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THE SAGA OF SLOT MACHINE

by Topper Thompson

In the 1970s, through a business connection, I developed a sailboat-racing relationship with Steve Terrell. Together with Steve's sailing partner, Mark Intyre, we worked with Melbourne, Florida yacht designer Paul Lindenberg to design a 30' Lindenberg sailboat. Our special design included mobile backstays on tracks which provided a powerful tool for changing the shape of the mainsail by flattening the mast. A straighter mast builds shape and power to develop a competitively superior upwind sailing slot between the mainsail and the jib.



Lindenberg 30' Racing Yacht SLOT MACHINE

Consequently, Steve's wife Becky Terrell suggested the yacht's name: "Slot Machine." My wife Susan designed a spinnaker logo for Slot Machine that displayed the three-cherry bar on a slot machine which nets the player a prize. Susan set up the silk screen in Becky's garage and they screened the cherries logo onto the spinnaker with a special ink Susan had researched. The ink had to set without heat and be waterproof.

On March 25, 1983, Steve, Mark, and I with a crew of seven, including Keith Donaldson, Neil Bercow, and Andre Martecchinia, sailed Slot Machine in the 180-nautical mile Lightship Race. I recall also that Pensacola Mayoral Candidate Allen McMillan may have been the seventh member of our crew in one of the Lightship Races. Slot Machine had won the race in 1982 when the Lightship Race first became part of the Gulf Ocean Racing Circuit.



The 180-mile Lightship Race ran a triangular ocean course outside the protection of the barrier islands of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Forming the boundary between the Gulf of Mexico and the shallows of the Mississippi Sound, these barrier islands are uninhabited long spits of narrow sand dunes peppered with pine and oak trees that parallel the coast and mark the rapid rise of the seafloor from deepwater. The race then rounded the lighted Sea Buoy at the entrance to the Mobile Bay Channel. After returning along the southern edges of the Gulf Offshore Islands, the racecourse turned north at Ship Island Channel to finish just outside Gulfport Yacht Club.

The race time in early April is an ideal weather window preceding the Gulf Coast's hot summer doldrums, but in April cool high-pressure systems dive south and collide with the Gulf's warm moisture. This pressure system can raise serious sustained winds and huge waves. However, for our weekend race, winds of nothing higher than 25 knots were expected.

The 38 boats in the 1983 race, which started at Gulfport Yacht Club, entered a strong and building southerly wind with heavily overcast and threatening skies, but expectations were for no waves in the Gulf over ten feet. National Weather Service computers for our area were down, so no one knew that a violent cold front was approaching from the north. A few vessels dropped out at the start in fear of a potential reinforcing front. As the front approached, conditions worsened quickly, and several boats had serious issues in the first few miles and didn't make it past

the mark at Ship Island Pass into the open waters of the Gulf. Meanwhile, Slot Machine raced under her spinnaker as we flew along the barrier islands toward the Mobile Sea Buoy. Only six of the 38 starters made it to the buoy.

The strengthening of the wind was demonstrated when a Hobie 33' yacht named "Carnival Time" lost her mast's port spreader close to Chandeleur Island. Carnival Time limped downwind back to Gulfport. Arriving in port, the crew was shocked to discover that several other boats had already returned without their masts and stories began to arise with communications over the boats' VHF radios of a streak of high wind and rogue wave catastrophes along the barrier islands.

Conditions continued to worsen as we raced past Ship Island; even more so as we passed the Chandeleur Islands. When we turned past the Mobile Sea Buoy, hurricane force winds and waves as tall as the length of SLOT MACHINE created a formula for disaster. We appeared to be leading the race after rounding the Mobile Sea Buoy, but I told the crew that I deemed it safest to continue north into Mobile Bay on the channel to the east of Dauphin Island, rather than risk our lives to continue to race. One of my most experienced crew members pointed out that the only rocks along the Gulf of Mexico northern shore were east of Dauphin Island, presenting a risk that if we were washed ashore, we could be slammed onto the rocks by the rogue waves as we entered Mobile Bay. We decided to travel along the south side of Dauphin Island until we reached the west pass between Dauphin Island and Petit Bois Island. Then we would turn north inside the protection of the barrier islands.

Rogue waves started coming in earnest as the winds pushed us westward along the south shore of Dauphin Island. In addition to the 20-foot seas running at the time, occasional monster waves would come through, breaking on top. If the wave height is 60% or more than the length of the boat, then capsize is almost inevitable; therefore, smaller yachts are more liable to be capsized than bigger ones. It was one of these waves that came through and was the harbinger of disaster for Slot Machine.

The rogue wave "pitch-poled" Slot Machine stern over bow, flipping the boat upside down in the water. The boat came up, rig intact, but without steerage; the rudder had been broken off. We deployed several sea anchors, but we were unable to bring the bow into the wind. Slot Machine had no control and consequently lay broadside to the breaking waves. The crew became immediately in danger of drowning while exposed to broadside waves that turned the hull upside down three

times. Consequently, they sought to launch the lifeboat. However, I advised them to lash the lifeboat in the cockpit – not to launch it.

I explained to the crew I had raced in the Bahamas with America's Cup champion Ted Turner. I had asked Ted what lessons he could tell me that he had learned when he raced in the Fast Net Race around England, in which a severe storm drowned fifteen competing yachtsmen. He told me that the lesson he learned from the disaster was: "Stay with the big boat!!" He advised that the fifteen yachtsmen who drowned had all evacuated into lifeboats, in which they drowned in the 65-knot winds. My advice further raised the fear of the crew as larger and larger broadside waves threatened to sink the Slot Machine. The crew lashed the lifeboat into the cockpit, shut all cabin portholes and hatches, secured the cabin door from inside, and all crew members wedged themselves into place within the cabin.

As Slot Machine's hull was turned upside down in the Gulf waters three times by waves striking the hull broadside, two of the boat's six portholes were broken open, allowing waves to enter the cabin. The cabin was soon almost completely filled with sea water, leaving less than a foot of air to breathe below the roof of the cabin. We radioed a "Mayday" to the Coast Guard, but in the middle of communication with the Coast Guard, the boat rolled again. This time the mast hit the bottom of the Gulf, and communication with the Coast Guard ended. The water filling the cabin threatened to drown the entire crew as we wedged ourselves inside the cabin. In desperate fear of being drowned inside a sinking hull, the crew began to set up the life raft for escape from the "Big Boat." But in that process, a member of the crew sighted waves washing onto the shore of a downwind barrier island. We discussed our options and recognized that if we left the Big Boat by boarding the Little Boat, it was likely we would be washed onto the island ahead of the Big Boat and be crushed as it washed ashore atop us. We decided to ride the Big Boat ashore.

Our crew was saved from drowning when Slot Machine's hull washed up on the shore of the barrier island Petit Bois Island. Petit Bois Island is deserted, occupied only by horseshoe crabs. Crew members abandoned Slot Machine's hull as it was thrown onto the island by the huge waves. Each crew member safely abandoned the hull as it washed across the island, taking care to avoid being crushed under the boat as it came toward them off the next wave.

The waves pushed Slot Machine across the east sand beach of the island, dragging, pounding, and inserting her keel across the beach of Petit Bois all the way to the middle of the island. We set up a shelter on top of a huge sand dune by lifting the lifeboat atop the dune and stretching a sail across the rails of the lifeboat.

Notwithstanding the protection of the sand dune shelter, our crew from Slot Machine experienced hypothermia, a condition experienced when the body's temperature drops to dangerously low levels. We suffered near-final stages of hypothermia after five hours in the 40-degree temperature and piercing winds.

Around midnight a Coast Guard helicopter spotted the wreckage of Slot Machine. The helicopter never landed because of the wind strength, but the crew chief lowered himself with a harness from the hovering helicopter, and I came down from the sand dune and met with him. He asked, "Is there anyone else alive?" I told him our entire crew of seven was alive atop the nearby sand dune. He drew a circle in the sand and brought each crew member one by one from the sand dune into the circle. By harness, he then lifted each of us into the warmth and safety of the helicopter's cabin. When our entire crew of seven had been lifted into the helicopter, the crew chief determined I was Captain of the wrecked boat and asked me, "Where do you want us to take you?"

I replied, "Can you take us to the Bar of the Gulfport Yacht Club?"

"NO! What hospital?"

The Coast Guard helicopter dropped us on the landing pad at Gulfport Memorial Hospital, where the Mayor of Gulfport picked us up and drove us to the Bar of the Gulfport Yacht Club. We went to the Bar to seek a meeting with Reverend Paul S. Tipton, who was Chairman of the Gulf Offshore Racing Circuit.



Father Tipton told us that while we rode Slot Machine halfway across Petit Bois Island, a twenty-year-old Tulane student, Nelson Roltsch, had fallen overboard when he climbed from below deck with his harness unclipped into the cockpit of the J-29 sailboat on which he was crewing. He did not have a chance to hook on to the safety rail before a rogue wave hit. He was washed overboard. Although the boat operated its outboard motor to try to reach and rescue Nelson, after forty-five minutes of failed rescue attempts, Nelson disappeared from sight. The crew of the J29 explained, "There was no way to get to him, and no way for him to get to the boat."

The corpse of Nelson Roltsch was never found. An accomplished sailor, well-liked and with fiery red hair, he had won a national scow championship at age 16. He had entered Tulane in 1981 and had spent the summer as a charter captain, having earned his US Coast Guard Captain's License at age 18. Today Tulane University is proud to continue to remember Nelson by having renamed the annual Windjammer Regatta as the Nelson Roltsch Regatta. It is well attended and very competitive.

We hauled Slot Machine onto a barge with a crane. The now famous Slot Machine was taken by the barge to a repair yard beside Ingalls, Alabama, to be repaired and then transported to Melbourne to be recast and to race again. The repaired Landenberg 30' was bought and renamed "Out of Control." Years later the original Slot Machine rudder washed up onto the Petit Bois beach; we refabricated the rudder into a coffee table with a story for guests to hear about the Saga of Slot Machine.

WINTER BREAK IN RUSSIA 1967

by Ginger Vehaskari

I was an English teacher and the only American traveling in the old WW2 train from Helsinki to Leningrad, now called St. Petersburg.

Clickity clack, clickity clack, the old “puff-a-billy” huffed balls of black smoke down its back. Yeah, they were still using steam locomotives back then. The train was blanketed with dark rainy clouds, sleet and wind pushed the train from side to side. We travelled at a snail’s pace and sat on rough, worn wooden benches in dank cabins overstuffed with people; no one talking. A depression settled over the train as it caterpillared toward the invisible iron curtain.

A short, squat, “babushka” tea-lady sat at the end of each compartment car and served tea from an old, yellowed pewter samovar, for a price, when she wasn’t in the closet giggling with a conductor. The tea tasted like metal.

You’ve heard in old black and white movies how the trains would screech brakes for long distances before coming to a stop. Yep, that’s the way it was. I thought it was going to screech all the way to Leningrad. Burping grey and dirty white smoke, it finally came to the border town, Viipuri, which is situated between Russia and Finland. Here we had to show our passports and visas. Russian soldiers in their gloomy olive-green uniforms carried loaded rifles slung over their shoulders and they swarmed around the train.

EVERYBODY OUT! PASSPORTS!

At least that’s what I thought was barked at us. Obedient as sheep, we herded to the exit.

“Вы останавливаетесь!”

Huh?

“Вы останавливаетесь! Сейчас!”

The soldiers pointed at me and shoved me back into the cabin. From the push, I guessed they meant that I had to stop. Now! My insides started to flutter. Scary. Never felt fear before.

“Предъявите паспорт!”

Oh. I guessed they wanted to see my passport. No problem. I refused to let my hands shake as I looked at them with big innocent blue eyes hoping they'd melt a bit. They didn't.

“Открытый багаж!” They pointed to my large suitcase on the above rack. I guessed I had to get it down. God, it was heavy. Why did I pack so much! No help from the frowning police soldiers, who looked to be about 15 years old. The exited passengers walked back and forth in the sleeting rain and peered into the cabin window, curious as to what was keeping them in the cold and wondering why was I being detained.

My insides started to shake. I wondered if any Americans had disappeared on these trips.

Everything. They tore absolutely everything out of the suitcase and threw it around the cabin. I hated to see my clothes on the gross seats but feared a Russian prison more. I kept my mouth shut, a rare thing for me. I guess I could teach English in prison. Their curious fingers opened all the bottles and tasted even the face cream. My stomach flutters became trembles, inching up into my throat and down into my legs. Was I going to faint?

Oh no. I gulped hard. They found my box of Tampax ... and opened it.

“Бомбы!”

Huh?

They pointed their guns at me.

Бомбы!

Palpitations shook me down to my toes. Oh my god. They pulled one Tampax out of the box. It was round, soft, and had a string drooping out of one end. It looked like a bomb! They thought it was a bomb! Oh shit. I'm gonna die!

Бомбы!

Oh my god, one soldier took a match and lit the end of the string. Blue and yellow sparks flew all over the cabin. Screaming, they dropped it on the floor, stomped out the fire and pushed me down on the bench with guns at my throat.

I am really going to die.

The tea babushka rushed into the cabin and stared at us. She saw one man holding the Tampax box and the guns at my throat. She pointed to the box and started yelling at them.

The red stripe running down the soldier's uniform's pant leg was pale in comparison to the red on their faces. The shocked young men dropped the box as if it were poison and flew out of the cabin.

My hands were still shaking as I crammed my things back into the suitcase while questioning people filed back into the cabin. The other passengers watched me suspiciously from the corners of their eyes, gave me plenty of space, and pretended to ignore me. I picked up a book and made believe that I really was a spy and glared at my companion passengers over the top of my book. Later, I realized my book was upside down.

If only that were the end of the story.

The rest of the two weeks as I toured Leningrad and Moscow, I was shadowed by a typical KGB, big, stocky, long dark coat, dark hat pulled over his eyes, always several yards behind me. He followed me through the empty stores, down the scarcely used wide streets and empty famous museums. Remember this was 1967 and the Cold War was in full rage with fewer and fewer products and tourists in the Soviet Union.

Two days before the end of the trip, I stopped at an ice-cream kiosk and bought two ice cream cones, even though it was still winter around 32 degrees Fahrenheit. I walked back to the KGB man and handed him one of the cones, turned around and continued walking. Together, for the next two days, we went through the rest of the tourist sights. Him, several yards behind me.

True story

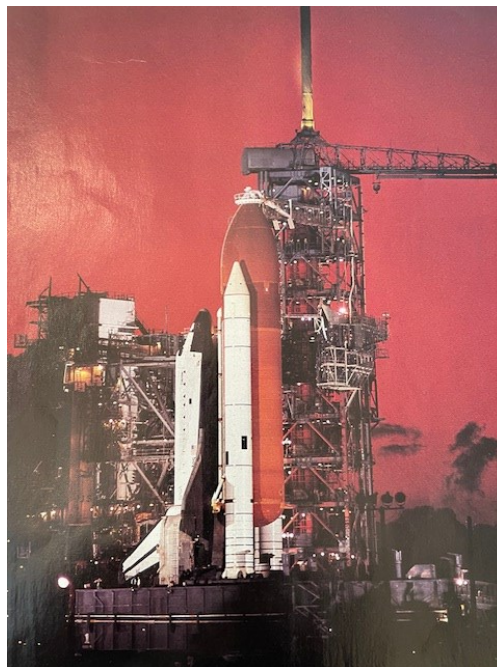
THE DAY THE EARTH TREMBLED UNDER MY FEET

by Aggie Richards

Tears erupted from my eyes. I tried to hold them back and regain some form of professionalism at Cape Kennedy at the launch of the Space Shuttle Columbia.

It was November 11, 1982.

Hopefully inconspicuous in the VIP section even closer to the Columbia launch than the Press, I stood shoulder to shoulder with the brilliant minds that had made it happen, including Bethel Pierce, a subject of our WYES-TV documentary series, "Opportunity, Working in Louisiana." As producer, I was invited with my crew, consisting of assistant producer, cameraman, and photographer, to witness this spectacular event.



The Louisiana delegation—25 Martin Marietta employees who have helped build the external tank for this shuttle flight—laugh/crie/cheer as the shuttle Columbia disengages into a clear November sky.

We were special guests of Martin Marietta Aerospace because we had done a feature story on their Quality Control Inspector, Bethel Pierce. It was also a first launch for 20 or so Martin Marietta employees with us. Bethel had been part of an SRT, systems refinement team, which had won a NASA competition among all the quality circles at all the hundreds of firms supplying shuttle parts and employing thousands of skilled workers.

This was the fifth flight and first operational mission of the Space Transportation System, carrying a commercial satellite payload and the first four-man crew into space flight history. This day, Columbia deployed two satellites into orbit for private companies, each of which paid about ten million dollars for the service. This was the beginning of a whole new era. Earlier explorers visited space, but Columbia's

success proved we could both launch satellites and retrieve them for in-space repair or return them to earth for refurbishment.



Solid Rocket Liftoff and Ignition

At t minus 00.02 solid rocket ignition and lift off there was a brilliant light, followed by white smoke tumbling about the launch site, almost obscuring the rocket and dominating my entire field of vision. The earth violently trembled beneath my feet. Only then did a thunderous roar catch up with my overloaded senses.

As we stood awestruck and teary-eyed, the Michoud-made external fuel tank, already on the other side of the world in eight and a half minutes, finished emptying its 528,000 gallons of liquid propellants, detached from the shuttle as planned, broke into pieces, and fell into the Indian Ocean.



On that chilly early November morning, the euphoria was electric. It was a splendid success.

I continued to follow the adventures of the Columbia and mourned with the world 23 launches and 20 years later on February 1, 2003, when the shuttle disintegrated as it reentered the atmosphere over Texas and Louisiana.

Seven courageous astronauts lost their lives that tragic day.

SUN VALLEY: FOR JEANNE

by Charlotte Travieso

On most days
The sun came through the windows just right
Throwing rectangular shadows on the carpet.

When she walked through that hall
On her way to morning yoga class
She would say
“This is my sun valley.”

She, and her brother too,
Had been premier ballet dancers
In their time.

She still had the legs
And the posture
And the grace to show for it.

And, when challenged,
She could still lift her heel to the barre
And perform a deep plié.

She was one of those people
Who would live forever.
She was supposed to.

But the day came, as it always does, when she left us.
And even though her light will shine forever
Sun Valley is much darker now.

THE MYSTERY OF NOTHINGNESS

by Bill Penick

[Presentation at the Geselling Institute in Toronto, Canada, on May 8, 2023]

My name is George Swanson. I'm a neuroscientist. The patient next to me is Estelle. She was 26 years old when she suffered devastating head injuries in an automobile accident. After nine months in an urban hospital, she spent the next 10-plus years in her parents' home with around-the-clock nursing care. During that whole time, Estelle was totally unresponsive to any outside stimulus and exhibited no signs of consciousness. Accordingly, all of the physicians who evaluated her agreed on the same medical diagnosis: "untreatable vegetative condition." Despite that diagnosis, I can assure you with absolute certainty that Estelle is hearing – and understanding – everything I'm telling you today.

How do I know that? Let me start by acknowledging the groundbreaking work of my fellow neuroscientist Adrian Owen. As explained in his book, Into the Gray Zone (published 2018), he demonstrated that 15-20% of allegedly "vegetative" patients are in fact conscious, alert, and fully aware of their surroundings. To prove that proposition without having the ability to communicate with those patients in any traditional way, Dr. Owen used a more advanced version of the well-known MRI machine called a "functional magnetic resonance imaging" machine, or fMRI for short. Unlike its predecessor, the fMRI is able to track the amount of blood flowing in different parts of a human brain. That's important because brain cells that are working (or reacting) the hardest use more oxygen and therefore need more blood to deliver that extra oxygen. Those parts of the brain with increased blood flow appear brighter on an fMRI monitor and that tells us exactly which areas of the brain are working or reacting the hardest. The results are quite precise.

It is truly fascinating how Dr. Owen used that technology to identify and then reach those "vegetative" patients who were in fact conscious. First of all, he placed dozens of normal volunteers in fMRI scanners and instructed them through microphones inside the machines to think for 30 seconds about either (1) playing tennis or (2) walking through their own homes. The results were identical for every volunteer: thinking about (1) lit up one particular section of their brains (the premotor cortex) and thinking about (2) lit up a totally different section of their brains (the parahippocampal gyrus). When he tried the same experiment on "vegetative" patients, most of them did not respond at all, but 15-20% of them did, with the exact same results as the normal volunteers. That proved to Dr. Owen that

those “vegetative” patients who responded were in fact conscious because they were able to follow verbal instructions accurately.

The next step was more challenging. Knowing now that the fMRI monitor would tell him whether the person being scanned was thinking about (1) playing tennis or (2) walking through his or her home, Dr. Owen re-scanned the “vegetative” patients who were conscious and instructed them to answer his questions by thinking about either (1) if their answer was “yes” or (2) if their answer was “no.” To test the accuracy of that plan, the first questions put to those patients were simple ones with verifiable answers, like “Did you ever attend college?” or “Did you ever get married?” After they answered all of those test questions correctly, he asked them more complex questions, like “Is one of your nurses named Evelyn?” or “Did it snow outside your window yesterday?” Again, all of their yes-or-no answers were 100% correct. Dr. Owen had successfully established a meaningful two-way channel of communication with patients previously thought to be totally unconscious, unaware, unresponsive, and unreachable.

Using his model, I selected Estelle for a special project because I suspected she might be one of the 15-20% of “vegetative” patients who are actually conscious and capable of communicating their thoughts. She had published three very popular children’s books before her accident, including one that was a finalist for the prestigious Newbery Medal. My goal was to find out, if possible, what she had imagined or thought about during her 11 years of mental isolation. Her parents, Tom and Sandy, who are standing over there by Estelle, were supportive of the project and the happy prospect of finally communicating with their daughter again.

The first step was to use our fMRI machine to determine if Estelle was not only conscious but also willing to be scanned a number of times, which she was on both counts. After that, she answered any number of questions about a variety of subjects, but I want to focus now on just one aspect of her life as an author. Specifically, I asked her if she remembered writing those children’s books, which she did. Since she obviously had a very fertile imagination, I asked her if she had composed any other stories in her mind at any time after the accident. Her answer was a resounding “yes” that lit up the scan monitor and looked like a very definite invitation from her to pursue that further, which is what I did.

It turned out that Estelle had used that time alone to compose a number of stories in her head, but her favorite was about a little girl and a mysterious void on a far-distant planet. She clearly hoped I would record it, but to do that was a painstaking process since we were limited to “yes” or “no” answers. Nevertheless, she

persevered and we did it after many long scanning sessions at night. Here's that story:

The main character, Kip, is a young girl who was locked entirely inside her own mind as the result of a catastrophic childhood illness. She could not see, speak, hear, smell, taste, or move on her own and lived in a special home for others like her. However, despite her disabilities, she was unusually intelligent, creative, and fearless. And she had a very dear and loyal friend named Tegla.

Before Kip's illness, she and Tegla spent much of their free time playing in a nearby field of flowers where there were multitudes of beautiful butterflies. Whenever Kip went there, hundreds of them would light on her exposed skin for minutes at a time. A few of the butterflies would light on Tegla too, but it was obvious that Kip enjoyed a special kind of relationship with them. Nothing about that changed even after Kip's illness. Tegla continued to take her friend to the same field in a wheelchair because she knew how much Kip loved it and the butterflies. Unbeknownst to them, each of the butterflies that landed on Kip both before and after her illness shed a number of tiny tears that were absorbed into her skin.

Kip and Tegla also shared a fascination with the place on their planet called "B'kia," which meant "the ominous void" in her people's language. It was a mysterious and foreboding space, utterly dark and utterly silent. As described by a local explorer, "it is an aberration of nature, a vast hole of intense and palpable nothingness on the edge of our world." After religious leaders condemned it as pure evil, everyone on the planet avoided B'kia.

Tegla continued to visit her stricken friend regularly for years until it became apparent to her that Kip was dying. Remembering her utter fascination with the whole idea of B'kia, Tegla knew instinctively that Kip wished to die there. A short time later, she brought Kip to the very edge of B'kia, kissed her on the cheek one last time, and gently pushed her into the darkness.

As soon as Kip entered the void, strange and wonderful things started happening, but first a little history. Unknown to anyone on the planet, B'kia at one time in the distant past had been full of light and sound produced by an infinite number and variety of butterflies. Not only could they communicate with each other, they had also adapted to the total darkness by developing an ability to generate light, like fireflies but brighter. As a result, B'kia became a dazzling place, unlike any other on the planet. Unfortunately, a freak cosmic accident then changed everything about B'kia. All of the butterflies there were transformed into "frozen" forms of

non-physical energy. Although nothing outside of B'kia was affected by the cosmic event, the butterflies that lived elsewhere knew that something drastic had happened to their "cousins" inside the shining void when it suddenly became dark and quiet. And that's the way B'kia was when intelligent life first appeared on that world and when Kip entered the darkness.

When she did that, Kip's mind survived intact as an incorporeal unit but her physical body disappeared, thereby releasing the countless butterfly tears that had been absorbed by her skin. They became an ethereal mist that permeated the entire void. That in turn freed all of the butterflies from their "frozen" state of suspended existence. B'kovia was again filled with trillions of exquisite butterflies that thrilled Kip, especially after she had lived in total darkness for so long. She also realized very soon that the butterflies were intelligent. After learning to communicate telepathically with them, Kip discovered they were capable of deep thought and emotion. From that point on, Kip and her new friends co-existed in a joyful state of discovery and creation inside B'kia.

But for some strange reason, perhaps to protect the inhabitants inside, the void appeared to be just as dark and empty as always to those on the outside, including Tegla. She did notice that the butterflies outside of B'kia seemed to glow brighter and fly faster than before. And she felt herself drawn back to the void in a mysterious but powerful way. Consequently, on the anniversary of her trip there with Kip, she returned. Acting on strong impulse, Tegla stood right where she had last seen Kip and leaned her face right up to the edge of the blackness. She did not see or hear anything, but she felt something brush her cheek very lightly and realized immediately that it was a kiss. After that extraordinary experience, she often went to the field where she and Kip had played as children. Whenever she did, numerous butterflies hovered around her and some of them even lit on her cheek that had been kissed. Tegla could not imagine what happened to Kip inside the void, but she knew it was something wonderful and was very happy for her friend.

For her story, Estelle chose the title of "B'kovia" to differentiate it from "B'kia," the name given to the void. In the imaginary language used in the story, "B'kovia" means "the teeming void" in contrast to the "the ominous void" meaning of "B'kia." After we finished recording, Estelle communicated to me that she thought of this story as a message to the world from her own dark world. The biographical component is very obvious, but as Estelle explained to me, the symbolic nature of the mysterious void that Kip entered is much more important. That's because Estelle's own future is dark and uncertain, whether she lives or dies. And when she

does die, what comes next, something or nothing? By entering the unknowable void, Kip found her answer to be a paradise “teeming” with life.

As you can see, Estelle was definitely not “vegetative” or unconscious over the last 11 years. Just the opposite. Her mind was incredibly active in the most productive way. We doctors just didn’t know it. To be trapped in her own mind but also hear that she was diagnosed as “vegetative” and untreatable must have been the worst kind of ongoing nightmare for her. Despite that, she did not give up. Instead, Estelle used her intelligence and consciousness to not only survive for 11 lonely years but also to transform her own personal void into a kind of “Bkovia” with butterflies and all. In the process, she created meaningful stories for the enjoyment and education of others. Her parents have just received an offer to make the story you heard into an illustrated children’s book and possibly an animated movie. I have made arrangements to start recording the 15 other stories that Estelle composed during her long ordeal. And if I know my friend here, she is working on another story at this very moment.

Kip must have been very special for the outside butterflies to pick her to free their cousins trapped inside the void. You too are very special, Estelle.

LAMBETH PROFILES – GARY HYMEL

by Julie McCollam



Hale Boggs



Gary Hymel



Lindy Boggs

In 1965, when Gary Hymel got the call from Hale Boggs to come to Washington to be his executive assistant, he was a reporter for the States-Item, the afternoon newspaper of the Times-Picayune in New Orleans. US Representative (D-LA) Boggs was Majority Whip and a rising star in the Congressional firmament. Since Boggs' previous assistant had retired, he needed a capable, resourceful, and diplomatic person to join his team. Their eight years together encompassed an era of unprecedented turmoil and social discord, and yet it was also marked by a spirit of civility, cooperation, and camaraderie in Congress.

Nothing in Gary's background predicted such a trajectory. His family, who moved to New Orleans from Alexandria, Louisiana, was not particularly politically-oriented. His bent was toward writing. In the eighth grade, he wrote to Loyola University asking how to get a degree in Journalism. After graduating from St. Aloysius High School, he went to Loyola and not only got a degree in Journalism, but edited the college newspaper, the Maroon, which twice earned All-American awards. In 1953 Gary was named the outstanding journalism graduate, and subsequently was named to the Loyola and LSU Journalism Hall of Fame. After graduating from Loyola, he went into the Army, serving as a military police officer in Brooklyn, New York, and then as a Captain in the Louisiana National Guard. Gary subsequently went to work for the States-Item, first as a messenger boy, then as a copyboy, then as a sports writer, and eventually as a political writer covering Jefferson Parish. While working for the States-Item, he commuted to Baton Rouge, earning a master's degree in Journalism from LSU.

Although moving a wife and seven children (soon to be eight) from the familiar, comfortable environment of New Orleans to the sophisticated, complicated milieu

of Washington might seem daunting, Gary and his wife were thrilled. The jump in salary was certainly an incentive, but the chance to explore a city with highly educated people or to sit down to dinner next to a world expert in a particular field was inspiring. How smart everyone was, Gary remembers! For the children, visits to the Smithsonian, the National Gallery, and the many other attractions in the city were important. Of course, Gary and the family missed New Orleans – the food, the music, the unique culture.

Gary's responsibilities as Boggs' executive assistant were many and varied. He described his role as "playing short stop" for Boggs, and included acting as press spokesman, coordinating foreign trips for Congressional delegations, and assigning office space to Congressmen. He eventually collaborated with House Speaker Tip O'Neill on a book called "All Politics Is Local." An important contribution with long term benefits that Gary made was helping install live cable television in the House of Representatives by C-Span, which greatly enhanced the public's understanding of how government works. Such multifarious duties might seem challenging to a newcomer Southerner, but as Hale Boggs remarked, "if you can understand Jefferson Parish politics, you'll have no problem in Washington."

An important aspect of Gary's job was to interact successfully with the vivid, varied and powerful personalities who peopled Congress. He seems particularly well-suited for this job. With much of the vaunted easy affability of Boggs himself, Gary brought graciousness and diplomacy to his position, a position that allowed him to work with such influential figures as Hubert Humphrey and Lyndon Johnson, whom he describes as complicated, demanding, rough, and profane, but a leader in forwarding such important social programs as the War on Poverty and civil rights. Tip O'Neill, by contrast, he remembers was easy to work with, affable, funny, and greatly respected. Newt Gingrich, on the other hand, used aggressiveness as a way of doing business, a harbinger perhaps of the incivility that would come to dominate Congress later.

By contrast, Gary recalls the spirit of cooperation, and mutual respect that characterized his era in Washington. This atmosphere prevailed against the backdrop of the great social upheaval of the 1960s – the Birmingham riots, the sexual revolution, the Vietnam War, the assassination of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King. Throughout this tumultuous period, Congress remained a bipartisan enclave of civility. Members regularly socialized, took vacation car trips to Florida together, and sought common ground to address the business of governing.

Hale Boggs personified this attitude of accommodation and camaraderie. His ties with New Orleans remained close. An unusual friendship existed between Boggs and Bing Lee, the Jefferson Parish restaurant owner, and subsequently with Lee's son, Harry Lee, who became Sheriff of Jefferson Parish. Harry Lee regularly picked Boggs up at the airport and took him around to various places. In a telling moment of character revelation, when Boggs was asked by Lee on behalf of fellow restaurant owners to help avoid desegregation mandates, he advised Lee to comply, and to urge his fellow restaurateurs to do likewise, saying "it's the law of the land." He told Lee he should take out a full-page newspaper ad to that effect, which Gary wrote.

In the spirit of good will and cooperation Boggs undertook a trip to Alaska to campaign for a young Alaska Congressman, Nick Begich, in the fall of 1972. Begich had actually voted against Boggs for majority leader, but being the consummate, savvy politician that he was, Boggs' viewpoint was don't retaliate, accommodate.

On October 16th, 1972, Hale Boggs, Nick Begich, and his assistant took off in a Cessna 310 C, built in 1959, from the Anchorage airport for Juneau. They were never heard from again. The search for the plane was the largest in the history of the country with forty military and twenty civilian aircraft taking part, including a Blackbird SR71 spy plane. After thirty-nine days, the search was abandoned. As more information unfolded, it developed that the pilot, Don Jonz, left the transponder in his desk drawer. Gary recalls that there was an article by Jonz in a magazine on sale in drugstores in Anchorage at the time in which Jonz writes, "you don't have to worry about icing on the wings if you're willing to 'cheat the devil.'" So, Gary is convinced that the accident was entirely due to pilot error. Adding to the fatal decision to fly despite



adverse weather reports was the pressure of the engagements the two men had in Juneau, and the fact that Hale Boggs was the kind of man to take risks too.

The spy plane actually flew the route of the lost plane, took pictures and showed them to Lindy Boggs, Hale Boggs' wife, and to Gary and Harry Lee, who had flown out from Washington the day after the accident. At last, they gave up hope and flew back to Washington. Then Lindy Boggs began to get calls from psychics offering information about the whereabouts of the plane. In a last, desperate hope, Gary would call Elmendorf Air Force Base and give an Air Force captain the latest psychic readings, giving the grid coordinates they provided. Lindy Boggs was even persuaded to send some of her husband's clothes to connect to a supposed location. An Air Force helicopter would go out and search, but nothing ever materialized.

Lindy Boggs was elected to fill her husband's Congressional seat, and later she was appointed ambassador to the Holy See. During her years in office, she championed the rights of women and minorities and served on countless committees and boards.

Gary Hymel was so respected for his exemplary work that he was asked to be executive assistant to Tip O'Neill who became House Speaker in 1977. In 1981 he joined a Washington firm as senior vice-president and chief lobbyist. In retirement he served for four years on the Louisiana Board of Ethics as an appointee of the Louisiana Senate. Gary now lives at Lambeth House in Assisted Living in the second Congressional district, once represented by Hale Boggs.

STOCKHOLM

by Bob Sakakeeny

He stood at the head of the table, a blond Nordic god in a blue uniform with gold trimmings. He was the Commander of the recently-created Swedish Armed Forces – consolidating the Army, Navy, and Air Force into one command.

1998 was turning out to be a good year for business. I was going to Europe so often that flying out Sunday night and returning Friday afternoon was becoming routine. I now wonder if all those miles in aircraft seats – over five million – caused my three back operations and current troubles walking. Additionally, arranging for coverage and care for Gale was taking its toll on both of us. She was still able to work and drive and get around with a Canadian Crutch, but I had to arrange for someone to be on call – at first friends and then caretakers. Diagnosed with MS in 1987, she surprised her doctors by lasting until 2018.

My bosses and co-workers all wanted to work on this contract, but the client insisted on me. Because I was a brilliant tech analyst/consultant? Hardly. I was one of the few analysts with military experience and as an enlisted one no less. I had a staff of six analysts working for me, access to dozens of others in the other groups, and contacts throughout the tech industry.

Sweden had universal conscription for men in the 1990s – changed to gender-neutral in 2010. But, even with that, only a small percentage served a full term. With the end of the Cold War and the concurrent end of the Soviet Union, the threat of a conflict was seemingly eroded, and this reduced the pressure to have a ready defense force. The Commander-in-Chief (CiC) was worried about how the “peace” would affect budgets and force retention, but he was more concerned about how the changing technology would affect troop management.

All basic training is focused on getting troops to obey orders without thinking – when ordered to take that hill, everybody moves forward. We all have seen the movies where the machine gun nest pops up and mows down the advancing troops.

During a planning call, the CiC said he wanted me to put on my emerging-technology hat and describe to his leadership team how advances could provide real-time information – knowing where the machine gun was located – that could affect how they positioned their troops. “But don’t spend too much time on that. My guys are sharp enough to work that out. What keeps me up at night is what to do when the troops have access to the same information at the same time as the senior officers. Where will technology take the cell phone and non-voice technology and anything we haven’t thought of?”

After this call, I contacted my handler and updated her on this consult. She responded that it sounded like a good deal, and could also be cover for another related task that I might be offered. I often updated her on my European travel plans in case there was an opportunity for a side job which helped pay for Gale’s health care not covered by insurance.

I landed in Stockholm on Monday and was met by a staff car and taken to my hotel. Early the next morning, I was picked up by the staff car and taken to a compound after a 20-minute drive and introduced to the group of about 10 officers – all male and all in the crisp blue uniforms.

We spent the first morning discussing the current and future advances in computing. Search, online shopping, streaming video, and so on would not be possible without powerful computers. This and equal advances in storage and imaging would be the foundation for the explosive growth in the use of technology in the near- and mid-term future. There were two major buyers of all this technology which pushed more product development – the Mormon Church and porn sites.

After lunch, we focused on communications. Most of you readers now have a “smart” phone running on 5G signals (the g stands for generation). At the time of this story, most phones were running 1G or 2G, allowing for mostly voice communications. 3G was beginning to gain market share and was notable because it allowed for decent text messaging.

This fading memory can’t accurately recount the discussion about what the future of warfare would look like and how Senior Staff needed to manage the troops. I can say that two technologies I did not cover were the impact of drones and satellites and the massive improvements in optics – photos and videos. A failure of my imagination.

I began to wrap up the meeting by talking about where I saw the technology developing over the next decade and how it would impact the troops. We only need to look at the Ukraine war to see how battle-planning would change because of technology. The much smaller Ukraine has an advantage over the much larger Russia in part because of how the Ukrainian troops are allowed to make tactical decisions based on what they see instead of having to wait for a central command to give orders. It should not surprise readers that the Swedish military has been supporting the Ukrainian military with training and supplies.

Driving back to Stockholm, I asked the driver to take me to a restaurant near the hotel. While it was getting late, the Commander had called ahead to make sure the kitchen would stay open for me. It was quiet and wood-beamed with a few diners finishing their meals. I had a double malt scotch while waiting for dinner. One guy was sitting behind me, so I got up to go to the bathroom in order to get a good look at him.

I finished dinner with a nice snifter of Calvados, put on my Barbour jacket, and headed to the hotel. Once outside, I took out my UK police baton and flicked it open to its full length. It had been snowing during my meal but it was light and fine and I had no problem walking in my L.L. Bean boots. My shadow had more difficulty since he was wearing loafers, so when he tried to catch up to me, I was able to pivot and swing the baton and whack him in the Adam's apple. He dropped to his knees grabbing his throat and gasping for air.

I went back to the hotel and had them call me a taxi while I packed. When I got to the airport, I had a long wait to check into my flight but there weren't any lounges open, so I went to the bathroom and sat on a toilet for a few hours.

The flights to London and then Boston were uneventful, but they gave me time to think about retirement. My age was becoming a handicap and it was obvious my cover was blown.

THE TRUTH OF “BIG TRAIN”

by Russ Herman

Have fun practicing law. You never know with certainty what will happen once a witness, particularly your client, takes the stand. Learn to laugh – particularly at yourself.

What follows is the direct and cross examination which gave birth to the Legend of the Big Train!!

In the 1960s, trial lawyers in my state learned their craft by trying large numbers of workers’ compensation, collection, and subrogation claims. Those of us who eventually became personal injury counsel for plaintiffs and defendants grew up in the profession “duking it out” before district court judges. Our workers’ compensation claims were tried by preference and without the benefit of juries. As a result, in the first several years of trial practice, we had numerous experiences in the field of adversary proceedings and we learned the rules of evidence and how to examine and cross-examine witnesses, prepare demonstrative evidence, et cetera. The learning process was often painful.

In 1967, I began an odyssey that I’ll never forget. After lunch, the senior associate, Tom (Bones) Brahney, II, and I left the office, crossed the street, and went to Charlie Malachais’s fruit stand. We each bought an apple and began an afternoon ritual of dropping dimes in the claw machine. While we played the claw machine, “Bones” (formerly the Chief Federal Referee in Bankruptcy in the Eastern District) advised me that his good friend, Cyril Hadley, Sr., would be in that afternoon to discuss with me the handling of his workers’ compensation suit. I was excited – it sounded like a pretty good case.

Cyril was a fellow who had been employed for many years at a plumbing supply house. His job was to warehouse and deliver large plumbing supplies to construction sites. The water heaters, toilets, and bathtubs were of great and varying weights, and as a result of work-connected activity, he had sustained a double inguinal hernia. The workers’ compensation insurer had refused him compensation.

“Bones” and I returned to our law office. About 40 minutes later, “Bones” brought Cyril Hadley into my office. Cyril was one of the biggest, meanest men I have ever

seen in my life. My grandfather, God rest his soul, always told me to watch out for men who had thick necks (Cyril's was the size of a tree trunk), thick wrists (Cyril's were as big as a man's thigh), and a barrel chest (his chest looked like two barrels). Cyril had mean-looking blue and red tattoos with snakes and skeletons and stuff all over his arms. He had on a Dixie Beer polo shirt and a pair of blue jeans. His lips were thick, his nose was red bulbous, his face was flushed, his hair was thinning, and his eyes were red. He said to me in no uncertain terms, "You better win my goddamn case, or I'm gonna beat the shit out of you."

In those days, I was already working pretty hard. I was married. Barb was working at the school board, and I was earning \$300.00 a month and a percentage of whatever fees I obtained for the firm.

I worked real hard. Eventually, Cyril, whom I later came to call "Big Train," congratulated me on doing a good job for him. Thank God. My career might have ended a long time ago.

John Combe represented Phoenix of Hartford, the workers' compensation insurer. John is a first-class defense attorney whose abilities and ethics are at the highest level. (He has served as President of our State Bar Association and as an officer in many Defense Counsel Associations.) But when we prepared and tried the case of Hadley v. Phoenix of Hartford, John and I did not understand many of the techniques of direct- and cross-examination. We were very young in the profession.

Comment: The following is actual testimony from Case No. 498-343. The case was tried before Judge Gerald Federoff, the most excellent of judges with a great sense of humor (thank God again). This case illustrates numerous pitfalls for the inexperienced plaintiff and defense counsel in the conduct of direct- and cross-examination. I abstracted and pieced together the trial and deposition testimony to give a coherent storyline.

CROSS-EXAMINATION BY MR. COMBE:

Q. State your name and address for the court reporter.

A. I did already.

Q. Would you do so again?

A. Aw-shit....

MR. HERMAN: Off the record, please, your Honor.

A. My name is "Big Train" Hadley.

Q. "Big Train" – that's a nickname?

A. Everyone calls me "Big Train"!

Q. Your given name is Cyril?

A. I like "Big Train" better!

CROSS-EXAMINATION BY MR. COMBE:

Q. Why do they call you "Big Train"?

A. Cause I'm big like a train, and if you get on my track, I'm gonna roll right over you.

Q. Mr. Hadley...

A. Call me Big Train.

MR. HERMAN: John, I told you - better call him Big Train.

THE COURT: Call him Big Train.

Q. Big Train, I want you to know I'm doing my job, nothing personal.

A. Well, dammit, get on with it.

Q. What have you been doing since your operation?

A. Since my crotch went all to hell, nothing – just fish and crab a little and drink a few beers now and then.

DIRECT EXAMINATION BY MR. HERMAN:

Q. How old are you ...

A. Call me Big Train.

Q. ... Big Train?

A. Fifty-eight years old.

Q. How tall?

A. Five eleven.

Q. How much do you weigh?

A. Two hundred ninety pounds.

Q. How long have you worked for Tops Company?

A. Twenty-one years.

Q. What was your job?

A. Delivering toilets and water heaters and such ...

Q. Well, what did you do ...

A. You know, get a paper slip, go to the warehouse, take 'em off the dock, throw 'em on the truck, take 'em off the truck ... carry 'em up the stairs, put them with the plumber.

Q. Did you have a crew?

A. A what?

Q. Some men who worked with you to help unload.

A. Sometimes they'd give me a little nookie to make it harder – if I was complaining.

Q. What did you say?

A. Well, say we had to deliver tubs or water heaters to an apartment being built. Sometimes they give me "little nookie."

MR. COMBE: Who?

THE COURT: What did you say?

THE WITNESS: "Little Nookie."

THE COURT: Let's take a recess.

THE WITNESS: See, Judge, I'd carry the front, he'd be on the back end – then I'd have to drag "little nookie" and the heater up the steps.

DIRECT EXAMINATION BY MR. HERMAN:

Q. What was the last day you worked?

A. March 10, 1965.

Q. Why did you leave work that day?

A. We was carrying bathtubs. They weigh 340 pounds. The pain grabbed me down here.

Q. Where?

A. My stomach and in here.

MR. HERMAN: For the record, the witness indicates his flanks, lower abdomen, and testicles.

A. Yeah, that's right ... in my nuts.

Q. Well, did you know what happened?

A. Not right then ... I thought I had gas ... but later, driving the truck, when I raised up my foot to like, fart...no gas came out and I said, "Oh shit...I musta tore something."

THE COURT: Mr. Herman.

MR. HERMAN: Yes, Your Honor, may we have a recess?

CROSS-EXAMINATION BY MR. COMBE:

Q. What doctor did you see?

A. I seen my own doctor – then Tops, the boss Mr. Max – he sent me to the company doctor. I said, "I don't want to go to no company doctor. Every time you go to Dr. Bakem and Soakem, they can't find nothing wrong with you."

Q. Dr. who?

A. You know, on Union Street. We call them Bakem and Soakem.

Q. Why do you call them that?

A. Well, if you bust up or cut up, they put you to soak all in the same tank with all the other coonasses who is bust up ... but if you hurts your back, they bake you in these hot packs.

Q. You weren't satisfied with Dr. Houston, the company doctor?

A. I told you, you go over there, say you have a busted hand, put a thermometer in your mouth – say you have a busted hand, they make you pee in a bottle – say you have a busted hand, they take your blood – say you got a busted hand, they take your blood pressure – say you got a busted hand, X-ray you all over – then they

say, “Oh, you got a busted hand,” and they put you in a tank to soak with some coonass who has his foot in it ... I said, “I can’t go for that.”

Q. Did you refuse to go?

A. No. I went anyway.

Q. Did you describe this pain to the doctor?

A. Yeah, like I say, I thought it was a gas pain ... then I thought I broke something.

Q. What made you think that?

A. When I used to think I need to pass wind or shit, and I wouldn’t have none.

Q. What did Dr. Houston do?

A. He told me to drop my drawers Then he run his finger up in there, told me to cough, said I was too fat, couldn’t feel nothing Told me to climb up on the table, stuffed his finger up there – I like to jump off the table

Q. Then what happened?

A. I said “You no good MF, you put your finger up in my nuts again, I’m going to punch you from here to San Antonio, Texas.”



LEVEE LIFE

by Dorien Mahoney

I open the back door
to God's iridescent blue morning light.
Squealing ducks spiral to greet me.
Pulsing red bridge lights,
green lights lumbering upstream.
Red, port, left...is that right?
Sprinkling of street lamps from the town.
A dog walker appears/vanishes
Where did she go?

CONTEXT, OR WHY LITTLE OLD LADIES FALL OUT OF TREES

by Joyce B Mathison

When my husband and I were young doctors, we volunteered to serve as medical missionaries for our church. We were sent to a very rural hospital in west Africa, just 8 degrees above the equator. One of the patients I saw not long after getting there was a little old lady with a dislocated shoulder. When I asked her how it happened, she said, "I fell out of a tree." Well, we all tend to make judgments based on the personal context we are coming from. Since my recent medical context had been in a big public hospital in the near west side of Chicago, my first thought was to wonder who could have been abusing this little old lady. Was her explanation the African equivalent of "I ran into a door"?

I only began to understand when I learned more about the village life which was her personal context: When the family gets up in the morning, the men and older boys take up their short-handled hoes and go out to the fields, taking advantage of the early morning coolness for cultivating the guineacorn or yams which are their main staples. The women and older girls take their jugs to collect water from the nearest source, often a couple of miles away. The grandmothers take the toddlers with them to go out and collect whatever dry sticks and branches they can find to use for firewood in the kitchen. As the dry season progresses, they have to go farther and farther away from the village to find the dry sticks they need.

If a grandmother sees a dead branch overhead in one of the little acacia trees that dot the countryside, what does she do? Like any grandmother, she wouldn't think of putting one of the little ones at risk by sending them up the tree to get it. She goes for it herself. And that's why little old ladies fall out of trees.

THE BIG MISUNDERSTANDING

by Elfriede Westbrook

The roasted chicken eluded her grasp and rested on the kitchen floor. Millions of viewers gasped in disbelief. In an instant, the voice of celebrated chef Julia Child reassured her audience that all was not lost; just pick up the unfortunate bird and continue with the recipe. Would any of the guests be the wiser? After all, accidents do happen – even in pursuit of a meal. This immensely popular cooking demonstration, shown every Saturday on hundreds of TV stations across America in the Sixties, became a phenomenon of gigantic proportion.

Julia Child was the wife of an American diplomat assigned to Paris. Always interested in the culinary arts, she decided to attend the Cordon Bleu, the famous French cooking school, as a way to pass time. She soon developed a keen interest in French Cuisine and thoroughly immersed herself in the subject. Forging ahead in time a few years, she became an iconic culinary expert and advisor, doing public appearances in the United States, and most importantly, authored the bible-like book, the sensational *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*.

I became one of her smitten viewers and one day copied her recipe for Coq au Vin, which included white button mushrooms, for a future foray into the French way of cooking. It was not a great mystery to me since my mother was a fine cook in my native Vienna.

I had a position in Tulane's Law Library on the uptown campus and was an avid walker. At times I would pass the august Langenstein's Market in elite Uptown where Society made groceries. I observed that certain ingredients, not of the common variety, were ordered by ladies after a broadcast by Julia.

It is difficult in our plentiful time to imagine that white button mushrooms were not an everyday staple. I decided to call Langenstein's produce department and place an order for a box of the little delicacies. I was to pick up my order in two days for a splendid Sunday dinner.

I eagerly awaited that day, and met the obliging manager. It was not long before he appeared with a cart filled with boxes of white button mushrooms. Stunned and confused, I almost fainted. There were a dozen boxes of lovely mushrooms when I needed just one box. I pulled myself together and tried mutely to apologize. I only meant to order a dozen of the white caps. What I supposedly ordered could have fed the entire population of the Garden District.

DOWN UNDER

by Ken Kneipp

In the fall of 1994, my wife Sandy and I were new “empty nesters.” Our oldest daughter Becky had left for college the previous year and now her younger sister Stephanie was off to college, too. We knew that there would be new friends, a full schedule of social activities, and perhaps even an occasional academic requirement that would prevent the girls from making many trips home. We expected that their absence would take some getting used to, but they were both very capable and well prepared and we were anxious to watch them begin to take flight as independent young women.

As all parents of college students know, news from the campus generally comes in uneven spurts. Information is randomly received, often incomplete, and sometimes it raises more questions than it answers. Nevertheless, Sandy and I settled comfortably into our new parental roles and discovered that we also had a newfound sense of freedom. Our calendars no longer needed to be frequently coordinated with the schedules of two busy teenagers. And, our cars were always available again for our own use!

This comfortable arrangement continued through the first half of Becky’s sophomore year. Then, with Sandy’s and my encouragement and support, Becky began to explore the possibility of study abroad. Both of our daughters had participated in a fabulous German exchange program in high school, so the idea of a distant learning environment coupled with immersion in a new culture and language was both familiar and appealing. Eventually Becky’s list of potential destinations narrowed to just one: the University of Wollongong, located just south of Sydney on the southeast coast of Australia. The program would last from the beginning of July until just before Christmas, 1995. It would be the spring semester “down under.”

Sandy and I tried to prepare ourselves for what it would be like to have Becky so far away from home for an extended period. Knowing that we would be out of easy communication with her, I phoned my friend Jim, a colleague at our company’s Australia subsidiary in Sydney, and explained to him that Becky would be in Australia for a few months. I asked Jim if I might pass on his contact information to her in the event some urgent need arose while she was there. Jim happily agreed to play the “on call” role but at the end of our conversation he said he thought I should know that it is not unusual for American girls to remain in

Australia upon the conclusion of such a planned temporary stay. “They often meet some ‘Aussie bloke’,” he explained, “and just never bother to go back home.” Jim’s chuckling convinced me that this was probably just an exaggeration. I saw no particular reason to even mention it to Sandy.

Putting your 20-year old daughter on an airplane by herself destined for a connecting fifteen hour flight from Los Angeles to Sydney brought its own set of challenges. There had been confirmation that she would be met by a university representative upon her arrival in Sydney and transported to the campus in Wollongong, but those promises did little to comfort nervous parents. “This must be what it’s like for NASA officials when astronauts travel around the back side of the moon and are temporarily out of contact with Mission Control,” I thought.

In 1995 we didn’t yet have a very sophisticated e-mail system at home, but I had good international communications capability at my office. And, one of the first things that the Australian university did when new students arrived on campus was establish an e-mail account for them. We had received a very short “I’ve arrived and I’m OK” phone message on the day of Becky’s Australia arrival, but we were anxious for more details. A day or two later it was a big relief to get that first e-mail. The long overseas flight had gone well, all her possessions had safely arrived, she had been met at the Sydney airport as promised, and she was successfully checked into the International Student Dormitory on the university campus. What was the only major logistics challenge of this entire international adventure had been successfully met!

The first item of business for me upon arriving in my office each day was a quick check for news from “down under.” On most mornings there was a message waiting for me and the news always seemed to be positive and upbeat. The dormitory was newer and nicer than the one back home and it was filled with lots of friendly, interesting students from many different places. Other than the monotonous daily offering of Australian lamb, the food was generally an improvement over the standard fare on her home campus, with lots of tempting new Asian dishes to try. There was a rapid train that ran between Wollongong and the Sydney harbor, so weekend day-trips there were a snap. And once in Sydney, it was easy to hop a ferry for the short ride over to beautiful Manly Beach. The weather, despite it being mid-winter when Becky arrived “down under” at the beginning of July, was pleasant and getting warmer every day. Things like “classes,” “assignments,” or “exams” never seemed to be mentioned in the messages we received, but we surely didn’t doubt that life in Australia was agreeable.

It didn't take very long for all the cheerful accounts we were receiving to sink in at home and the question "Why is *she* the only one having all this fun?" demanded an answer. By the end of July, the inevitable next steps had already begun to take shape. We decided that we would meet Becky "down under" at the conclusion of her academic program, spend some time with her exploring Sydney and the surrounding area, and then all come back home together just in time for Christmas. It would be a lengthy trip of about four weeks for Sandy and me, and it would require careful advance preparation, especially for me at work. But, once those details were ironed out, our trip planning began in earnest. It seemed prudent for us to kick the long journey off with a few relaxing days in Hawaii.

Finally, at about 2:00 A.M. on the Tuesday of Thanksgiving week, Sandy and I departed Honolulu for Auckland, New Zealand, and then the final leg to Sydney! Upon our arrival in Sydney around mid-afternoon of the following day, we immediately spotted Becky waiting for us in the airport's "International Arrivals" hall and the fatigue of the long flights was quickly replaced by the excitement of our reunion. After a few days in the historic "Rocks" area of central Sydney, minutes from the "Coat Hanger" Bridge and within easy walking distance of the Sidney harbor's Circular Quay and famed Opera House, we rented a car so we could explore some of the surrounding countryside. Over the next couple of weeks, we visited Canberra (Australia's national capital), the Blue Mountains (a rugged scenic area north and west of Sydney), and the nearby Hunter Valley (one of Australia's premier wine-producing regions).

Every day brought new experiences and created memories that would last a lifetime – like the performance at the Sydney Opera House on the very evening of our Australia arrival, the near-collision with a kangaroo that hopped out in front of our car as we toured the rural countryside, and our surprisingly-easy accidental entry into the unsecured main courtroom of Australia's Supreme Court in Canberra! That surely wouldn't have happened in Washington, D.C.

But a rather ordinary experience stood out as one of the most memorable of all. On the last day before returning to Sydney to begin the long journey home, Becky needed to return to the university campus to collect her belongings and to officially vacate that International Student Dormitory. Sandy and I were anxious to see where she had spent the last six months, but we were really unprepared for the experience that was to follow.

All of the students who had been living in that dormitory were there doing the same things – searching for their possessions, discarding items that didn't need to return to wherever home was, confirming that all the really important things were in their bulging backpacks, and stuffing their suitcases with small treasures that would remind them of new friends and their recently-shared experiences. If you've ever moved a college student out of a dormitory at the end of the school year, you know the routine – this same process occurs on every college campus.

But this experience at the University of Wollongong seemed different. For one thing, no daughter of ours had ever resided in a place called the “International Student Dormitory.” A place like that had always been reserved for young people from faraway places, and they looked, dressed, spoke, and even acted differently. Suddenly it occurred to us that our daughter Becky was one of those “foreign students from a faraway place!” And yet she seamlessly blended in with all the other young people there who were from many distant locations. She was one of only a handful of students from North American universities who had participated in this program. There were also some who came from Western Europe. Many more came from locations all across Asia – Japan, India, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, and the Philippines.

These young people were from many different cultures, looked and dressed differently, and spoke a wide range of native languages. But there they all were in a single group – laughing, hugging each other, and shedding tears together as the realization set in that they would all soon be heading off in different directions, almost certainly never to see each other again. Sandy and I stood quietly by watching this incredible scene unfold. I found myself wishing that there could have been United Nations delegates, international ambassadors, foreign policy advisors, military commanders, Congressional representatives, Prime Ministers, and Presidents all standing there with us to witness what we were seeing!

Even if there had not been a single class attended or any academic assignments completed during those six months “down under,” this adventure had clearly been a learning experience of unparalleled value. And, it confirmed what most of us have come to know – that some of life's most valuable lessons are learned outside of the classroom.



*Sandy, Becky and the Sydney Harbor
"Coathanger" Bridge*



Sydney Opera House, from the Manly Beach ferry



*Mizuho (Japan) and Becky (USA)
Saying goodbye in Australia*

A FABLE FOR OUR TIME

by Ted Martin

Once upon a time, there was a rather old gentleman who liked to wear a coat and tie on many occasions. He also liked to invest in the Powerball lottery. His wife, now deceased, warned him that if he invested in that way he might win, and he'd be sorry. But he rather liked the idea of winning. He had great plans for giving away the millions that could come his way, thus becoming a renowned philanthropist in the old city where he lived. So he invested about \$25 a year in the lottery. Whenever he bought a ticket, he would compare his numbers with the winning numbers, and it was rare that he had even one of the winning numbers. Until, one day, he looked at the winning numbers and discovered to his amazement that they were all the same as the ones on his ticket. Remembering his wife's wise words, he considered giving the ticket away, but his greed was too great. When he notified the Powerball people, they descended upon him, took his picture, shook his hand, and gave him a whopping check.

The old gentleman thought and thought about how best to give away all that money, in order to become known as the city's great philanthropist. But before he could make up his mind about how to divide up the money, he discovered that a great many of his relatives and friends, even relatives and friends that he quite forgot that he had, were in great need of financial help and expected him to share his windfall with them. So he began to write checks. The more checks he wrote, it seemed, the more pleas for help he received. He soon realized that he had to ignore many of these requests, if he was to be a great philanthropist. Some of the people whose requests he ignored or denied got upset. They could not understand why a great philanthropist could not give them a share of his great unearned wealth. A few million dollars made it into the hands of the charities he favored. But the thanks for those gifts was not enough to relieve him of the misery he experienced when he denied requests for a share of his bounty. Eventually he left town and hid somewhere under a new name. And people wondered what had become of the great philanthropist.

TALKING TREES

by Bill Penick

Trees do actually talk to each other! Well, not verbally (as far as we know), like humans, but in other equally effective ways (which assumes that humans always use their verbal skills in “effective” ways, a dubious proposition). There is good scientific evidence that trees are sensitive, alert, social, sophisticated, nurturing, cooperative, and even intelligent (just like humans, right?). They communicate by way of both chemical and electrical signals, scents, and sounds. Their messages are transmitted through the air and through an extensive network of underground fungi (one teaspoon of forest soil contains several miles of fungal filaments!). With their ability to sense danger and feel pain, trees send out electrical signals when they are cut down, emit gaseous distress signals to neighbors when leaf-eating animals start feeding on them, and share sugar and other nutrients with companions in need. One example of the latter is that mature trees pump extra sugar through the fungal network into the roots of young seedlings and saplings because they are too short to receive enough sunlight to photosynthesize it into sugar as chemical energy. [From the article “Do Trees Talk to Each Other?” by Richard Grant in the Smithsonian Magazine of March, 2018]

To prove my point, I urge you to read the following four conversations (out of thousands) between redwood trees in northern California that were actually recorded with special underground equipment by the Wohlleben Company of Frankfurt, Germany. The recordings are verbatim and have not been edited or altered in any way.

I

[Conversation of July 6, 2021, at 10:29 AM between redwood trees numbered 14 (“Cyril”) and 19 (“Gwendolyn”) in the LaLinda Grove near Mount Shasta, California]

Cyril: “Oh, Gwendolyn, you are positively gorgeous! And your lovely roots are so soft and smooth! May I just hold one of yours with one of mine? Please.”

Gwendolyn: “You may absolutely not! Don’t you ever touch one of my roots. Yours are rough, bumpy, and just plain ugly. I don’t want them anywhere near my little gems. And stop rubbing your nasty branches against my trunk or I’ll call the Tree Patrol.”

Cyril: “But your trunk is so shapely, Gwen. I just can’t keep hands off of it. And I love you. Really I do.”

Gwendolyn: “Heaven forbid! You don’t love me, Cyril. You’re just a horny old tree who wants a little quick fun.”

Cyril: “Oh, Gwen baby, how can you say that? I’ve loved you for a long time, ever since we were in nursery school together. You’re the only one for me! I swear.”

Gwendolyn: “Then why did you use the exact same line on my friends Cheryl and Mabel?”

Cyril: “I’m sorry, Gwen. Please let me explain. I was pining for you but couldn’t get your attention, so I just acted out of desperation with your friends. It was stupid of me and didn’t mean anything at all. You are the only gal who ever mattered.”

Gwendolyn: “Oh, phooh! You even promised to somehow protect them from those horrible woodpeckers, which gave them a good laugh.”

Cyril: “I was feeling so lonely and depressed that I was willing to try anything for little harmless attention.”

Gwendolyn: “It wasn’t a little “harmless attention” you wanted from them, Cyril. Both of those girls have beautiful bodies that are much admired by all the guys around here. What makes them even more desirable to men is their unusually sweet sap, as you undoubtedly know. Was that the object of your alleged affection for them?”

Cyril: “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Gwendolyn: “Yeah, yeah. I’m on to you, Cyril. Just keep your distance and maybe we can be friends if you do.”

II

[Conversation of July 28, 2021, at 4:52 PM between redwood trees numbered 25 (“Magdalena”), 26 (“Lenora”), 32 (“Caitlin”), 39 (“Juanita”), and 51 (“Flo”) in the same LaLinda Grove]

Lenora: “Did you all hear about Gwendolyn and Cyril?”

Juanita: “Yep, we did. Word gets around fast.”

Caitlin: “What a jerk he is to try something like that.”

Lenora: “Yeah. I heard he tried the same thing on other girls in the neighborhood. With the same results.”

Magdalena: “But Gwendolyn may have brought it on herself.”

Lenora: “What are you talking about?”

Magdalena: “I’ve heard from other friends that Gwen is a terrible flirt who does a lot of stuff to attract the guys, like bending her trunk in seductive ways and flinging her pinecones at boys to get their attention.”

Juanita: “You don’t say!”

Magdalena: “Yeah. And it’s pretty strange that most of her long roots are extended out in the direction of male neighbors only.”

Juanita: “Wow. That’s pretty suggestive. She sounds like a real hussy.”

Caitlin: “I also heard that she does something funny with her sap to make it into some kind of aphrodisiac and then releases it through her bark when a cute guy gets close enough. I never believed that until now.”

Lenora: “Umm. That’s actually not a bad idea. I wonder how she does that.”

Magdalena: “It all fits. I guess that’s why she changes boyfriends every 15 years or so instead of keeping them around much longer, like the rest of us.”

Lenora: “Wait a minute, girls. The culprit here is Cyril, not Gwendolyn. She had every reason to stop him from doing what he wanted to. What do you think about all this, Flo?”

Flo: “I don’t know. I’ve always thought Cyril was a nice guy who was lonely but harmless. And he seems almost too desperate in his recent pursuit of female companionship. I just have this gut feeling it’s not all about sex.”

Lenora: “Well, he’s not very sexy, that’s for sure.”

Caitlin: “And he’s pretty clumsy at trying to attract girls.”

Flo: “That’s why I feel so sorry for him.”

Magdalena: “So if it’s not about sex, what do you think is driving him to do what he’s been doing?”

Flo: “I wish I knew. I really do.”

III

[Conversation of September 19, 2021, at 11:07 AM between redwood trees numbered 14 (“Cyril”) and 19 (“Gwendolyn”) in the same LaLinda Grove]

Gwendolyn: “Oh, my dear friend, I am so, so sorry. Are you in any pain?”

Cyril: “Just a little right now, Gwen, but the pain was excruciating yesterday when those loggers cut off my trunk and took it away. Unfortunately, the pain is not the worst part.”

Gwendolyn: “What could be worse?”

Cyril: “I can never have a child now. That’s all I ever wanted.”

Gwendolyn: “Oh, Cyril. Please tell me more. I want to know.”

Cyril: “I’ve always wanted to have a kid and have been trying to do so for over 300 years. Like everybody else here, I had both male and female pinecones and therefore should have been able to produce a child by myself, but for some reason, I couldn’t. There must have been something wrong with one of the two sets of my pinecones. The only other possible way for me to generate a child was to hook up with a female tree and connect our pinecones. But, as much as I tried, I didn’t have any luck finding a willing partner. And now it’s too late, because the loggers took most of my body and all of my pinecones, leaving just my underground head that will die soon enough – which is just as well, since I no longer have any reason to live.”

Gwendolyn: “I feel so bad, Cyril. I wish you’d told me the real reason for wanting us to get together.”

Cyril: “I wish I had too. It was just a matter of that silly old male pride. And I expected to live another 500 or 600 years, so I thought I had plenty of time.”

Gwendolyn: “If only those stupid loggers had not selected you to cut down. I hate humans! They are so brutal with their big saws and machines. And they could care less if we have feelings too. Maybe it would change things for the better if they only knew how much pain we suffer when they cut us in two and leave us to die slowly. Not to mention how painful it is for the rest of us to watch that happen to our friends.”

Cyril: “You’re right, Gwen.”

Gwendolyn: “Another thing is their blatant hypocrisy. They come from all over the world to admire our size, age, and beauty. Even worse, as we know from the Fungal News Network, their stupid politicians keep promising to do everything necessary to preserve us for future generations of humans to appreciate. It’s pure baloney, of course. Despite all the admiration and promises, they have no compunctions about sending out the loggers to cut our bodies down and use them to make chairs and other non-essential things. We redwoods are nothing more than disposable playthings at the mercy of human greed and blindness. It makes me sick!”

Cyril: “So true, Gwen, but maybe that’s because we redwoods are so much older and wiser than humans, who are a relatively immature species. They still have a great deal of growing and learning to do.”

Gwendolyn: “You are much too kind, Cyril.”

IV

[Conversation one year later on October 3, 2023, at 1:32 PM between redwood trees numbered 19 (“Gwendolyn”) and 51 (“Flo”) in the same LaLinda Grove]

Flo: “Look at him, Gwen. Isn’t he beautiful!”

Gwendolyn: “Indeed he is. Cyril would be a very proud father.”

Flo: “What a terrible shame that Cyril isn’t still alive to know what he produced.”

Gwendolyn: “Yeah, he died thinking that he had left no legacy after working so hard for 300 years to create one.”

Flo: “I’m sure he died of a broken heart because he lived only six months after being cut down, instead of the usual three or four years.”

Gwendolyn: “The big event must have happened just a few days before the loggers came for him.”

Flo: “You’re referring to his success in producing a seed that became his son?”

Gwendolyn: “Yeah. His pinecones finally did their job but, sadly enough, he never knew it.”

Flo: “It would have been even sweeter for Cyril to know that he did it all by himself, which is certain because he never found a girl willing to connect with him.”

Gwendolyn: “Including me. I still feel terrible about that.”

Flo: “You’re not alone, Gwen. And remember that you had no idea he was going to die so soon and so young.”

Gwendolyn: “It is what it is. I’ve learned a good lesson from this. There are probably a few other neighbors like Cyril who are having trouble producing a child on their own, so I plan to make it known that I’m available to help them do that. In the meantime, I’ll do whatever I can to make sure Cyril’s son grows up into a fine adult redwood.”

Flo: “There will be many others to help you. He’s already getting a lot of attention because he’s the first orphan to appear around here in 450 years. Our local Fungal News Network, for example, has started asking for volunteers to watch over him. As you know, he’ll need extra nutrition to make up for the shortage of sunlight so close to the ground but he has no parent to provide that, which will have to come from the rest of us. And we’ll also have to protect him from the wildlife and the elements until he gets a little bigger. Sharing rainwater with him is another priority, especially in the dry seasons.”

Gwendolyn: “What about a name? Does he have one yet?”

Flo: “The Governing Council is considering that right now, but I would guess they will wind up naming him after his father.”

Gwendolyn: “That would be wonderful! I wish Cyril knew that.”

Flo: “Maybe he does, somehow.”



ENCHANTMENT

by Russ Herman

Enchantment is not a word
it is a state of being
the unknowable and unknown
speaks in silent tongues
caresses the body
Soothes the mind

It is at once the firmament
upon which some truth
Stands

And where the Kaleidoscope
of dreams
occurs
And flees

But ignites the inner
light

And in some fashion
stokes life’s passion.

OUT OF GAS

by Nat Fleck

Debby and I both taught at the International School of Lusaka in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia. It was a kindergarten through twelfth grade school with about 1300 students. It provided a superior English education to a wide variety of students. In our first year there, the graduates were from 24 different countries. We lived outside of the city in a very rural setting.

For our second Christmas vacation, we decided to go see the mountain gorillas in Rwanda, leaving our Land Rover behind and using public transportation. In the end, we saw some in what was then Zaire; things rarely turned out the way we expected them to. We had previously lived in Ghana and later lived in Egypt. We could fill volumes with stories of our adventures from this trip alone.

Those years in Africa were the happiest of our lives. The people there are so friendly, so happy, always wanting to be so helpful. One has to be a very patient person however. They have a very different sense of time. Most things took a long time and were usually very late. No one was in a hurry. The expatriates living in Egypt had a joke that could apply anywhere in Africa. It went like this: an Egyptian and a Mexican met and started talking. After a while the Mexican said: "I hear you have a word – what is it? Bukra? – that is like our word mañana." (Bukra is the word for tomorrow in Arabic). The Egyptian replied, "Yes, I guess that is true, but it just does not have the same sense of urgency that your mañana has."



So we started our trip aboard a luxury bus; that meant that the bus was like an average Greyhound bus with reserved seats. Everyone had a seat! We left at five o'clock. Near the equator, the sun sets about six o'clock year round. Soon it was dark and, as we looked ahead, it seemed like the headlights were very dim and we wondered how the driver could see. The road was a good road; that meant it was paved and smooth. We were in forest most of the time. Around nine o'clock, the bus pulled over along the side of the road out in the bush (as they call it in Africa).

Beside the driver, there were two men from the bus company on the bus. One of them got off the bus and went off into the woods, where there were occasional huts that people were living in. He came back with another man and then the bus turned around and went back to the last little village we had passed. There was a bus barn there that we pulled into and the headlights were replaced. After that, we could see the road!

Around seven in the morning, the bus pulled over again and stopped along the road. We had run out of fuel, probably because we had gone back to that village to get new headlights. So how could we get more fuel? This was before the days of cell phones, very few cars were passing, and gas stations were few and far between. Well, the two extra men on the bus went out to the road to hitch-hike.



One went north and the other went south in search of gas. It was a long time before they were picked up. We were certainly going to be there for a while. Now how would the bus passengers in America react if they were going to be stranded on a bus for a bunch of time? Probably not how these people reacted. Most of the passengers had provisions with them and they broke out their baskets and

had some food and chatted and laughed and had a good time just like as if they had gone for a picnic. A picnic it was. Seven (7!) hours later, one of the men came back with a Gerry can of gas which was enough to get us to our destination.

There in Africa that made for a gentle adventure. No one was upset or angry or frustrated. They had all had a good time picnicking. Of course we missed the next bus we hoped to take, but we got a later one and were still able to make the boat we took up Lake Tanginika. If we had missed the boat, we would have just changed our plans and done something else; no big deal.

The stories of our adventures on this one trip are plentiful. As I alluded to at the start, we had to change our plans a number of times, but it was a fantastic trip and we got home on time (barely).

MY FAVORITE LEE STORIES

by Pat Mason

My husband, Lee Mason, had so many stories from his youth that he loved to share. One of which was from his Canal Street neighborhood. The Masons moved onto Canal Street to be next to Granma Griffin after Granpa died. They lived in a small, two-bedroom double next door. When the Vigueries (4 people) were building their Metairie house, they moved in with the Masons (3 people) for several months. Lee and Shaun slept in the breakfast room, Winx in her parents' bedroom, and every one shared only one bathroom for several months. Lee and Shaun would put their towels on their shoulders and pin the ends together at their necks so they had capes. They would hide in the bushes next to the Hibernia Bank, ready to spring into action if any robbers robbed the bank. They were either Batman and Robin or Correll the Thunderbolt and Pinhead the Idiot. Without their protection, who knows how many robberies could have happened at the Hibernia Bank?

When Lee returned to being himself and was no longer a superhero, he would play with Big Fat Jimmy Smith. Lee would beat Jimmy at every athletic contest. Whenever he told the story years later, Lee always added that Jimmy played defensive lineman at LSU and with the Kansas City Chiefs. The children thought he was exaggerating his prowess until we ran across Jimmy at a restaurant and he confirmed Lee's story.

While growing up Lee played every street game known and he taught all of them to the kids on Pine Street where we lived after we married. They have wonderful memories of playing Kick the Can, Dungeon, Stick Ball, and so many others. Lee attended Saint Anthony (pronounced Antony) U. for grammar school. When I asked why he went to a grammar school with a university affiliation, he said, everyone just added you (U) to the end of their sentence. For instance, if someone asked where he went to school, he would answer "I go to St. Antony, you (U)?" Most people would answer "I go to St. Anthony and where do you go?" Lee said all of his friends spoke like that: "Where ya' at, you? I go to St. Antony U. with Simon Simeon, Fano Sagano and Big Fat Jimmy Smith."

One of my favorite stories came much later in 1957, before we ever met. One Christmas Eve, his gang, Buddy Laughlin, Billy Deeves, Conrad Kuebel, and others were having a party at the Jahnckes before Midnight Mass. Lee walked in late and without a date. They all told him he should have one. So he got on the

phone and started his quest. After several calls, he told the group, “I couldn’t reach anyone I knew, and I began talking with the operator and so I asked her if she wanted to be my date. She sounds cute,” he said, “and she agreed.” At this time in history, when you picked up the phone to call, a human voice said, “Number please” and she connected you to your number. Lee said the next thing he knew, he was at the corner of Poydras and St. Charles, waiting for the operators’ shift to come out and asking each one, “Are you Number 37?” Sure enough, she was his date for the party and Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. She was a cute date and everyone liked her. Later in life Lee would have long meaningful conversations with other operators as well, such as from Medicare or the Veterans Administration. Lee never met a stranger. He would chat with people on the bus, in the bank line or grocery store. He could talk to anybody, and sometimes this gift of gab resulted in lifelong friends.

Of course, over our 55+ years together, I heard these stories over and over again, and you would think I would be tired of hearing them, but because Lee would get such joy each and every time he told these stories, it was hard not to laugh each and every time I heard them.

CAPTION CONTEST



We've all experienced the “look” from bored children or grandchildren that is so beautifully captured by our Lambeth neighbor and talented water color artist, Roni Thomas.

WINNERS OF **FABULOUS** PRIZES ARE:

- **First Place:** - Watch out! Here comes Granma with those egg salad sandwiches. - Jody Gates
- **Second Place:** - Waiting for the caution flag to turn green. – Anne Kennedy
- **Third Place:** - Siri, what is the safest way to jump ship?- Julie McCollam

*Are we there yet? – Charlotte Travieso

*Wait till Mom finds out he's been logging on to a porn site!- Joyce Mathison

*Waiting for the caution flag to turn green. – Anne Kennedy

*Wow! look at our new summer neighbor in that red bikini! - Allain Andry

*Watch out! Here comes Granma with those egg salad sandwiches. - Jody Gates

*Don't look now but here comes that bully! – Marilyn McConnell

*Siri, what is the safest way to jump ship?- Julie McCollam

*Since we have pledged to be lifelong friends, I have good news for us for 2024.

We'll be able to move into Lambeth house occupying a luxury garden suite (multiple bedrooms,) our own executive chef, physician, personal trainer, limousine chauffeur and helipad 24/7.– Elfriede Westbrook

*Girl: Interrupt my screen time once more and you will die!!!– Susan Thompson

* Girl: I'm listening to a romance novel while these dorks are watching porn. Bob Sakakeeny

POPEE'S STORY

by Gene Preaus

Roy Darnell Kerr, known to his grandchildren affectionately as "Popee," led an adventuresome and interesting life. He was born not long after the beginning of the twentieth century and lived to see his beloved Saints have a chance to go to the playoffs for the first time.

In the mid 1970's, I began to fuss with Popee, telling him that if he did not record his remembrances, his grandchildren would have no idea of the life he led. In 1977, he created several notes of his remembrances and it is from those notes that this article derives.

Popee was born in Middle Tennessee, on a farm just outside Fayetteville on December 16, 1903. He was part of a large family, twelve children, the result of the death of his father's first wife and his remarriage to Ann Eliza Darnell, who was Popee's mother.

As neither Popee nor any of his siblings had a bicycle, they all walked to school, which was about one mile away. Lunch, which was brought from home, was usually a slice of cured ham and a biscuit, which he would sometimes trade with a classmate. For five years, he had a record of perfect attendance. He broke that record when there was a large snowfall and he "laid out" to play with his friends. Popee went to two more schools before graduating. He had several jobs, among them delivering the "Nashville Banner." After graduation, he worked for a strawberry farmer picking strawberries. When that ended, he went to Akron, Ohio, and there he was employed by the B.F. Goodrich Rubber Company, where he worked for a while. When he returned home, he took and passed the Tennessee State Teachers Examination, whereupon he became an elementary school teacher for a couple of years. He then attended Bryson College but did not graduate. In 1926/27, he got a job with Marshall Fields and Company. He worked in the Adjustment Bureau dealing with customer complaints. After one summer and one cold winter, he resigned and returned to Fayetteville.

It was during his childhood that Popee began to daydream of going to faraway places. Initially, some exotic islands in the Pacific. He did not make it to an island in the Pacific, but he did make it to Central America and Mexico and ultimately to Ecuador, through a friend of Popee's and another friend with Standard Fruit Company in their new division in Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua. In early May of

1928, Popee and his friend left Tennessee bound for New Orleans, a first visit for both. They stayed at the Jung Hotel. He recalled “eating at the Old Maylie Restaurant on Poydras Street where we had a full course dinner, including wine and after-dinner drinks, for \$1.00.” He recalled a visit to Pat O’Brien’s, when Pat O’Brien himself actually ran the place and Mercedes was the lead performer.

They sailed on the SS Favorita, a small banana steamer. The voyage was quite rough and took five days. A few days after his arrival, Popee was taken to the banana growing areas and given his first assignment, as a farm clerk in the Wa Wa District. From the beginning, he was determined to learn Spanish and he did so. Thus began an adventure that lasted until the mid 1960’s.

This was a time of civil unrest in Nicaragua. Sandino was leading the rebels and Somoza was head of the Guardia Nacional and later ruler of the country. After a particular uprising at one of the camps, Popee, while in Managua, met with Somoza to relate his knowledge of the events.

At some time in the late 1930’s, Popee moved to Mexico and became involved in the vanilla business. He was not eligible for military service for medical reasons. With his fluency in Spanish, he went to work for the U.S. State Department. It was during this period that he met and married Ann’s mother and took her to Mexico City. At that time, “MyDeeDee” spoke no Spanish. After their wedding in 1942, they drove back to Mexico City, a difficult journey in those days. One evening when they were en route, it was getting late and they had not found an inn. Then they came upon one. MyDeeDee had a terrible fear of rodents and thought that the inn looked dodgy. Popee said that he would talk to the innkeeper. He related MyDeeDee’s concerns, whereupon the innkeeper advised that was not a problem because, after the guests retired, he let out a boa constrictor.

In the early 1950’s, Popee was offered the position of manager of Ecuadorian Operations of the Standard Fruit Company and the family moved from Mexico City to Guayaquil. They did not yet have a home when they first moved to Guayaquil and there was only one hotel. Children were not permitted in the dining room for dinner; however, management made a concession and permitted Ann and her brother to eat dinner in the dining room provided they were gone before any other guests arrived. They found a house and began to consider schools for Ann and her brother. MyDeeDee chose the American School. At a later date, she heard that the head of the American School had led the Communist Parade. She pulled Ann and her brother out of that school and thereafter they were home-schooled,

using materials provided by the Calvert School. That continued to be the case until Ann enrolled at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in New Orleans as a boarder.

Popee's involvement in the banana business continued. During the 1950's, Ecuador was the largest banana producer in the world. Standard Fruit was one of the major players in that market. Notwithstanding, Ecuadorian bananas were at a disadvantage because of the shipping time required to get them to European markets and, to some extent, American East Coast markets. Popee was involved in the effort to resolve that problem. He also tried to help the banana farmers in Ecuador improve their farms. For all that he did, he was awarded the Order of Merit, the highest award given by Ecuador to foreigners. He was only the second American ever to receive that award. For his having received that award, he and MyDeeDee were invited to a State Dinner at the White House during the Kennedy Presidency.

Ann and I would usually go to their house or they would come to our house on Sundays. Popee's 80th birthday was approaching, and we wanted to have a surprise party for him. Because the party was to be at our house, we were able to make the plans without his knowledge. We ran into a big hitch. It was the last game of the season for the Saints and a win would put them into the playoffs. After much grumbling and assurances from us that he could watch the game, he said he would come. He did come and it was a total surprise. Many friends of longstanding came. We had Julio and Cesar, and upon Popee's arrival, they played "When the Saints Go Marching In," "Happy Birthday," and a lot of Latin American music. The food was Mexican, prepared by Ann. Popee died the following April after a long and incredible life.

EROTICA

by Russ Herman

I am no green sapling
Or aged cypress
Bearded with Spanish moss.

I do not dwell in memories
Of years past.

I have found magic and mystery
In the Siren's dance you do
With lips, mouth and tongue.

You send me to an unfamiliar place –
I have never been before
Me escaping gravity
And body soaring, roaring
My inner self escapes
Then in free fall.

I rise and swell...
Searching out your secret place
And enter wanting more,
To have our special spirits
Join in love's release.

Then to hold you tight,
Caress and gently kiss your closed eyes,
Swan neck and feel your breasts swell
And undulate against my chest.

EMBARRASSING MOMENT #101

by Elaine Coffin

Pouring heavy rain outside did not slow me. I dashed into the front hall sopping wet and furious that my shopping bags were soaked. Yanking off my raincoat while throwing my umbrella down, I heard the phone ringing impatiently. WHO could that be? It is almost 6:00! I grabbed the cell phone, “Yesss....!”

“This is the Main Office of Torrington Public Schools. The Superintendent would like you to come at 8:00 tomorrow to interview with the Board of Education for the high school principal position.”

My voice lowered to a virtual purr, “Thank you for calling. I will be there.”

I sat down and started to worry. I had to prepare. What goals had the Board determined for the district? I read the brochure and discovered that the graduation rate should improve (not a surprise) and, even more, facilitate a move to a block schedule (radical). Then I worried more, whatever should I wear? After agonizing thought, I chose my black suit and a crisp white blouse and some modest gold jewelry. Pleased with my costume, I left for my interview awash with confidence. I arrived in the town by 7:30 and had to locate the location for this meeting.

The Board of Education office was on a street strangely named Migeon Avenue, strange since the street was not on the city map. I learned, after considerable trial and error, that East Main Street arbitrarily became Migeon Avenue. That abrupt shift in nomenclature is typical of old New England towns. My daughter’s college roommate from Virginia came to visit and exclaimed, “You have so many roads.”

Pleased that I had conquered the absence of a coherent street map, I parked my car in an unmarked parking space and entered the building around 7:55. I stepped into the ladies’ room and checked my hair and makeup. Just outside that door was an arrow pointing upstairs and labeled Board of Education. Ascending the stairs, I reached a wide hall that was nearly dark. Something was amiss. I stood there feeling decidedly uncertain when I saw a gentleman walking towards me. Good Heavens! With horror, I recognized the Superintendent, the man I was going to impress!

He smiled (or so I thought), “Good morning.”

I smiled (or tried to). "I think it very important to do something really stupid from time to time, don't you?"

He smiled sincerely (I thought), "The interview is 8:00 this evening. I look forward to seeing you at that time."

His secretary walked by looking confused, wondering if she had made the time clear. She didn't realize that my workday began at 6:30 a.m., so I would think the interview began at 8:00 a.m. I remember thinking briefly that perhaps the Board members scheduled their interviews before their workdays began.

I made a hasty exit, thinking that my interview that night would surely be a disaster. On the way back to my school, I stopped at a coffee shop to have a latte in order to calm down and console myself. Hoping to be reassured, I dialed my older sister in Cambridge.

She listened and remarked, "You should have known."

Why did that not surprise me? "You should have known" was an oft-repeated comment. She was a wise and accomplished older sister not given to unnecessary reassurance. So toughened up by her frankness, I went back to my school.

Several colleagues and friends asked, "How did it go?"

"Oh, really well. So well that they asked me back tonight."

LEECHES, LOVERS, BEARS, AND CHOCOLATE PUDDING

by Bill Penick

How would you like to be married to a certified leech-plucking bear-chasing woman? Even those fearsome 400-pounders with the big teeth and sharp claws are no match for my 100-pound, 5-foot wife. And if they aren't, how much of a chance do you think I, at a mere 175 pounds, have against her?

The word is obviously out among the bear population of North America: don't mess with Julie! And none has since that fateful day in the summer of 1967, even though we hiked and camped in bear country many times after that. But actually the leeches came before the bear, so I'd better start at the beginning.

Before plighting my troth on another fateful day 46 years ago (as of yesterday), my very dear friend Charlie Genre and I spent two adventurous weeks canoeing through the Boundary Waters Canoe Area of northern Minnesota and Ontario, Canada. He "cooked" and I "navigated." Needless to say, we spent most of the time hungry and lost – but we still managed to have a great time in a pristine neck of the woods. And the bears kept their distance, thanks no doubt to the sublime malodor of Charlie's culinary disasters.

So when it came time to plan a summer vacation with Julie a few years later, another trip to the Boundary Waters sounded perfect. Even though our previous track record together in the Great Outdoors was anything but stellar (see stories about the duck-hunting trip and our ill-fated honeymoon), I assumed we had used up all of our vacation bad luck (wrong). And if two stumblebums like me and Charlie could survive for two weeks in the North Woods, Julie and I could survive for a week or so. She was, after all, a good cook (too good, as it turned out) and I had finally learned to read a map (wrong again). We planned and prepared so meticulously that nothing could go awry this time.

After renting our canoe and other gear in Ely, Minnesota, we took a seaplane across the Canadian border about 35 miles back into the Quetico Provincial Park. There was nothing but woods and water as far as we could see. No roads, billboards, buildings, power lines, motor boats, or other detritus of civilization, at least on the Canadian side where we'd spend most of our time. It was a truly unspoiled wilderness. The pilot dropped us off in the middle of a shimmering lake and went on his way. Julie and I sat very still in our canoe for several minutes, savoring the absolute solitude, the unfamiliar silence, the perfectly clear water, and

the wildlife returning to the lake. Then we picked up our paddles and headed for the outlet river running south.

That's when Lady Luck abandoned us again. Our river route no longer existed! The entrance to the river was blocked by a huge beaver dam, which reduced the flow of water downstream to a mere trickle. Of the hundreds of full-flowing rivers and streams in the area, the beavers of course picked ours to dam. I say "ours" because it was the only way to go by water on our chosen route back to Ely. We therefore had no choice but to follow the course of the semi-dry riverbed to the next body of water and hope the beavers did not get there first. (We found out later we could and should have made a hole in the beaver dam and waited for the river to fill up enough to float our canoe.) Since there was nowhere near enough water to do that then, we had to drag the canoe and the heavy gear through five miles of very soft and slippery muck that was filled with horrors we never imagined. Dressed in our once-clean tennis shoes and long pants, we sank a foot or two in the muck every time we took a step. Walking the muck while pulling a sizeable load was bad enough, but then our legs started itching all over for some unknown reason.

Enter the leeches. Hordes of them. An inspection of our legs revealed they were covered by leeches happily sucking our very tired blood. Bogart's and Hepburn's brief encounter with a mere handful of them critters in The African Queen was a cake-walk compared to our situation at that moment: not only did we have dozens of leeches already embedded in our legs, we still had miles to go through leech-infested muck. And John Wayne was nowhere in sight. Julie and I were all alone in a vast wilderness, surrounded by hungry little cannibals eager to devour us, bit by bit. It was certainly not where we expected to be at this point in our vacation. Our only choices were to panic or pluck, so we plucked, pulling the slimy, squishy things out of our skin one by one. Julie was a rock, plucking away without a single complaint. At long last, we were free of leeches and ready to move on, but knowing what awaited us there, it took some willpower to step back into that muck.

We dragged the canoe for another hour or so before stopping to pull off leeches again. It's not something I'm really proud of, but by the fourth stop, we had become pretty damn good pluckers, out of sheer desperation. During one of those stops, we were treated to the awesome, close-up sight of a bull moose with an enormous rack of horns. He ambled out of the woods and stopped to feed in the riverbed only a stone's throw from us. They are magnificent creatures, but they can be unpredictably bad-tempered and, at half a ton, quite dangerous. We had nowhere to run or hide, so we just remained very still and very quiet in the canoe, not even

moving to scratch our itching legs. Had he charged us, he would have easily finished what the leeches started, but fortunately he was in a good mood and left us alone. He fed contentedly for about 15 minutes and then sauntered back into the forest. It's still a special memory for us both. How anyone can kill such a majestic animal for a mere trophy is beyond me. Having said that, however, I must confess to you that I feel quite the opposite about beavers after what they put us through that day. They're even worse than those devilish sheep (see sheep story).

After several hours of pulling and plucking, we finally reached a floatable river as the sun was going down. Exhausted to the bone, we found a spot and put up the tent in record time, pulled off the last few leeches (so we thought), hung the food pack in a tree, crawled into our sleeping bags, and went sound asleep without any dinner.

The next morning was a whole new ballgame. Aside from the numerous welts on our legs, we felt rested and ready to take on the world (but not a bear). It was a beautiful day. The river was deep and fast. The only problem was that it was flowing in the wrong direction, according to my reading of the map. I read that darn thing every which-a-way and it never turned out right. The possibility of my being wrong was of course ridiculous, so either the mapmakers got it backwards or the river reversed itself. Despite Julie's pleas to my alleged common sense, my stubbornness (she called it something else) prevailed and we aimed our canoe upstream. Paddling against the strong current got us nowhere fast, so we decided to go with the flow, wherever it might take us. You'll never guess what happened next. After paddling for a couple of hours, we wound up right where we were supposed to be! I naturally had to eat a little crow dished up with relish by my loving wife. But all was forgiven when we took a very cold dip in the crystal-clear water that did wonders for body and spirit.

We covered several miles that day without another hitch. No more beavers or leeches, thank goodness. Canoeing in exquisite country like that is definitely the best way to experience it. And we didn't have to share it with anybody else until we crossed the American border six days later. Except for the pleasant sound of water running over rocks and the occasional call of a loon or duck, the silence was total. While paddling across lakes, we were often accompanied by a variety of wild ducks who played with us by swimming alongside the canoe and then diving under it to the other side. It was a remarkable exhibition of trust and goodwill. The same applies to the chipmunks who approached us for handouts of GORP ("good ole raisins and peanuts") and other goodies.

Amidst all of this beauty and bonding, however, we encountered two unwanted guests who brought us back to earth. The first was the fattest, happiest leech you could ever imagine. He was nestled in the protective arch of Julie's foot and therefore went unnoticed for two days. After slurping her blood nonstop for that long, he was a grotesque blimp of a leech on the verge of exploding. It was a bit dicey getting him off, since he couldn't be burned off or pulled out like the others, but we finally succeeded with rubbing alcohol and recycled Julie's precious blood by feeding him to the fish. But, as they say, he died happy.

The other uninvited guest was a good bit bigger and scarier. Julie and I had set up camp beside a small gem-like lake and had enjoyed an early dinner, to be followed by a dessert of chocolate pudding. While the freshly-cooked pudding cooled, I went out fishing in the canoe and Julie rinsed our dishes at the water's edge. Enter a large black bear, lured by the irresistible smell of chocolate. When I first saw him from my canoe, he was shamelessly devouring our dessert like Winnie-the-Pooh with a honey pot. Even though he was only about 50 yards behind her, Julie had not seen or heard him enter our campsite. Fortunately for her, Winnie's only interest was the pot of chocolate pudding and our still-open pack of food for the next several days. I yelled at Julie that there was a bear in the camp and to "let him have it." That particular choice of words was most unfortunate. I meant for her to stay put until I came with the canoe and to let the bear have whatever he wanted, but she thought I wanted her to go after him. And that's exactly what she did. Following the advice of a ranger to make noise if we encountered a bear, Julie grabbed two metal pots and charged right towards the startled bear.



By that time, Winnie had finished the pudding and started in on our food pack. I can only imagine what he thought when he saw my very angry but diminutive wife running towards him, yelling her head off and banging the pots together. He could have swatted her like a fly – but he'd obviously been conditioned by his own wife to run like hell from any aggravated female, whether big or little, so he ran like hell but with our food pack in his mouth and Julie in hot pursuit. It was a chase scene out of the Keystone Kops if it had not been so real. First came Winnie, then Julie, and then me after paddling back to shore. From 20 feet behind Julie, I stupidly continued yelling at her to “let him have it” and she responded “I am” over her shoulder. The chase finally ended at a small clearing, where Winnie had dropped the food pack in the very center and retreated to the far side to watch over it. When I caught up with Julie, she and the bear were glowering at each other across the clearing. Neither one was willing to budge, one way or the other. The standoff ended a few minutes later when Winnie ambled off with one last knowing growl.

We quickly retrieved the near-empty pack and double-timed it back to the campsite. The chocolate pudding pot looked like it had been scoured with a Brillo pad – Winnie hadn't left a smidgen. We considered moving our campsite in case he returned that night looking for more easy food, as I figured he would, but it was getting dark and too late to do that. So we hung the food pack in a tree, scrambled into the tent, zipped the tent door and flap tight, and checked our weapons, which consisted of one machete and one tear-gas pen, just enough to irritate an attacking bear. At least there would be two of us fighting together against one of him – or so I thought until Julie crawled into her sleeping back and calmly fell asleep. When I gently tried to wake her up to fight beside me, she actually growled at me just like Winnie, who by comparison seemed the lesser threat at that moment. It was going to be a very long and lonely night in that tent.

And so it was, the perfect Hollywood setting for the climax of a horror movie: The two of us trapped inside a tiny tent in the middle of nowhere, stalked by an angry bear. The moonless night black as pitch. The eerie silence broken only by the chilling call of a loon. The scene was all set for Winnie to make his grand entrance and bring the curtain down. Well, fortunately for us, he forgot his lines. He did in fact return to the scene of his crime – although I could not see him through the zipped-up tent and certainly wasn't about to poke my head outside, he did come close enough to hear his breathing and twigs snapping under his paws. But he left the tent alone, no doubt because he knew my fearless and ferocious waif of a wife was inside it and he didn't want to tangle with her again. So I must begrudgingly admit that it was Julie who saved the day, even though she slept peacefully through the whole scene while I stood guard over her, for what that was worth. The happy

ending also proved that (1) Winnie was a gentleman after all and (2) Julie asleep was still more intimidating than I was awake.

(At the end of the trip, we learned that some bears don't seem to mind a little noise, contrary to what that ranger had told us at the beginning. While we were out in the woods, another bear apparently chased a park ranger up a tree and mauled his foot badly. It's a good thing that our Winnie followed the rules.)

We had no more trouble after that (and of course no more chocolate pudding either), except for one little detail: we didn't have nearly enough food left to get us home. But we did have spinning rods and the fishing was good, so we were able to supplement our meager food supply with lots of grilled fish. The walleyed pike were particularly tasty. However, a steady diet of mostly fish for breakfast, lunch, and dinner gets pretty old after four days. By the time we crossed back over the American border, we were both craving anything edible but fish.

That's where the lovers came into the story. Imagine Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr in that famous scene on the beach in From Here to Eternity. Then add (1) a large picnic basket and (2) Julie entering the scene with a lean and hungry look. Although Burt and Deborah had not the slightest interest in food at the moment, I was still reluctant to interrupt their amorous exploits, but not my intrepid wife. While I sat sheepishly in the canoe, Julie marched right up to the startled and still-entwined couple, told them we'd been starving for days after a bear stole all our food, and requested something from the picnic basket. You can surely imagine their response, which I cannot repeat here, but she came away with two sandwiches and two apples that we devoured like animals after leaving our frustrated benefactors in peace. That sandwich could have been raw possum tongue for all I know, but it sure tasted good.

Thus ended another overly-stimulating encounter with Mother Nature. Our chewed-up legs and feet eventually healed. We adjusted quickly to civilization again, especially the plentiful food. We returned happily to our two-year old daughter in New Orleans. And the trip inspired us to take up canoeing as a favorite form of family recreation and teach our children the glory of paddling down a beautiful river. But my best memories from our sojourn in Quetico are of Julie's courage and composure under fire. In addition to the usual rigors of living outdoors, she took on the leeches, the bear, "starvation," and the hostile lovers without ever flinching. I always knew she was someone special, but that trip revealed a new and wonderful side of Julie that's one of many reasons why she's such an extraordinary wife, mother, teacher, friend, and person. There's another

adversary now (Alzheimer's) that's even tougher than those leeches and bear, but she's battling it with the same courage and composure as before. As Julie herself said so often to others, "you go, girl!"

[illustration of bear drawn by Lucia Penick, age 14]



ESCAPE

by Ellen Conway Bellone

I

Let us crawl together
Into a tunnel
For the elderly
Where we can recall
Baby faces and
School trips and weddings.
Let us dream of dreams fulfilled!

II

Perhaps an old scout
Can mark a clear trail
Over icy rocks
To a lighted space
Free of screaming, shouting, and shooting, and ...
Where we can find our peace
Before our final peace!

Amen

THE BARRED OWL

by Charlotte Travieso

Athena had her wisdom owl
Merlin's companion was Archimedes.
They were probably both Screech Owls.

Harry Potter had Hedwig,
Portrayed as a she
But actually a pure, white
Male Snowy Owl messenger deliverer.

Me, I have one feather from a big owl,
Found in the parking lot one day.

Faster than any owl can fly,
I sent a picture of the feather
To a bird expert.
The return text identified the feather bearer
As a Barred Owl, uncommon to this geography.

Maybe she was on her way to the river
To search for a small possum.
Or maybe she was on her way, prey in talons,
To her tree sanctuary on Bird Island.

Maybe one night I will hear her calling
And be witness to her excessive beauty.



ADVENTURES WITH HELENE AND JULIA

CHAPTER #1

by Ginger Vehaskari

Helene and Julia wrapped their arms around each other and giggled at the hotel registrar and the other waiting customers. “We’re mothers-in-law,” the two red-headed ladies said. They enjoyed telling people and then watching their horrified expressions. They were often asked, “You two are mothers-in-law? And you’re traveling together, and you’re happy?”

They giggled. “Yes, we sure are.”

The observers’ shocked expressions quickly turned humorously happy, and they often said, “Oh boy. You two are trouble.”

Yep, it was true. Julia’s daughter and Helene’s son married. And I’d like to tell you some of their exploits. They didn’t look or dress alike, but their temperaments were compatible, and many mistook them for red-headed sisters.

Julia was a professor from New Orleans, USA, and Helene was an exercise instructor from Helsinki, Finland. When they first met, their adventures began. This is how it started. Julia and Helene met in Greece and Helene invited Julia to travel with her to Åland, the archipelago between Finland and Sweden. Professor Julia Hodnett had a habit of muttering to herself as she stomped over the ancient Greek cobblestones in her hiking boots, cargo pants, tan safari shirt, and canvas hat pulled tight over her red curls.

Helene soaked in the radiant Greek sun and breathed in the warm moist sea air and the fragrant balsamic smell of the cedar trees. She stretched her arms, twirled in a circle billowing out her white full-length skirt, showing her strappy sandals. She held in one hand a matching white oversized hat with a red paper flower, and a glass of white wine in the other.

Julia took off her canvas hat and waved it in the air, “What a great idea to travel to the Finnish cool north. I’ve been here in these stuffy libraries in Greece way too long. It’ll be good to get away and just relax for a while.”

They strolled through Athen’s Royal Gardens, which was a peaceful, green refuge in the center of the city. It was a place for an escape, a lovers’ meeting, children to run and scream aloud, and a solitude for old folks to amble and reminisce about

their lives. They wandered through ancient ruins, Corinthian columns, and mosaics. Sometimes they were quiet and simply breathed in the fragrant trees and flowers and memorized the sights and sounds to take home.

“In 1939, Henry Miller said ‘This is the quintessence of a park, the thing one feels sometimes like looking at a canvas or dreaming of a place one would like to be in and never finds.’”

“That is beautiful. Henry Miller, he was one of Marilyn Monroe’s husbands, right?”

“Oh no. Arthur Miller was Marilyn’s third or fourth husband. I can’t keep them straight. But I do suppose old Henry would have liked a turn with Marilyn.”

“Look, there’s little kiosk that sells ice cream and they say if you eat ice cream, you’ll be happy. And you can see from my soft plump body that I must be quite a happy person.” Julia teased and patted her stomach. “I’m buying. Choose as much ice cream that you want.”

They chose double chocolate in wafer cones and sat in the shade, out of the hot Mediterranean sun. Helene’s chocolate ice cream trickled down the cone, along her hand, and into her lap. Drip, drip, drip. The melted chocolate made pools and spots on her white skirt.

“Eat your ice cream, dear, or you will be doing laundry tonight instead of dancing. Besides, the drips are always tastier than the ice cream. Hurry, it’s leaking from the bottom,” Julia urged. “We could wash your skirt in the little brook there, but we might get arrested for doing laundry in a public park. Imagine the headlines: ‘Two foreign redheaded women in jail for washing clothes in botanical gardens.’”

Helene licked her lips. “Oh, that double chocolate ice cream was messy but sooo good. Thank you. You might be right that ice cream helps make one happy.”

“Come on. Maybe we can break some laws here in Athens by washing in the little brook. I’ll look for the police, you wash. Stop giggling.”

“Oh-ho, doctor-professor, we could be arrested for putting ice cream in their public water.”

They walked nonchalantly to the little brook and knelt and felt the cool water run through their fingers. Julia dug into one of her many pockets and pulled out a small

bottle of green liquid soap. “Here, put a dab of this on your skirt. That should do the trick.”

Helene looked in humorous surprise. “Have you also the kitchen sink in a pocket?”

Julia stood up. “Wait, let me check. It must be in here someplace.” She dug deep into her mump-like pockets, felt all the places it might have been, then looked up at Helene and grinned. “Nope. I guess I left it at home.”

Helene laughed, “You have a good sense of humor.”

Julia smiled, “Thank you for inviting me to your beautiful country, and especially to tour the archipelago of Åland. It’s an area in between Sweden and Finland, right?”

“Yes, thousands of islands and it’s one of the most beautiful spots in Finland.”

“I can’t wait, but you ought to also plan to visit me in New Orleans. There the nights are hot, and the women sashay down along the Mississippi river in rhythm to the music.”

“They do what?” Helene looked confused.

“Sashay... you know, you swing your hips in a causal way, flirty, like strutting to warm smooth jazz. The men’s eyes just pop right out of their heads. Here, you ought to try it. In that long full skirt you have on, you can sashay. Just take slow steps and swing those hips ever so smooth.”

Helene walked like she had two wooden legs and a hip replacement. “This feels weird. Do women walk like this in New Orleans?”

Julia covered her grin. “Well, no, not quite like that, but if they are feeling confident, proud, self-assured, and sassy, you bet they do.” Julia demonstrated once again, but with her cargo pants pockets full of various collected items and her legs bulging out like chipmunk cheeks, she looked more like a drunk camel.

Helene watched amused but didn’t laugh aloud. “This walk is just not natural. I am used to walking fast. In Finland they say, if you are cold, you aren’t moving fast enough. So, I learned at an early age to almost run when going anywhere. It is cold often in Finland.”

Julia stood with one fist on her hip and the other holding a picnic basket. “Oh, come on, Helene. Look, you are an exercise teacher and a born dancer. I can see it in the way you move. Now, just relax, take a deep breath, close your eyes, and think of enticing a good-looking man.”

“Oh no. A man is one thing I don’t ever want again.” Helene slapped her hat against her skirt emphasizing each word.

“Hey,” Julia chuckled. “Hold on there. Let’s just practice your sashay. Okay. Close your eyes....”

“Close my eyes and walk at the same time after we’ve just had wine with lunch? Do you want me to fall and break my neck?”

“You’re the one who can drink and walk at the same time, not me. I get tipsy from the vapor off the bottle. Now pay attention, Helene. Let your body relax, lift your head with pride in yourself, walk in a sensuous way, and swing your hips in time to some old blues melody, like ‘Summertime’ from Porgy and Bess.”

“Oh, okay.” Helene took a deep breath, relaxed her shoulders, hummed ‘Summertime and the living is easy, fish are jumping, and the cotton is high,’ and step by step she began to stroll down the gravel path through the park.

“That’s it. You’ve got it. By George, you’ve got it. Feel the confidence?”

“I feel a back pain coming on,” Helene grimaced. “But I am beginning to understand the strange type of centeredness in my body. This is quite a new sensation, Julia. I do feel confident and in control.” She stopped. “Why am I learning this so late in my life?”

“Take it easy, girl. Don’t be so hard on yourself. You’re not too old to learn self-assurance and trust in yourself. You’ve just been mentally beaten down a bit. You’ve got poise. You’ll come out of your troubles stronger than before. You’ll see.” Julia followed her, encouraging each hip swing.

“Oh yes, nothing will get in my way now. I can handle it all. Hey Julia, watch me walk past those two old men on the bench playing checkers. Watch and see if they stare.”

Helene batted her eyelashes at the men and smiled.

“Oh, Helene, keep walking, don’t stop. One of them knocked over the checkerboard watching you and the other one hasn’t noticed the pieces all over the ground. Stop giggling. They’ll think you’re making fun of them. Now you’ve got me laughing.” Julia trotted after her with the picnic basket swinging and her pockets jingling.

“Oh, here we are, two middle-aged redheads giggling and sashaying through a park. If I am going to do something this ridiculous in public, I think I can do anything.” Helene said.

“Helene, you’ll be a hit in the ‘Big Easy.’”

“The big what?”

“That’s the favorite name of New Orleans, ‘The Big Easy’ where life goes slow, and people take life more casually than in other cities. We ‘live and let live’ and don’t get riled up so fast.”

“Well, I am glad you let people live. That’s a good thing.” Helene said mischievously as she continued to practice her sashaying. “But how can you be easy and walk like this? This is a strange way to walk.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll get the hang of it. It’ll soon be natural to you. When we take the trip to the Åland Islands, you’ll have to try it there. Better still, you can come home with me to New Orleans and stroll down the bank of the Mississippi River. I assure you. You’ll be a sensation.”

“Yes, we will go to Åland but if I walk like this, they will put me either in a hospital or the insane asylum.”

“Great. Let’s see what we can do to shake the Åland locals out of their staid lives.”

The talk between the two redheads flowed unstoppable with care and quiet sharing as their new friendship fast cemented.

“Julia, I think you are dangerous, and I like it. Åland will never be the same again. Yeeees. Let’s see what trouble we can get into.”

“To be continued ...”

ADVENTURES WITH HELENE AND JULIA
CHAPTER #2
VIKING LINE FERRY TO ÅLAND

by Ginger Vehaskari

From Chapter 1. *Mothers-in-law, Julia from New Orleans and Helene from Helsinki, Finland, travel to Åland, the archipelago between Finland and Sweden.*

“Floating Islands. Incredible,” Julia called to Helene on the other side of the ship. On the top deck, the salty wind blew Helene’s wavy red hair all over her face while Julia’s curls twisted into knots. The same blue of the sea and sky joined in one solid canvas continuing from outer space to the bottom of the sea causing the countless islands to appear to float in midair.



Helene didn’t hear Julia but smiled and waved. She walked with slow determination over to Julia, trying to sashay. She concentrated as she stepped, swung her hip to the right, stepped, and swung the other way. She couldn’t imagine how this could be sexy but, slow and deliberate, she practiced as Julia had taught her.

The Viking Line ferry sailed southwest from Turku, Finland, toward the Åland Islands and glided through one of the most beautiful and extensive archipelagos in the world, with over 6,500 islands. Some of the small rock-islands have only a few lone trees and bushes struggling through the cracks in the split pink and grey granite rocks, determined to grow despite the harsh environment.



“What an amazing way to start a vacation.” Julia threw her arms open wide to embrace the ethereal scenery. “I’m so glad you invited me along with you.” They rested their elbows on the railing and gazed at the other-worldly scenery slowly passing. Julia was embarrassed. “Please just stop me if I get on one of my speaking tangents again. I do rattle on. I’ve been teaching so long, I forget to ‘put a cork in it’ sometimes.”

“I think you forget to ‘put a cork’ in the wine bottle too but now you must come to the restaurant. We have to celebrate with a glass of wine and then get to the tax-free shops on the third deck. I must do some therapy shopping.”

“I know I must’ve been a Viking in a former life. It feels freeing to be up here on the top-deck with the wind blowing all over. This is marvelous.”

“Your hair makes you look more like a redheaded Medusa than a Viking. It looks like you have curly red snakes coming out all over your head and my hair looks like red broom sticks. Let’s go eat. We can come back later and pretend to be Vikings. Have you ever been on a Scandinavian tourist ship before?” Helene asked.

“No. Why?”

“You will see. We must be there when the restaurant doors open.” Helene rushed ahead of Julia, almost losing her in the circular stairways. She edged herself as close to the doors as possible, then turned and spoke in English in a loud voice. “Professor, the restaurant door is here. We must wait a moment.” She knew that usually Scandinavians give deference to visiting foreigners, especially those of high education. Julia looked surprised as all those around turned and stared at her.

Never one to be intimidated, she said over the crowd, “That’s alright. I’ll wait here.” Slowly the other passengers turned away from her and faced the closed door.

The instant the door opened, the crowd rushed into the dining room, pushed Helene to the side, and with pack momentum, carried Julia off her feet and into the dining room. Julia fought against the Lemming stampede, grabbed a rugby-looking waiter, and hung onto him. “God Almighty,” she said as she rescued her hat and smashed it back on her head. The mob took all the window seats and called out to the patiently-waiting serving staff to bring beer and wine. She turned and looked at the throngs rushing by to claim seats. She slowly released the bemused waiter, “Are they always like this?”

“Yes, for sure.”

Helene pushed through and made her way to Julia. “You see, it is clear that most of these people have been on one of these trips before. They act like bulldozers and have taken the best seats. They should learn to ‘be easy,’ right?”

“Never mind, a small table near the buffet is fine. And we get free wine refills. This has already started out to be quite an adventure.”

Here you go, ladies, a free glass of champagne for you both. Enjoy.” The waitress set down two glasses in front of the surprised pair.

“Whoa. This is great. Okay, my friend, Cheers to you. I think I am going to like these cruises, or you call them ship trips.”

They looked at the people crowding and shoving around the buffet looking like piglets around a feeding trough. “Let’s wait until the hoards have taken food and, in the meantime, we can just sit and enjoy this champagne. They toasted their good fortune and sipped the bubbly and by the time they finished their drink, both women were nodding and yawning. “Oh man, Helene, I’m getting too old for these long trips. I’m too tired to eat even though the food smells so enticing. Let’s go back to the cabin and take a little nap. We can eat later and then hit the tax-free shops.”

“Yes, you have a good idea. Let’s go.”

Their little cabin was on the second level, named the Rooster level. Each of the floors was designated by a symbol such as, pig, rooster, bear, or horse. Symbols are easier to remember than numbers, especially after the passengers have taken advantage of the tax-free booze on board.

“Helene, did you set an alarm on the clock?” Both women hit their beds like logs and slept with their coats, shoes, and the cabin lights still on.

. . .

“Whazz th noizze?” Julia felt like an elephant had been sitting on her when she tried to move. There were buzzing and pounding noises and no lights and from far away someone was yelling.

“Helene, where tt... lights? Hello? It’s darker than being blind. Crap. I can’t see a thing.” Now Julia shouted, “Helene?”

Julia turned over, fell, and hit her head on the table between the beds and her arm hit the edge of Helene’s bed. “Iiiiiiee, crap, that hurt. What’s the noise? I can’t see anything; god, maybe I have gone blind. I’ve got to stop drinking.”

“Helene, where are you?” Julia felt along the bed and found her still sound asleep. She shook her. “Hey, someone is pounding on the door and yelling something I don’t understand. Wake up. We don’t have any lights. How am I going to find the door?”

“Huummm? Mitasssnyt?” She was groggy and saying something Julia didn’t understand.

“Wake up,” Julia shouted. “Where are the lights? “

Julia talked sense into her clouded brain and used her hands to crawl and feel around the little dark cabin. She talked to Helene to wake her up and also to give herself courage. “Ok, bed edge here, feel with your feet and hands. Ok, go slow, go slow, noise and banging coming from that direction. Oh no. IIEEEE. Ok, don’t panic, Helene, I just fell into the bathroom, gotta keep going around the wall. Little by little. Door. Helene, I’ve got the door. Handle, handle, where in hell is the handle? Yell. Bang on the door. Yell.”

“Open the door. Open the door. Speak English. No lights.” Julia’s fists pounding on the door just added more noise and confusion to the commotion outside their cabin. There was a woman on the outside yelling something incomprehensible.

“Crap, o-p-e-n-the-door.” With that, the door swung open. Julia fell into a ship’s housekeeper and a security guard with such force the three slammed into the adjacent wall and landed rolling on the floor. Curse words in rough tones and in at least four languages mixed and flew into the air.

“No lights,” Julia yelled at the two ship attendees.

The cleaner and the security guard flashed their lights into the cabin showing a very dazed Helene half sitting up on her elbows in the dark. “Taaa..?”

Julia stumbled over to a confused Helene. “God only knows what you just said but our cabin lights are out, and I think we are in port. We have to go.” She shook her again. “You have to wake up now.”

“Taaa?” again from Helene.

“Alright, alright, ok, whatever ‘taaa’ means. Get up. We overslept. The ship is in port. We have to get to the car. Oh, great, who is going to drive? We’re drunk. Jeeze, my head hurts, again.”

“Nooo, I don be druncked ...,” Helene stuttered.

“Ok, you had more champagne than me. Remember you drank half of mine? Oh, never mind.” Julia turned to the security guard, “Please sir, be so kind. I will give you 100 Euros to drive our car out and park it in the street. Will you please help us?”

The guard glared, flicked off the flashlight, turned and walked off.

“That wasn’t very nice at all. A lot of help he was.”

Helene stood up supported by Julia, they each grabbed their roller-bags and stumbled out of the dark cabin. “The car is on the Bear level.” The ship blew its long and loud horn notifying all passengers it was getting ready to leave for Stockholm. “Oh, come on, Helene, we must find the Bear level. The security guard won’t help.”

“My car. My little green car. My Muffi. Where is it?” Helene was confused and coming out of a stupor. She pinched her cheeks, took deep breaths, and tried to focus on the symbols on the elevator door.



“Helene, it’s on the Bear level but I don’t know where that level is. Here get in the elevator and go to the bottom.”

Helene was waking up fast, “This is Swine level. Where is the Bear?” She tripped over her suitcase and thumped into the back of the elevator. “Ooof ... that hurt.”

People crowded into the elevator as Julia pushed them out. “No, wait please, we have to go up. Don’t push down. Go to the Bear level. Go up one level, go up.” Julia was trying to communicate with the other passengers by waving her hands and shouting. The other passengers backed away from the disheveled shouting

women smelling of alcohol and ducked their heads in shame for the two English-speaking ladies.

Adrenaline, like a jolt of espresso, hit Helene and she woke up, bug-eyed. “Level two is the Rooster level. Bear is next. Here we are. Run.” The women bolted out of the elevator knocking over others trying to enter the elevator. The passengers backed away from the two women, running bleary-eyed, frazzled hair, slept-in clothes as they yelled and searched for their car.

“Look, Bear level this way. Run” The ship blew its horn three times, signaling it was leaving port. The little green Muffi was sitting all alone. The other cars had long ago left and driven into the beautiful Åland city of Mariehamn. “Quick the ship’s bridge is closing. Blow the car horn,” Julia said.

Helene gunned the car full throttle. The little green car bolted for the gate and slid under the boom just as it was closing. The car jumped the last metal bridge, which had begun to part from the shore, landed with a thud in the empty parking lot, and screeched to a stop.

Helene turned to Julia, both women were panting hard. “We made it. What happened back there?”

“I don’t know. We fell asleep. Were we drunk from one glass of champagne? There were no lights in the cabin.” Julia rubbed her forehead and temples.

Helene was offended. “I NEVER have been drunk from one or two or six glasses of champagne. Never.”

“I have a strange bitter taste in my mouth. Let’s walk over to the kiosk and get something to drink. My head is pounding and my mouth feels like a cactus. Man, that’s twice in one week. I’m getting old.”

Both women sat resting their heads on the car seat backs, then with great effort and determination, got out of the car, and walked to the kiosk to get non-alcoholic drinks. The sun was beaming hot on their backs and the bright sun hurt their eyes.

“We missed the tax-free shop.” Helene pouted.

“But we got off the ship, just barely, but we got off anyway. Helene, if we’d stayed on the ship, we could be on our way to Stockholm by now.”

The women gulped down two carbonated orange sodas each and bought more to take with them. The sun beat hard, and both were sweating. “It’s not supposed to be this hot in Åland – not this far north.” Helene burped up the soda. “This is like Greece.”

“I think we were drugged.” Julia tasted something bitter on her tongue.

“Whaaa...? No. What makes you think that? Why would anyone do that?” Julia wiped her tongue with a handkerchief and saw the grey residue, “I have a bitter taste in my mouth and there is a greyish stuff on my tongue. Look at your tongue. You have more grey than I do. You drank more than I did.”

“But but – why..? Why would someone drug us?”

“Well, someone could have been following us to rob us. It happens in New Orleans at Mardi Gras. Sometimes people put stuff in the drinks, then when the victims fall asleep on the street, people just think they are drunk and don’t help them and they get robbed.”

“We didn’t buy the champagne. It was given to us, for free.”

“Is that a normal custom on these ship-trips?”

“I, I, I do not know.” Helene hesitated, trying to remember. “I have been on ship trips several times and I cannot remember anyone ever giving me free champagne, but someone else has always been with me and he has bought the drinks.” She smiled.

“Do you have any headache medicine? I’m going to need a lot, I think,” Julia said.

The women swallowed several tablets, then stood staring, surprised and confused at the ship sailing into the distance toward Stockholm. They walked back to the little green car. “Helene, I think this is going to be an ‘adventuresome’ trip with you. I’m glad I came. Oh, and by-the-way... you’re one hell of a driver.”

“Thank you. Now perhaps we can have a restful vacation. What do you think?” She took the paper napkin and wiped her tongue, looked at the grey residue and frowned. “Do you really think that someone drugged us?”

DON'T FORGET TO CARRY YOUR SIFTER

by Peggy Brown

Armed with huge amounts of idealism and naiveté, I reported to Southern Baptist Hospital for my first day as the hospital's first social worker. It was June 1972, and I had completed the Master of Social Work program at Tulane University earlier that year, entering the master's program right after completing an undergraduate degree in Psychology from Newcomb College. I had the great good fortune to have Edward Clarkson as my boss. His training for the ministry made him a kindred spirit in the world of compassionate care that I was being initiated into. His job title was Healthcare Administrator, and he was responsible for all the clinical departments (I recollect it was 15 altogether). He had a world of experience in dealing with the varied temperaments of physicians and managers.

I felt like I was shepherded by him into a place of skillfulness in dealing with hurdle after hurdle. After all, I thought everyone would WANT to have a social worker. Instead, I was seen by some as ... (fill in the blank – a threat, an intruder, a dispenser of welfare). Even though he was very busy, Mr. Clarkson would always make time to talk with me, ground me, and remind me – “Now don't forget to carry your sifter!”

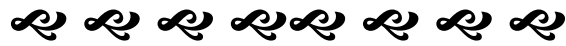
At first, I was a little puzzled by this suggestion, but I gradually began to see the exquisite helpfulness of it. Just focus on the work at hand, and don't get caught in the non-essential – like taking anything too personally.

That phrase – “carry a sifter” – has been a portal to much of what I value about my profession, e.g., accepting the person/client/patient, wherever they are, without judging. It launched an interest in learning about the mind's influence on how we cope with illness and other difficulties. One of the arcs of learning has been the practice of mindfulness meditation. The website www.mindful.org reminds us that

Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us.

It's not all in your head – you can practice mindfulness by sitting down for a formal mindfulness meditation practice, or by being more intentional and aware of the things you do each day.

A deep bow of gratitude to you, Ed Clarkson, for offering me a way of framing difficulty that reminds me to first ... pause, ground myself, and listen.



UNCERTAINTY!

by Ellen Conway Bellone

On a sunny day on the Mighty Miss,
I can see the land across the river,
Can watch birds flying to the granary,
See the little tugs and giant ships passing!

But at dawn today fog sits thick and still
Like a curtain dropped from heaven above!
Treetops appear to be river rooted,
An illusion created by this thick fog.
Gone, the sunny scene of yesterday.
Cautiously, slowly River Pilots
Are ploughing through the dense grey-white curtain
To hopefully find clear sunny ports.



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