes it special.

My tiny aunt attacked the coconut with a hammer and a screw driver. Sometimes, the coconut would fly off the counter and she would run after it, hammer in hand. My Uncle Charlie, her sea captain husband, would bring back fresh coconut from his trips for her famous cloud cake. Oh! Did I forget to mention my grandmother wrapping the coconut with a towel was the secret? Once you opened it, if you moved too slow you would lose the precious milk. As one of the two survivors of this family, I have all the recipes. To this day, coconut on anything is my favorite. My favorite memory is of Grandma and Aunt Emma chasing the coconut through the kitchen butler's pantry, right into the mud room where they would catch it.

Every holiday as I prepare the linens, crystal, china, silver and food, I recount these stories to my daughter. She has begun to write them down so future generations will know about these spunky women and the coconut. My daughter cannot believe that you could not go to the store in 1955 and just buy a coconut. We are quite spoiled nowadays because we can purchase anything you can dream of anytime, anywhere.

Control

by Brandy Scelzo

She is sitting in her new reclining chair; it is a deep velvety maroon with black buttons on the side that she can reach down and press to adjust her feet. She won't do this on her own, even though she is able. She was perfectly happy with her old recliner with the wooden lever on the side. Every time someone presses those buttons to show her how it works she is startled. She begins to yell, "Stop! Stop! I'm gonna fall backwards, I'm gonna tip over!" Her 3-year-old great-grandson watches all of this excitement and can't wait to get his hands on those buttons. She thinks of her old chair again. "Nothings wrong with that chair! You're NOT going to throw it out! Give it to someone, someone can use it ..." She is pleading now. A small lie is told to calm her down; we found someone who wants this decrepit chair; friends on the other side of the building, the couple who just got married. She is satisfied.

Her grandson drags the chair down to the dumpster. He is frustrated and slightly guilty. He agreed with her: what's the point of the new chair? Well, it made his mother happy, for one. He returns to the apartment and hears all the yelling before opening the door. He takes a deep breath and enters. There is his son kneeling next to the chair happily pushing those shiny black buttons. She is screaming now, her legs flying up and down. "Stop him! Stop! It's gonna break!" The more she screams, the more he pushes the buttons; he has discovered a wonderful game! The home care worker is now screaming as well. Normally, he would laugh his ass off at a scene like this, but now it just makes him want to cry.

The old lady's parents died when she was still very young, 13 I think, in a fire, tragically. She was taken in by a family as a sort of foster kid and was meant to help the mother take care of her young children. She grew up as a worker and a helper. She is self sufficient; she walks and takes the bus all over town, and she never learns to drive. She gets married. He wasn't very nice. "Oh, he was just terrible, nasty." That's how she tells it. She had one son, the apple of her eye. In the pictures of him as a little boy, he is impeccable with his little suits, and perfectly combed hair. She is smiling proudly in the background. He was a good student, a good boy and he went all the way to Plattsburgh for college. They would drive him there and it would take hours; this was before the thru-way was built. There he would meet his future wife, her future daughter-in-law. Thankfully, he would bring her back home; he wouldn't move all those hours away. He was a good son. He would die way too young; 50-something, his two children barely out of their teens.

She has been diagnosed with cancer; she is 97 years old. It is all arranged by her daughter-in-law – the home care worker and the radiation schedule – she can work wonders on the phone from Pennsylvania. Her grandson, along with her great-grandson and the home care worker will bring her to the radiology site and by the time they arrive she is close to hysteria. She doesn't like how the home care worker is pushing the wheelchair, she hits a bump going into the elevator and she screams, "What are you doing to me? What are you doing?" Her grandson is embarrassed for his grandmother and her aide. He knows she is better than this, knows better than to yell at someone who is trying to help. His son wants to help push the wheelchair too; he pushes in front of the aide and jerks the chair. "Where is he? What is he doing? Make him stop!" He is 3 years old. He only wants to push the stupid chair.

It is a disaster from start to finish. She screams and cries when they put her on the table, she doesn't want to fall off, she is sure they will let her fall. The home care worker closes her eyes in the waiting room; she can barely stand to look at her anyway. The little boy climbs on a chair and slowly pulls every tissue out of the box on the receptionist's desk, but his father can't stomach any more yelling today so he looks the other way. He is thinking about his father.

Finally they are all back in his little black Honda. She is able to calm down a little bit now. They are all painfully aware that they will do this every day for the next five weeks. For today, though, the hard part is over and everyone in the car feels a little bit lighter. They will take a celebratory ride through the Dunkin Donuts drive-thru. She is ashamed of the way she has carried on. It seems with every passing day she can control less of what is happening to her and she is terrified. They bicker over who will pay for the Boston Crème's, they both insist on paying as if this will make up for something; she wins and is genuinely happy for the first time that day. He looks in the rearview mirror and sees his son laughing with the home care worker in the backseat. He is happily licking chocolate frosting off of the top of his donut and for now all is forgiven.

My Lucky Journey in Becoming a Paraprofessional

by Siu Chia

The most important thing in my life was the journey that led me to become a paraprofessional. After starting with nothing, becoming a paraprofessional was the culmination of every success and good thing that I would want to happen in my life. I can honestly call this essay “My Lucky Journey in Becoming a Paraprofessional.” To start with, I was born in a small village in Malaysia, in 1972. We did not have electricity or running water. There were no washing machines or dryers. We did the laundry by hand in the river and we cooked using wood to make fires.

There were no flushing toilets and no running showers. We were missing most of the luxuries that the large cities in Malaysia had. But since we didn’t know about them, we didn’t miss having them. Looking back, this was a great way to start my life because I can appreciate all of the luxuries that have come into my life since then.

My early childhood years were very happy. I was introduced to chores and hard work at an early age. Before I entered school, my job was to follow around and help my mother. I became very responsible and learned just about every job that we needed to do to survive. I learned everything from cooking to cleaning, planting vegetables and taking care of farm animals. This was not a privileged lifestyle, but it gave me a great sense of responsibility. I grew up learning Thai from my mother, Chinese from my father and Malayan from both parents and neighbors in the village. When I attended elementary school, we were only allowed to speak Malayan. This is when I learned Malayan properly because my parents as well as all of the neighbors never attended any school. It was a problem not having enough money to buy school supplies and clothes. The school didn’t give us any books or food. My parents had to provide everything for me and it wasn’t easy for them.

When I first entered school, it was not only a new experience, but an escape from my work around the house. My dad took me to school on his bicycle and picked me up the same way. When I got a little older, I used my own bicycle. I enjoyed school but it was difficult sometimes. I still had to do many chores after school in addition to my homework. In Malaysia, elementary school is six years, and high school is seven years. It is structured different than in the United States. When I entered high school, I was lucky to have a relative who drove a school bus, and he took me to and from school for many years and did not charge my family.

I enjoyed high school very much and did well. I was offered a position in college when I graduated, however, due to financial constraints, it was not possible for me to attend at that time.

After graduating from high school, I got a job as a sales person in a department store in Kota Bharu. This was the closest city to my village. After working in the store for a few years, I got an offer to go to neighboring Singapore to work in a restaurant. I liked Singapore but I didn't like my job. Fortunately, a friend from my hometown helped me get a job in an American factory after only a few weeks at the restaurant. The factory was an electronics factory, and I was able to work as a machine operator assembling chips and other parts. Also, I was able to get benefits for the first time in my life, such as a health insurance, vacation days and a food allowance. I enjoyed this job and took pride in my work. This dedication paid off when I was promoted to be a team leader and got a raise. I spent a total of five years in Singapore and really loved the country. There was very little crime and the country was very clean. Also, it offered me many opportunities to have fun in my spare time. For the first time, I lived somewhere that had movie theaters, restaurants and cultural exhibits to see. I made a lot of friends there and developed a very nice lifestyle.

One day in 1999, a friend informed me that we had a chance to travel to the United States since we worked for an American factory. This sounded great to me, but I didn't like the idea of leaving Singapore which had become my home. I decided to take a chance and travel to the United States with two other women friends from the same factory. From what I heard, the United States offered more opportunities to be successful and would possibly give me an opportunity to get a college education. And so, this was the start of my present life.

When I first arrived in the United States, I was taken in by a Malaysian family in New York City's Chinatown. They hailed from the same city in Malaysia as one of the women with whom I traveled to the United States. I stayed with this family for about two years, and they came to be my adopted family. After a few weeks, I started my career as a waitress in the New York metropolitan area. I worked in different restaurants for a few years. In February 2001, on my day off, I went to a Chinese restaurant for a dim-sum breakfast and was seated at the same table as my future husband (some Chinese restaurants seat multiple parties at the same table). Even though my English was not so great, we managed to talk a little, and eventually we got together.

After about three years of dating, we decided to get married. Since I got married, my life has changed considerably, and I've had many more opportunities come to me. Since my husband supported me in every way that he could, I was eventually able to take classes in English and then go to college.

The turning point that allowed me to go to college was after I got an opportunity to become a paraprofessional in the New York City public school system. This happened in January 2007, but I didn't start to attend college until I became a permanent full time paraprofessional in December 2007. I took my first college courses in January 2008. As I look back, I can now appreciate the advice given to me by my parents, "Do not give up your dream." I have been taking college courses, making my schedule a very busy one. However, since I like everything that I'm doing and learning, I look forward to it every day. Life hasn't been just all work and studying, as my husband and I always find good quality ways to spend our free time. Also, since we are very compatible, there is almost never a disagreement about what we should do. An example is that we like to try different kinds of cuisines. We try new foods and experience some of the cultures of the countries of origin. Also, since we don't like blockbuster movies much, we find ourselves going to see independent films at less flashy movie theaters. In addition, we both try to keep up on articles in reputable publications such as The New York Times, where we can get the news and other interesting and useful information. I believe that we share the feeling that quality is more important than quantity.

My goals for the future are to continue my career as a paraprofessional and continue going to college. I would like to first get an associate degree, and then hopefully a bachelor's degree. Even though I am very happy with my paraprofessional position, a long-term goal would be to become an elementary school teacher. I know this would take a lot of hard work and sacrifice, but most good things are worth working for. Also, even though my husband and I are very happy together, we may consider having a family in the future. I know that my life has not been an average one, but I feel very fortunate and thankful about how my life has changed since I was a little girl in Malaysia. Even so, that little girl will always be in my heart.

Smell in My Youth

by Lissette Perez

The smell of a strawberry cake baking in the oven brings back a flood of memories of so many good times with my family. Baking the cake with our mom gave us an opportunity to spend much needed quality time with her. As we grew older and our lives took us down different paths, we continued to look forward to times we spent in the kitchen making strawberry cake. We had so many laughs in that kitchen.

To this day the smell reminds me of bonding, and the importance of family working together. My brother, Edward, was the first in the process as he poured the flour into the bowl. The way he did it made the kitchen look like a cloudy day inside the house. My job was to crack the eggs and the sound reminded me of the ocean waves hitting against the rocks at the beach. My sister, Dotty, came after me and it was her job was to pour the milk in the bowl. She did it so slow that it sounded like running water. My mom went next putting her secret ingredients into the mix like a magic trick so that we wouldn't see what she put inside. Finally it was my brother Anthony's turn to mix everything together and the way he did it made your head spin like a merry-go-round.

The smell of strawberry would become stronger and stronger as he mixed the batter. We felt proud as we baked the birthday cake. Not only did the cake make the birthday child feel special, but it made all the children feel important. The time spent in making and baking the cake was always fun and made time stand still.

The smell of strawberries also reminds me of a childhood toy I had – a Strawberry Shortcake doll. I loved that doll so much that when I had my daughter I felt I had to find that doll for her. When she was six, I told her the story behind the scent and I explained to her why I love the smell of strawberries so much.

We did a lot of growing up in my family and having a homemade cake on our birthday made us feel like millionaires, comforted and secure, with the feeling that whatever our family was going through would turn out okay.

The last cake I remember baking with my mom was for my brother; he was dying of cancer and the family got together again in the kitchen to bake one last cake for him. It was both a joyous time and a somber time. We all wished it wouldn't be his last birthday with us but we all knew the harsh reality of the situation and in those brief moments in the kitchen it seemed like everything was better. A month and a half after his birthday my brother passed away.

My Sista's Story

by Crystal Vaughan

I am the third child in a family of nine children. Between us there were four fathers who really did not make a difference if they were around or not. Who could of thought of having so many children? Not me for sure; however, I am thankful for being here! My siblings and I grew up in a strange way; we actually took care and raised ourselves together until children services came into our lives. I have one sister who I am very proud of and this is her story.

My parents had other important things to do than to be parents. They were both sick from drugs that took control of their bodies. Sometimes, I wonder if there were no drugs back in the '70s would they have been better parents. During my mother's partying days, we saw so much that was unhealthily for young children to see; it is almost unimaginable. My mom kept all types of unsafe company and they all partied together. At times they would fight, viscously, blood, hair and booze everywhere. My siblings and I would hide under the bed at the first sign of trouble. Once it was clear, we would come out to find everyone fast asleep in the living room.

After some time, ACS removed us from the home and placed us in different homes. It really broke my heart when we were separated. However, we maintained a relationship and visited one another every Monday. I always found myself counting down the days until the next Monday so I could visit with my siblings. While we visited, my sister and I would talk about many things, one in particular, boys! She was the fourth oldest child. We were close in age so we bonded well. The family I lived with did not allow me to have a boyfriend so I was always excited and eager to hear what she had to say. Week after week, she would tell me how wonderful this guy was; he would buy her nice clothing, take her out to dinner and send her to the salon to beautify her hair and nails. Well, I must say, I was jealous. Being 16 and not allowed to have a boyfriend was getting kind of hard for me. After a few weeks of all this joy and happiness, things changed and I could tell but I did not know what it was. My sister stopped offering stories about her guy and when I asked her questions she would refrain from answering anything concerning him.

The next week came and my sister did not show up to the visit and neither did her foster mom. I was worried. I felt that this woman was allowing my sister to grow up too fast, and I was right. The following visit my sister showed up and her lip was puffed up somewhat on one side. Before I could ask, she offered a story that did not sound sincere. We went on to visit; I was just relieved that she showed up. I gave her a big hug and told her how much I loved her. She told me of her getting

married to this man who would be her ticket out of the system. Unfortunately, she did not know what was ahead of her. As I sat there listening, I pretended to be happy for her, while I really was not. I felt that this man was not good for her.

She was 15 and married to a stranger who only wanted her for what she could do and not because he loved her, not to mention he was almost twice her age. At times she was not allowed to call or even come over to my house if her husband told her not to. He had totally brainwashed her against her family. I felt that she was too young to marry or even know what love was. Deep down inside, I felt she knew how much we loved her but she listened to his advice. It was almost like he was her sergeant father. My sister became pregnant with her first child soon after her marriage. Strangely, she always visited the hospital for a slip or a fall throughout her pregnancy. My sister was terrified of her husband and she wanted us to believe that all was well in her marriage.

Four months into the pregnancy, she was rushed to the hospital after a fight. Sadly, her baby did not survive that. Out of fear she believed she still loved her husband who beat her repeatedly. I almost pitied her. I did not understand how anyone would allow someone to treat them in such a cruel manner. It pained me day after day knowing that she allowed this man to control her every waking moment. But, he was her husband. One Sunday afternoon my sister arrived at my house unexpectedly. When I examined her I was astounded by what I saw. Her right eye was swollen almost shut. I began to cry and so did she. I believed that this was her breaking point, or so I thought. My sister went on to tell horror stories of events that she endured. The expression on my face was one that cannot be explained. At one point I became speechless for words other than, "I love you."

My sister stayed with me for a couple of days. When her husband found out where she was he came bearing a mouth full of pleas and lies. She thought that she loved him and maybe she did; however, she was his punching bag whom he missed for some days. He came bringing flowers and apologizes and hugs and kisses. My sister was so afraid when he reached out to hug her she flinched as if he was ready to strike her. I began by saying to her, "Let me tell him to leave," but her reply was, "No, I can handle him." Truthfully, she really could not. I feared for her life and leaving my house raised my fear even higher.

Needless to say, she went back home and things were great for a while until one day I got a call from her telling me that she would be moving in a few days. I was shocked by the news. He moved my sister 12 hours away to Charlotte, N.C. I did not have a chance to say goodbye. He was like thief in the night taking my most precious, prized possession.

Worried out of my mind, I called his mother, friends and relatives, but nobody would offer any information of their whereabouts. It would be two months before I heard from her. I could hear in her voice that she wasn't happy to be there. I

remember asking many questions, fearing there was a limit to how long she could talk. After 15 minutes it was time for her to depart from the phone conversation we were having. We both were so full of tears and pain. Mine lingered long after the phone call. My mood was very unsettled. She was my sister.

It would be another four months before I would hear from her again. Her call took me by surprise. She was pregnant again. I kept asking myself why she would want to put herself through this again. I went on to give her my blessing in a strange way. But I really wanted to tell her how stupid she was being. Well, he beat her through most of the pregnancy again. The baby came to term with a nervous condition as a result of the repeated abuse. After the birth her husband was arrested for possession of an illegal substance. He went to jail for two years, which was a relief to her and me. I believed that God was on her side. She went on to visit him at the prison taking the baby and illegal substances to him upon his request. I told her she was stupid and crazy, but she loved her husband so she did not listen to me. Close to his release she became pregnant again – this time by someone else.

We all knew that the baby was his and so did he because they had conjugal visits. Upon his prison release one month later, she told him of her pregnancy with their second child. He treated her just the same way as the other two pregnancies and at times worse. Baby number two arrived in the hospital room. I could hear him on the phone claiming that the baby was not his. How insulting was that? I told her to leave him and come back to New York, but she stayed with her husband.

Times got harder for her having two kids and an abusive husband. She wanted to leave because she believed that he would kill her. Luckily, her leaving came before he did kill her. He broke her head with an iron one evening and she had to be rushed to the hospital where she received 25 stitches. Because she had been treated on several occasions at that emergency room for spousal violence, the state picked up the case and made her prosecute him. As scared as she was she went through the trial then, at the last moment, she stood up and said, “Your honor I plead the fifth.” Nevertheless, he received 25 years in prison. He received one year for each domestic abuse report they could find that was made by her.

Finally, God answered my prayers. My sister was free from the pain and misery she endured for many years. She moved closer to New York City. From time to time we would visit one another. The travel was just two hours. She stayed single for three years. She did not want to find herself in a similar situation so she closed herself off from the dating world.

As time went by my sister’s oldest son, my nephew, displayed similar violent traits as his father. His aggressive behavior would become more and more intense. She began to feel like she was living in her past violent world again. She took him to precinct after precinct and finally, someone helped her. He was put away for six months in a boot camp where they gave him therapy and discipline for treating

his mom the way that he did. He was released and seemed to be changed for a while. Now, at age 14, he is back in the camp making great progress in his behavior. My sister learned such a valuable lesson during her lifetime. When we are together she speaks of how differently she would do things if given the chance for the sake of her children. However, it is not too late for her. I advised her to become an advocate for domestically abused women. She thought the idea was great but it took some time for her to grow enough courage to put her story out there because it could help another family who is walking in her shoes everyday. She visits shelters and hospitals with her story. I am so proud of my sister. After everything she has been through she is doing well now, and telling her story to others is like therapy for her too.

Scent From My Youth

by Dondrew Armstrong

I can remember now as if it were yesterday, I would go out in the evening to play with other children in my neighborhood. We played many games including “hide and go seek.” Sometimes we played in the rain; I liked the smell of rain. When the rain started to fall, my aunt would call out my name for me to go inside. I would always go to my neighbor’s house because of the smell of the bread she was baking.

My neighbor, Annette, would bake bread to sell every weekend. The neighborhood would be overpowered by the smell of bread. When we would hide it was always close to her home because of the aroma. Most of the time when I went out to play in the evening my Aunt Mena would be at her job working at a laundry. Working in a laundry can be tiring. The smell of the dryers and the hot clothing irons has a burning smell. I thought that she would come home smelling of hot irons but she had a smell of the talcum powder she used daily. Sometimes before she reached home, I would smell the talcum; I would tell my sister, Mena is on her way. My sister never believed me and asked me how I knew. I would smell her talcum powder. When Mena would leave in the morning to go to work, I would get a hug because I was too big for her to pick me up. The smell of her talcum powder would linger on my clothes for the whole day.

Although it has been many years, I can still think of the nights when I would take my shower and powder with the talcum. Once, I went to my older sister’s house to spend a day, I had to take a piece of my aunt’s clothing with me. I could not sleep without the smell. The talcum powder was made in England. It had a very distinct scent of roses and baby powder. After a shower my aunt would powder her body. The fresh scent of talcum remained in the house for a long time.

When I was just a teen, my aunt gave me a cashmere bouquet powder for my birthday. It had a nice aroma, but I preferred the smell of the talcum, roses and baby powder. About 10 years ago, I got the scent of the talcum again. This time it was not as strong, but the scent was there. Two days later, I got the news that my Aunt Mena had passed on. Some scents linger and stay with you for years.

Dear Papi

by Lissette Perez

Dear Papi,

The nightmare I wake up from every night of you leaving us brings bolts of fire to my eyes. They burn with rage and heat because you were the man of the house. How dare you disrespect us by getting up and leaving us, the children you created with love? How can you, Papi, make me cry and feel abandoned?

I remember you taking me to the park and teaching how to ride a bike. Hey Papi, do you remember me falling down a hundred times and you telling me to get up and try again? Do you remember my high school softball game when I hit a home run and you came running on to the field to congratulate me? How about the birthday cake I made you for your birthday that everyone laughed at because it was lopsided? Hey Papi, remember our family reunion in Puerto Rico when I was 6 and I was scared to fly but you sat next to me and held my hand for the whole three-hour plane flight?

Oh my God, how I cried and fought with myself thinking it was my fault that you left us. Was it the dirty dishes I left in the sink for two days, or the night you told me to be home by 10 p.m. and I broke curfew and came home at midnight? Papi, did you leave because I failed two classes or because I didn't wash my clothes and had them all over the floor when we were having a party at the house?

Whatever it was Papi that I did to make you leave us, I am so sorry. I missed you. I remember how I cried as I drop to my knees, holding on to your leg as you walked to the door. I dreamt often of waking up and running to your room to hug you and tell you please Papi don't ever leave us.

Sincerely,

Your loving daughter, Lissette

The Broken Saint

by Ingrid Gioppo

My mother was not a religious person, but for some reason she enjoyed the hobby of collecting porcelain saints. Well, like clockwork, every day at noon she would fix my little brother and I lunch. As we sat and devoured our grilled cheese sandwiches, mother used her feather duster to dust her figurines, one by one.

“Now remember, no running, no playing in the house,” she would say.

“Yes, mommy,” we would reply.

One day my brother dared me to play hide and go seek.

“Are you crazy, do you want me to get in trouble?” I yelled.

“You’re chicken,” he tempted.

“Don’t call me that,” I replied timidly.

“Chicken, chicken, chicken,” he repeated.

“Fine, but we need to be careful.”

I zoomed through the numbers and stopped at 30.

“Ready or not, here I come.” I searched up the stairs and under the bed, into the closet and behind the couch, but no brother. Where can he be, I thought?

As I turned around to think of more places to look, my brother raced from behind my back towards the base. I quickly followed him and reached out my arm for the tag when all of a sudden I tripped on a toy car lying idle on the carpet.

I tried maintaining my balance, unsuccessfully and bumped into the cabinet of saints. Out came one of the fragile statues onto the floor and fell beside where I lay.

As I lay on the floor with pieces of white, chalky dust behind me, I feared for what was to come.

“What was that noise?” my mother asked with a gasp. I jolted up and pointed to my brother just at the time he pointed at me.

My mother took both of us by our ears and squeezed so tightly she turned them red as peppers sending us to our rooms. The look on my mother's face was one that I will never forget.

Dear Daddy

by Luz Torres

Dear Daddy,

I am writing you this letter to let you know that you emptied out my heart when you left us. Why, why did you leave us? I knew that you and mom were going through some type of tribulation, but why did I have to pay for your predicaments. When you left mom you left me too. Later on, when you divorced mom, you divorced me too. Did you not love me enough? Did I do something to hurt you or make you angry? Was it my fault? When you left, you didn't even say goodbye to me, the little girl you called your precious little princess.

After you left, you never came to see me, you never wrote me a letter, and you did not even send me a birthday or Christmas gift, much less a card. Why would you shred my life into millions of pieces, Daddy? When you were home with us, I remember how you cared and loved me. I have to ask, do you not love me anymore? Have you forgotten the good times we shared? Did they mean anything to you? Was it all a lie? I cannot believe that it was all a lie. Deep down in my heart, I know that what we lived through together was real.

I remember when you used to take me to the park. I remember one day at the park I fell and scraped my knee and elbow. You ran toward me and hugged me. You kissed my boo-boos and magically you made them feel better. You made me feel that I was special. Oh, how I miss you! I have so many memories that I tried to bury for so many years, but for some reason, unexpectedly, they just pop up when I least expect them. When they do come up, I feel this overwhelming feeling of sadness, loneliness, and of missing you so desperately.

I stayed awake many nights wondering where you were. Is he near, or is he far? Is he OK, is he eating, and does he have a place to live? Why did you go and leave me here to cry in pain asking why? For years, I felt a part of me was lost and always feeling this horrible sense of being scared. I have lost what for me was by biggest strength, support and guidance. No words can ever express my feelings. No one can understand the pain I feel in my heart. Cruel circumstances snatched you away from me – what a nightmare. There is not one day that goes by that I don't miss you, Daddy.

There is one particular memory that stands out for me. Do you remember one very hot summer day in June when we all went to the swimming pool? I must have been 12 or 13 years old. Once we were at the pool, I was so excited that I ran toward the water so that I could jump in and make a big splash. But I never made it to the water; I fell and hit my head. I was unconscious and was rushed to

the hospital. I don't remember the incident; all I remembered was waking up in the hospital. The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was you, my prince. You were holding my hand with a worried look on your face.

You said to me "I see you my precious princess," and I said "I see you my prince." Then you asked me "How is thou princess feeling?" And I responded "Big headache thou prince."

What a unique moment, a memory I will always carry with me. Later that evening the nurse told me that you stayed by my bedside holding my hand. That you were talking to me saying not to leave you. That there were many things we had to do and many places we had to go to together. How can you show so much concern and love and yet leave me; I never heard from you again.

You have no idea how I felt when I got married and did not have my daddy to walk me down the aisle. When I had my three sons, you were not there for them to play with or be spoiled by their grandpa. There were so many times I needed a daddy to talk with and guide me. Oh, Daddy, if you only knew how much I have missed you.

Even though I do not have an address to send you this letter, I hope and pray that somehow through some magical, mystical or spiritual way you will feel or sense my aching soul, my emptiness and my longing for you, my daddy.

P.S. I read this poem and I thought of you.

"It doesn't matter who my father was; it matters who I remember he was."
Anonymous.

Vinny

by Lori Tanzi

When my husband and I got married, we were lucky enough to buy our first home right away. At the time, we were both working full time and never got the chance to really meet any of the neighbors. This would change when my first son was born. I became a stay-at-home mom and I was fortunate to meet my neighbor whose backyard was along side ours. His name was Vinny, and he would become one of my best friends.

Vinny was older than my own father yet he was similar to him in many ways. He had a large backyard and would tend to his many beautiful flowers and vegetables daily. He would meticulously trim the bushes. He would often bring me roses or a favorite of his, which was the peony. This flower is a beautiful pink flower and has a very strong fragrance. I would put them in a vase in my kitchen. I never had the heart to tell him that my allergies would become nearly unbearable from the smell. I also looked forward to the tomatoes Vinny would plant. I joked that I didn't need to have my own garden and the work that went along with it because Vinny took care of me and gave me all the tomatoes I could ever want.

Throughout the 20 years I was fortunate to know Vinny, his family became like my own. He would often come over to sit with me and enjoy a cup of tea and great conversation. I knew all his family stories. Vinny loved to talk and his stories were so interesting. I learned about his childhood, and the years he had spent in Italy. I learned about his time in the Navy with his twin brother. Sometimes I think I knew more about his family than my own. Often the cup of tea would turn into lunch. Vinny loved to eat my grilled cheese sandwiches. He would have one or two and then tell me he had to go because Margie, his wife was waiting for him for lunch.

In one of our early conversations, I would learn that Vinny and Margie had a daughter that was born just months after I was born. He and his wife had waited years for her. Sadly she passed away as a young child. Vinny and Margie were blessed a few years later with an adopted daughter, Jackie.

Vinny and Margie became a fixture at my table for many holidays. They would celebrate, with my family, all of my children's birthdays. Vinny was always there to lend an opinion on how my husband and I should do something around the house. You see, Vinny was a great handyman, my husband was not. My husband lost many battles over how to do something to Vinny and I.

I also would call Vinny the neighborhood historian. I called him this because neighborhood gossip is not too flattering. Vinny lived in the same house for more than 50 years. He knew more about the neighborhood than anyone. He knew so many of the stories of the years past. I remember always knowing he had some new information just by the way he would approach my fence. He would saunter over with a grin from ear to ear. I knew this meant he had some interesting gossip to share.

In the summer of 2008, Vinny began to go to doctors due to a lump he had in his chest area. Soon he was diagnosed with an aortic aneurysm. Due to the fact that this could rupture at any time and kill him, he, Margie and Jackie, had decided that they would have the risky surgery to mend this. The surgery was risky because he was 78 years old. He did have the fact that he was very physically fit in his favor. Still, I worried. The surgery would take place on a Monday morning in September, four days before his 79th birthday. I will never forget our conversation over the fence that day. He was so optimistic. I, on the other hand, thought this might be the last time I saw my friend. I gave him a hug and a kiss and told him I would see him the next day in the hospital. As I walked away I turned back to look at him and thought this could be the last time I might have seen him.

Monday evening, I received the call I had dreaded. It was Jackie. She told me the terrible news. Vinny did not make it through the surgery; he died on the operating table. Margie told me that he was so optimistic that morning before the surgery, even telling her not to wrinkle his pants, as he would need them when he left the hospital. In a bizarre twist, Vinny was buried on the day of his daughter's death some 43 years earlier.

There were no tomatoes that next summer. However, the flowers Vinny tended to so lovingly every year did manage to bloom. I took this as a sign of the beauty of his life. The flowers continued to bloom for the next summer that I remained in that home. I have since moved a couple of blocks away from that house but I continue to visit Margie. I am still amazed that some flowers continue to bloom to this day. I know he would be pleased to know that all the years of hard work are still being enjoyed by all who see his flowers.

Dear Dad

by Sue Fenner

Dear Dad,

As I sit in mom's old tattered chair, I think about what could have been between you and me. I am watching my husband interact with our 6-year-old daughter. Their relationship is nothing like the one we shared. I respected the way you financially took care of me. I always had clean clothes, a clean home and food to nourish my body.

I always wondered how it would feel to have my soul nourished. Growing up, my soul was malnourished, dirty and naked. I can recall you standing on my grandparent's porch on a dark, stormy day, telling the tale of how your parents left your soul empty. I didn't understand it then, but I do now. It hit me like a thunderstorm. The same type of thunderstorm that rolled past as I heard you utter the words, "Left your soul empty." How could you give me something you never had? How could you nourish my soul when you have been left empty? How could you hold my hand when yours has never been held? How could you tell me you loved me when your father never told you he loved you?

Dad, I sit and watch my beloved hold our daughter's hand tight. It always reassures her that Daddy has got her. I feel like a peeping Tom when I steal a glance as he lets her know, "Daddy loves his baby girl around the world and back again." I love the way she giggles and responds to him, "Daddy, I love you like a fat kid loves cake." I envy the way he gets excited when she runs and jumps into his arms with her tales of drama from that day's events. Dad, no matter how her day was, good, bad or indifferent, he always has a meaningful message which will be planted so deep into her soul that it will nourish and grow inside her.

I almost missed the opportunity to experience such a loving interaction. When I met my husband, we found out we shared one thing in common. Our common bond would be that we never had a loving relationship with our fathers. What made me fall deeply in love with him was that he promised himself that he would tell his children he loved them every day. He pledged to be the father to his children that his father couldn't be. He articulated softly and slowly that he would, "break the cycle." The words flowed from his lips, through the air and into my soul. For the first time in my life, my soul felt nourished by a loving man. Dad, it felt good!

I am sorry this letter will be returned to the sender unopened. I wish you could have met our daughter. She looks like you and mom. She has your mother's stubbornness, though. Maybe her sunshine smile and explosive personality would have helped you "break the cycle."

I have missed being able to sit on the foot stool and watch you work on cars. You were an excellent mechanic. It wasn't a truck, car or motorcycle you weren't able to fix. You enjoyed getting your hands dirty, greasy and cut up. I understand that working on cars nourished your soul, Daddy. One thing I know for sure is that it is not a car in heaven whose engine does not purr under the hood.

My Fashion Career

by Rose M. Carrasquillo

The lights were dim in the auditorium. You could see a lot of flashing lights going on and off from the cameras. It was my turn to go on the runway. I walked to the end and turned around with another girl, who was modeling the same clothes, but in black. All my friends were there too. They couldn't believe that I had the nerve to do it. I had a big smile on my face. In the mean time, my father was trying to avoid my boyfriend who was watching me as I walked back to the end of the stage. My father thought I was only going to model clothes. He was stunned. All my teachers congratulated me for doing such a great job.

When I returned to the back of the stage, who do I see with their jaws popped wide open but my father and my boyfriend. I was wearing a bra and a girdle. Over it I had to wear a sheer cape in order to see the garment better. I was surprised to see my father and my boyfriend staring at me. My boyfriend had the biggest smile on his face.

A few days before, Ms. Clooney, my language arts teacher, made an announcement about the fashion show. They needed participants. I waited for my classmates to leave before I spoke to Ms. Clooney.

I asked, "Can I participate in the fashion show?"

Ms. Clooney looked at me and said, "I have to check your grades before I let you participate. How are they?"

"Okay I guess," I told her.

That night, I gave my parents a permission slip for the fashion show. My father was against it but my mother was willing to let me participate. They argued for a while but eventually my father gave up the fight. He signed the permission slip. I know my father was trying to protect me since I was the youngest daughter in the family. I was so happy!

After the show, I was offered the opportunity to do other modeling jobs. I modeled for the Barbizon School of Modeling and other agencies. I was able to keep the clothes and shoes I had to model. I was happy I was able to try make-up products too. I did commercials and some magazines. I did a commercial for toothpaste and another for ketchup products, and I modeled a business suit for a magazine. I've traveled in different location in New York City. This is an experience I will never forget. Neither will my father and mother.

Backyard

by Shan Chen-Goldstein

I have been dreaming of a nice, comfortable backyard where I can spend time with my family for years. After months of house hunting from Brooklyn to Staten Island, my husband and I finally got this warm and cozy house located on a green, tree-lined block, which met our family demands and budget. We couldn't be more satisfied and got a contractor to start our great project – changing the whole backyard right away.

There were two small maple trees near to a shaky old deck which made some strange sound every time I stepped on it in the original backyard. It was far away from what we desired, so we started renovation of the shaky old deck. We felt that the materials should not be regular wood; although cheaper, we would have to take care of it every year. We also felt regular wood would not look as nice as “Trex” decking composite wood.

Since the deck was very small, we decided to enlarge it by one third. Along the side of the steps my husband wanted to install decorative solar lights so that at night they will give off a romantic atmosphere that makes us feel like we are on a vacation.

The backyard was paved with brown-red bricks in the shape of a square surrounded by light grey bricks. We felt that the two colors matched each other very well and dramatically changed the backyard into a pleasant scene.

We discovered that in spring the accumulating snow melts off and the red soft shoots of the trees start growing. We planted some green bushes and some Indian Azalea which my son created into a beauty floral design that he first saw at the age of five in China. Together they make our backyard more colorful and alive.

In the summer, we bought a gazebo, a 54-inch round table with a piece of glass of the same size on top, two 360-degree reclining wicker chairs and four regular wicker chairs. In the gazebo we hung different colored lanterns, 10 round and two rectangular on which there are Chinese paintings of peach blossoms. This way we can stay in our backyard at night as much as we like. The most enjoyable part is that we set up two swinging hammocks. I enjoy lying there looking up at birds singing in the green tree and the blue sky decorated with a couple of silk-like clouds. My heart often sings along with the birds. This is our lovely backyard where we can relax, barbecue, do some reading and enjoy our holidays with our family and friends.

In the fall, leaves gradually turn from green to orange and then to fresh red. I take pictures and share them with my friends in China. From our backyard, I am able to tell when the temperature changes and the next season comes – winter.

In winter our backyard becomes a paradise for our two cute dogs – one is a black and white Alaska husky named Julie and the other one is a golden lab called Monica. Before winter comes, we put away the gazebo and the table and chairs so the backyard is empty. When it snows, the yard is totally covered and becomes a snow and ice world. That is the time when my sons do not walk the dogs instead they let them run around. Julie and Monica love it so much they usually chase each other up and down the stairs. Julie jumps like a deer, quickly and swiftly; Monica wags her tail as usual and jumps up high in the air. My sons run in the snow with their dogs and throw snowballs at them and leave a bunch of laughter outside. Our family loves this backyard in all four seasons.

My Fifth Birthday

by Velina Falby

It was the beginning of March, the weather was beautiful and my fifth birthday was just a few days away. I was anxious and excited all at the same time because I didn't know what my mother had planned for me that year.

On the day of my birthday, I realized my mom had planned a big birthday party. It was indeed a big event. She cooked food and made sandwiches; there were cookies, chips and lots of toys and candies for the kids. She had rented a hall to accommodate the people that were invited. I snuck a peak at the guest list and was surprised to see it went on for pages; at least three pages, I remembered. I found out there was to be a DJ, which my mom hired of course, a clown, a magician and one of those people who paint faces. I was overjoyed. I could not believe I was having such a big party. I got busy helping mom prepare for this big event to celebrate my fifth year of life. I suspect mom made such a big deal of my fifth birthday because earlier in the year I had accidentally drank kerosene and was close to death. But I recovered fully. I guess mom was just showing her excitement that I was alive and well.

The day went on and the evening fast approached. I was tired from helping all day, from decorating the hall to making gift bags. Mom had to chase me into the shower. I took a shower and as I stepped into my bedroom, on my bed, was a brand new, beautiful outfit. Dad came home from work early that Saturday, and in he walked with a cake – it was a Spider-Man cake. Yeah! I was bursting with excitement. As 4 o'clock approached, my mom, my dad and I walked out to the car. On the way to the garage we realized that it looked like it was going to rain. Mom was surprised. "They didn't say anything about rain all week," she complained. I hoped that it would not rain. Mom told dad to wait as she ran back inside for an umbrella, just in case! It took mom longer than normal to come back out of the house, so dad sent me in to get her. When I got into the living room, I noticed mom was on the phone. "Hurry mom, we need to get there before the guests," I screamed. But mom only hushed me. I sat and waited for her. When mom got off the phone, I saw a look on her face, I just didn't know what that look was. Mom told me to sit down.

She grabbed a box of tissues, sat me down on the couch and said to me, "Honey, Amanda went to heaven today."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

“Baby, Amanda went to heaven, she is no longer with us, she is with Jesus now.” I ran off the couch and into my room. I remember mom saying that to me the previous year when grandpa died. But it couldn’t be that Amanda died! No! It couldn’t be!

But indeed it was true. Later, I learned Amanda died on her way to my party. Her parents got into an accident and she was ejected from the car. She died on impact. Since that day, I have never celebrated a birthday, and needless to say, I didn’t celebrate that fifth year either, because on that day my best friend died!

House Demolished

by Wai Wah Law

When I was a little boy in China, I lived in a fairly large house. My father told me that we only needed to pay a monthly payment of four Chinese Yuan (equivalent to about 63 American cents) to the government. One of the biggest impressions of my childhood was a big Chinese character (meaning “to demolish”) which was painted in bright red paint outside of my house, on the wall beside a big, old wooden door.

In this old, large house lived four families. My family occupied a small bedroom and a half living room. My parents slept in the bedroom. My older sister, my younger brother, and I slept in the half of the living room that we shared with the other family, which also was our dining room. Every night, after dinner, we folded our dinner table, so my sister could make her bed. My brother and I slept in a small mezzanine inside our house above my sister’s bed that my father built.

“I hope it will not fall down on our sister,” I said to my brother.

He said, “I am afraid that may happen ... ”

I do not remember how many times that we said the same thing before we fell asleep. Every night, we climbed into the mezzanine very carefully, and then lay down slowly. I was worried that the whole house including our beds would collapse because the Chinese character for “demolish” was not only on the wall it also was in my mind.

One day, I saw my father making wood work.

I asked my father, “Are you going to make something for the house and make it stronger?”

My father laughed and said, “This house is strong enough for living even though it is more than 100 years.”

“But why is there ‘demolish’ on it?” I asked.

My father smiled, “I believe that we still can live in this old house for another 10 years. Don’t worry.”

I believed my father. I would not ask him again. Gradually, I got used to the sign of “demolish” and it was as a beautiful decoration on the wall of my house.

Every night before we slept I would say to my brother, “Have a good dream.”

My childhood life was like most other Chinese children in the 1950s and 1960s. We were poor and life was simple. We did not have toys. My father made us a wooden gun. I played with it with my brother and later we made our own wooden guns. One day my mother bought two little pigeons for us.

I jumped and shouted to my brother, “We have pigeons.”

We raised those two pigeons until they had their babies. Then we had four pigeons. We fed them. They could fly. When I close my eyes, I can still see my four pigeons flying together around and around in the sky.

When I grew up I moved to another house. One day, I went back to visit my parents. I saw that my favorite decoration – the big red Chinese sign “demolish” disappeared.

I asked my father, “Did someone do something with the house?”

My father answered, “They only covered the “demolish” sign by using white paint.

I asked, “The house is not dangerous anymore?”

“I told you it was strong enough,” my father said, “And this is the government’s business.”

Three years ago, my father turned 88 years old.

He called me on the phone and said, “We need to move into a temporary house because our old house needs to be rebuilt.”

Eventually, the sign “demolish” became a reality.

Remembrance

by Esperanza Sierra

On an ordinary morning, one with a light breeze and visible clouds, I found myself day-dreaming as I was looking through my window. The sun was brilliant, like diamonds glistening in the light. It was as warm as a summer day. I watched as people walked up and down the block and I began to wonder where they were going. Some were perhaps on their way to work, maybe to school or other important things. I heard the laughter of children and watched them play beneath trees. As I watched, memories of my childhood came to my mind.

As I gazed through the window at that beautiful view, I was transported to my native country. I remembered when I was a child of about 6 or 7 years old. I used to play in the backyard with my siblings. We played baseball – that wonderful game that allowed us to be represented to the rest of the world. There was a baseball store where we could buy the equipment but it was too expensive so we would make them or use the tools that we had around us. Our balls were made of strings and old socks, our bats were sticks and our gloves were made of cardboard and string. The bases could have been made of any material we might have come across – leaves, cardboard, fabric. We had endless hours of laughter and fun.

My country is one of the most gorgeous islands in the Caribbean. Our weather is warm and it is summer all year around. Everywhere I went there were beautiful, tropical views to enjoy. As I think back to my past, I feel very fortunate that I was born in such a place where all the people are friendly and warm and genuinely care for each other.

As I sit on the front porch beneath a sky as blue as Princess Diana's eyes, the air is warm and I can feel the breeze caress my face and flow through my hair. The street is cast in shadows from a large oak tree and I see people pass by looking calm and stress-free. Suddenly, in a wonderful moment rain begins to pour from the sky and I laugh as the people run for shelter, trying not to get wet.

Suddenly, I am back in my memories, looking through the glass window that made me feel like I was living a beautiful moment from my childhood. It is this smile that causes me to laugh at the people in the rain, as I recall the Spanish phrase, *recordar es vivir* – to remember is to live.

"Interviewers often ask what I'm proudest of. There are many things that come to mind. If I had to pick one thing, I'd say it's this: organizing classroom paraprofessionals and negotiating for them not only better salaries and benefits, but a career ladder that enables each of them to go to college."

– Albert Shanker, former UFT and AFT President, 1985

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