

A Time of Innocence

Life Experience

BY KEN FORMALARIE

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On a late spring or early summer Sunday afternoon, when I was a boy with a bicycle, my father would occasionally give me three dollars to ride to Cincotta's Market, a small Italian-owned neighborhood deli, bakery, and grocery store in our Boston suburban town, to buy cigars for him. He always smoked the same brand, El Producto Blunts. I knew them well because whenever he smoked one, he would gently slide the name band off the cigar and give it to me to wear as a finger ring. At that time, those three dollars were more than enough to buy a couple of those Blunts with plenty of change to spare.

The store owner, Mr. Cincotta, simply known as Johnny in our neighborhood, knew my father. When he saw me outside his store on a Sunday, he anticipated my arrival by grabbing two blunts from a box under his counter, carefully wrapping them in scrap newspaper, and then placing them by his register. He did this while I tried to steady my bike against the wide trunk of an old maple tree, one of many lining all of our streets. This particular tree, right in front of Johnny's store window, had suffered from its muscular roots pushing sidewalk concrete upward into a small hill, making it difficult to keep my bike from falling.

When I finally entered the store, Johnny greeted me with a hello, asked if I was behaving, and inquired how Mom and Dad were doing. Even at that young age, I recognized this social ritual of communication that grownups used to affirm one another. Being respected this way as one of their children made me feel important, like I was a grown-up, a full member of the tribe, so to speak, and Johnny was a very nice man. However, I was still a little green around the gills and lacked the finesse to reply properly, so I often had to invent answers to these questions, like "They are home."

"Here," he said, pointing to the cigars, "these are for your father, and what can I get for you?"

Now, when you are a kid in a store with candy, there's probably no greater temptation than someone literally offering you anything from the selection. His offer so excited my thoughts that all the circuits overloaded, tripping the breakers! My eyes darted across the glass-enclosed counter, taking in what seemed like an endless array of candy bars and boxes of sugared treats. On Sundays, the bakery featured enticing freshly baked loaves of Italian bread and a tray full of blond brownies cut into massive squares, all sitting atop the glass counter.

"How much are those?" I asked while pointing to a box of Good 'N Plenty.

"Oh, you have enough money," he told me after spying the three dollars in my hand.

My gaze quickly shifted to those tempting blonde brownies, hoping Johnny wouldn't notice because he was busy pulling out my box of Good 'N Plenty. To my surprise, I saw him cover his hand with a piece of wax paper, pluck a brownie square from the tray, wrap it tightly, and, with a kindly smile, tell me to take it home carefully for my mother. Devilish thoughts flickered in my mind, but I quickly composed myself, recalling that I was on an important mission for my father—truly serious business! Johnny handed me a brown paper bag filled with the stash.

"Thank you, Mr. Cincotta," I said as I turned and almost jogged out of the store to my waiting bike.

He waved and said, "Please tell Mom and Dad I said hello," a continuation of those grown-up rituals of communication meant to send me off.

When I arrived home, I found Dad in the parlor of our small house, sitting in his favorite chair and waiting for me. This chair was his alone, not for other family members or strangers. I noticed the television was on.

"Well," he said, "did you get them?"

I handed him the bag silently. He peeked inside, took out the box of Good 'N Plenty, handed it to me without a word, then carefully placed the two cigars on a small wooden tray-table next to his chair, which now had a box of wooden matches and a large glass ashtray neatly arranged on it.

"Did you get me a brownie?"

I told him that Mr. Cincotta wanted me to give it to Mom.

Dad explained, "It was nice of Johnny to do that, but he must have forgotten that Mom doesn't like blonde brownies very much, so you may have it. Did you say hello to Johnny for me?"

His question took me by surprise; I couldn't recall whether I had passed along a hello from Dad to Johnny. "Yes," I answered, hoping not to be caught in a lie.

"Good, Johnny is a nice man, we like him."

Whew, safe! I thought quietly, my mind racing. Plus, hearing about Mom's preferred taste made me flutter, like a squirrel with fresh acorns, eager to get to them!

Then Dad said, "Wait, do you have my change?"

Once again, I was caught off guard, realizing that amid my excitement at the market and my quick ride home, I never noticed Johnny had slipped some coins into the bag. Dad held up the bag and shook it so I could hear the coins jingling.

"Here," he said, "you may keep these for going to the store for me, thank you."

I pocketed the loot and thanked him with an excited smile before turning to leave. As I did, I heard two men speaking on the television about baseball, specifically Boston Red Sox baseball! I recognized the announcer's voice, with its deep, melodic, almost-mesmerizing yet authoritative tones, one I've heard so many times before. I could have guessed the Red Sox were playing a Sunday game when Dad sent me to Johnny's store to buy cigars.

I did not know then, but later learned that Dad's habit was to light one of those cigars when the 2nd inning started, and if the game was especially good or long-contested, he would make it to the second cigar. He seemed well-practiced in this.

At that age, I didn't really grasp the subtleties of the game, so I didn't stay to watch with him, but I was never far away. In fact, I was so close that I could see his cigar smoke drifting in small swirls from the parlor, out through the open front door onto the screened porch, where I sat, watching it fade into the air. I could also occasionally hear a roar from the ballpark crowd through the TV, and I noticed Dad talking aloud to no one.

That's when I became curious. I slipped back into the parlor to sit on the floor in front of his chair, cigar smoke curling above us, doubting he even noticed I was there, but it didn't matter. I was busy trying to understand why he got so excited watching these gentle warriors come to life while they competed on their ball field. It got really interesting when, every now and then, a player got angry at what seemed like a mistake was made, and then got into a nose-to-nose argument with a man dressed all in black, wearing pads. *What was that about?* I wondered.

Although I couldn't fully understand the game strategies the way Dad did, I clearly understood each brilliant maneuver of skill and precision. I knew the players by name, watching them intently as they sprinted on and off the field like conquering heroes. I pictured myself as one of them, larger-than-life, entering the game for *my* moment of brilliance. It was definitely another one of those enlightening moments—while engaging in the flow of adult practices and finding them fascinating—that made me realize I belonged to the tribe. I looked forward to my next adventure.

I miss you, Dad...

Christmas in Athens

Literary Arts - Life Experience

By: Orville L. Sentman

I was deployed to the Mediterranean for the second time in 1976 onboard the USS Josephus Daniels (CG-27) as the Combat Information Center Officer (CICO). Susan, my wife, and I had been married since February (Valentine's Day) 1975 and made the decision to have Susan quit here job and travel to Europe to follow the ship. She met up with me and the ship in Toulon, FR, in October, and during that three week port visit we toured southern France, including Ax En Provence, the Gorges of Verdun, various vineyards and small towns as well as the Riviera.

We found out during this July - February deployment In the USS Josephus Daniels (CG-27), during our next port visit in La Spezia, Italy, in late November, that she was pregnant with our daughter, Sydney. She reminds me frequently when she visited the ship at anchor in La Spezia, and had to climb the Jacobs Ladder, a loose metal hanging ladder, to come aboard, and how scary that was. La Spezia port visit was about a day or two after the long Toulon visit and we were able during the port visit to tour La Spezia and the Cinque Terre via rail. The areas are part of the Italian Riviera.



Photo Taken of Manarola, Italy, Cinque Terre

We were in La Spezia for about a week and as Daniels left the protected harbor, the ship heeled to port 35 degrees from the wind and a terrific Mediterranean storm on our way to

Majorca, Spain, for a short visit via Gaeta, IT. The storm was so fierce that we laid up on the east side of Sardinia at anchor for a day before making our way to Palma de Majorca.

Susan made it to Majorca traveling by rail from Gaeta, IT, where we were expected to have a short port visit, but the weather intervened. There Susan found out that the Daniels was not going to Gaeta, so she took a train to Barcelona and then flew to Majorca and joined up with me there. Majorca port visit was another week port visit and I was beginning to wonder if I had enough money for all the port visits.

The Daniels had been in a collision at sea in September at around 0530 in the morning with the USS Conyngham (DDG-17) during a red / blue exercise. The collision destroyed about 40 frames on the starboard side of the Daniels and took out the degaussing cable as well. We all thought that the ship repair would be in Toulon as we had been in the port there for so long. Instead the Navy made arrangements for repair to the Daniels at Skaramagas Shipyard about 15 miles from Athens, Greece.

Susan left Majorca back to Barcelona and took a train to Venice where she stayed for five days before taking the old Orient Express train from Venice to Athens. The train was stopped at the Yugoslavia border and all with US passports were required to disembark and stand on the platform for some period of time. Eventually Susan and the others were allowed back on the train to continue to Athens. She arrived several days prior to the Daniels reaching the shipyard.

Daniels arrived in Athens in early December and expected the repairs to the ship to last up to two months. That meant that we would be in Athens over Christmas. We stayed in a hotel in Omonia Square in Athens, for the duration. I was able to take a bus for 15 cents to the shipyard for work daily. We were in three section duty, so every three days Susan was alone in Athens.

We spent Christmas in Athens and our only decoration was a small 8 inch plastic and foam Christmas tree that we were able to keep for many years, but sadly has been lost during our travels. I remember We both were somewhat sad over the holiday period, Susan from being pregnant I assume, and both of us missing family and friends in Virginia, but mainly because of the smells of the street food mutton and large pots cooking meals with grease floating on top of the stews in the various restaurants.

I was able to take some leave and we rented a car and toured the northern part of the Peloponnese during that time. Upon crossing the Rio-Antirrio bridge from the mainland we came upon Corinth, stopped and did a quick tour. We were somewhat disappointed as there were only small rocks of what must have been a magnificent site. We traveled until evening and stopped in Argos, GR. Susan could not eat any of the food as it was all street food or pots of greasy stews.



Corinth Historical Ruins

We were fortunate to find a hotel in Argos. The room we were in had two single beds and the room was across from the communal bathroom with a very unsavory smell. We stripped one

of the beds and used all of the bedding to add to the other bed, slept with all our clothes on and coats piled on top and held each other throughout the night to keep warm as the only heat was from a small electric space heater and the temperature was freezing.

The next morning we were up early and left to return to Athens and better facilities. On the way we stopped by the Mycenae archeological site. The site was shutdown for the winter so we could not visit the site which Susan really wanted to see.

Susan flew home around our February 14th. anniversary shortly before the completion of the Daniels' repair. Daniels' return across the Atlantic was an easy crossing as we had very calm seas. I was happy to return to Norfolk, VA, our homeport and ready for our next posting to Newport, RI, and Department Head Course, where in August Sydney was born.

So the fall of 1976 was our second honeymoon of sorts in Europe (first honeymoon was in February 1976 in Jamaica) and our first Christmas away from home together. All-in-all this deployment was a great experience for us both.

Cat on the Counter

Literary Arts – Life Experience

Rae Keane

I grew up in Pittsburgh back in the early '70s—the days of hippies and love. When I was twelve, my family bought a place in the country with another family. It seems strange now, but communal living seemed perfectly normal during this era. Every weekend throughout the summer, a constant stream of people would descend on “the Farm,” as it became affectionately known. We owned an eighteen-foot sailboat, and we would go sailing on Lake Wilhelm, eat massive potluck meals with our guests each providing part of the fare, wander through the woods and the fields, and sit by the campfire in the evenings and tell spooky stories while “cinder pies” stuffed with marshmallows and fruit pie fillings hissed and popped in the burning embers.

During one of these trips to the Farm, we went into the closest town—a small town called Sandy Lake. We stopped in the local hardware store for a part to fix the old water pump that was on the back porch. The Farm did not have indoor plumbing, just an old pump that brought up frigid water with particles of rust, and a dilapidated two-seater outhouse that had an extreme pitch to the right.

While my father was off rummaging through the dusty shelves hoping to find some hidden hardware treasure, I stayed in the front of the store eyeing up the display of licorice and horehound candies. There, lying on the worn wooden counter acting like he owned the place, was a large ginger tomcat. The cat was unperturbed by all the comings and goings around him. He turned his golden gaze toward me, and lazily stretched a paw in my direction. That was the exact moment that the thought occurred to me: someday I would like to own my own store with a cat on the counter.

Flash forward forty years ... For 17 years I owned Zeetlegoo's Pet Store, a small retail pet store in the coastal town of Southport, North Carolina, complete with a store cat, first Sammy and then Salvatore, who made themselves comfortable at the front cash register of the store. So how did I get there?

Throughout my life I have been totally indecisive as to what I wanted to do when I "grew up." I amuse myself by making lists of things I've done to make money because bills don't pay themselves. As a teenager, I worked as a clerk in a sporting goods store, a hardware store, and a few clothing stores. But ultimately, each of those jobs was boring and not very challenging. Plus, I would regularly get reprimanded by my bosses for talking too much.

So, at twenty-one years of age, I started college. I got an associate's degree in basic engineering, a bachelor's degree in biochemistry, and finally—after a several-year hiatus—I went back and got a master's degree in environmental science. After college, I again held many positions: polymer chemist, analytic chemist, adjunct chemistry professor, safety manager, environmental manager, and—finally—deputy public works director in a small town.

The more responsibility I got, the more money I made—and the more stressed I became. I was miserable in the corporate world. I would come home from my job and unload all the negativity on my husband, Paul.

The other consequence of my chosen career was exposure to chemicals. During the course of my career, I worked with gallons of chlorinated solvents, organic pigments, rubber vapors, and various other toxic chemicals. During the evenings, I taught

chemistry lab classes and made jewelry—grinding and polishing metals. Also, during this time, I had a lot of dental work done—I mean a lot. Thirteen crowns to be exact.

The result of this toxic chemical bombardment? I got sick—really sick. No one needs to hear the specifics of my various ailments, but suffice it to say that I woke up nauseous, struggled through work in a fog, and went to bed exhausted every single day. I had a plethora of tests run—blood tests, an upper GI, a lower GI, and a liver function test. All the tests came back with normal results. Finally, a doctor determined that since everything was testing normal, apparently, I was just imagining all of my symptoms. She suggested that everything was just in my head. *Grrrrrrr*. I was frustrated and felt belittled. I knew my body and something was not right.

At that point, I started to research alternative medicine and other options. I had constant nausea and other gastro problems, and I knew I wasn't just imagining it. After much research, and with the help of a couple of holistic practitioners, I determined that many of my physical ailments stemmed from heavy metals that I had accumulated from years in the chemical industry, dental work, and jewelry making. A hair analysis confirmed that mercury, cadmium, and aluminum were present in my system at very high levels—and were most likely the cause of many of my symptoms.

So let me explain how this has to do with starting a pet store. Oddly enough, this is where my health crisis and my business dream intersected. During the period of time that I was having my medical problems, my Abyssinian cat, Zeetlegoo, was also having her share of issues. Zeetlegoo's major problem was that she vomited. Now I know you are thinking, "Well, yeah, cats do that. They are known for throwing up a hairball on occasion." But Zeetlegoo was different. Zeetlegoo was the Barfmeister—Barf-O-Matic

the Cat. She would barely get her food down, and it would come right back up. She could have won Olympic gold in synchronized vomiting.

At some point while I was trying to determine what was wrong with me, I was tested for allergies. One of my trigger foods, it turned out, was corn. One day, the proverbial light bulb went off over my head when I realized that Zeetlegoo (and all other cats and dogs), like me, was unable to digest corn. In fact, I started wondering, why was I feeding a cat corn at all? How many cats do you see out grazing in a cornfield?

I made a trip to the grocery store and scrutinized the labels of one bag of cat food after another. I found ingredients like whole ground corn, corn gluten meal, and corn syrup. I had spent many years taking biology courses, and yet it hadn't occurred to me that I was feeding a cat (considered an obligate carnivore—meaning they will die if they do not consume meat) a highly indigestible grain, and causing the poor cat to earn those unflattering nicknames.

After much searching, we finally found a brand of cat food that was a premium holistic food—with no corn, wheat, soy, by-products, or preservatives. Unfortunately, we had to drive twenty-five miles up to the city of Wilmington to get the food. Our other option? Driving twenty-five miles to the south. This was in the early 2000s, before online ordering and two-day delivery were commonplace.

We had recently moved from the Piedmont of North Carolina to the small coastal town of Southport, because I had taken a job working for a local town. Paul was finishing up a nine-month contract with his employer in Greensboro—spending a week in Greensboro, and then a week in Southport. For years, I had talked about starting my own business,

so prior to the end of his contract, we started researching established businesses that were for sale in the area.

We didn't really have any direction; in fact, we even looked at a tool rental company since I had worked at a hardware store for thirteen years. Then we found a local pet store that was on the market—the name, the inventory, and the building. Although I had never owned a dog, and Paul had never worked in retail, we decided that we both liked animals, and that pets make people happy. The price of the shop seemed high, but working with a commercial realtor, we put in an offer. And our offer was rejected. No counteroffer—nothing.

Since we were planning to start some sort of business, we'd hired a lawyer to help us incorporate. During an especially productive meeting with the lawyer, we mentioned the pet store offer. We asked if he thought that we should pursue it any further. The lawyer said, "Did you like the name of the business?" Paul and I looked at one another shaking our heads. "No, not at all," we both said. "Did you like the inventory that they had in stock?" Again, Paul and I looked at one another. "No," we exclaimed simultaneously. "How about the building and its location?" asked the lawyer. "Not really..." I responded. "So why would you invest a considerable amount of money to get something you don't want in a business you aren't even sure that you are going to like?" the lawyer remarked. "Why don't you rent a place and start your own business the way that you want it?" That was probably the best \$250 we ever spent, because that is exactly what we did.

Working with the same realtor, we found a storefront in an excellent location with good parking. The building was brand new, so my husband, acting as subcontractor, outfitted

the building—putting in walls, drop ceilings, and store fixtures, which we had been lucky enough to find second-hand. The name of the business was easy; we named it after our inspiration for the store: the barfing cat Zeetlegoo.

In December 2004, Zeetlegoo's Pet Store opened its doors. For the first couple months, my husband ran the store, while I continued to work full time at the town, placing orders in the evenings and helping at the store on Saturdays. We joined the local Chamber of Commerce and had a grand opening ribbon cutting which Zeetlegoo attended as our honored guest. Though she was a cat in her teens and starting to get frail, she presided over the event with dignity. Happily, Zeetlegoo lived to be sixteen and ate only top-of-the-line treats and foods in her twilight years—no longer needing the unbecoming moniker.

After four months, I decided that I could no longer take the negative atmosphere of my job. I called my husband and we decided that my health and sanity were more important than a regular paycheck, so despite the fact that the store had only been open a short time, we agreed that I should resign from my position. We didn't know if we were going to make it in business, or even when we would be able to pay ourselves. Nonetheless, April Fool's Day of 2005 was my last day of working for "the Man."

We lived primarily on savings for two years, during which Paul and I worked a ridiculous number of hours every week. And I flourished in this atmosphere. I could sit at my computer at two in the morning in my pajamas and order dog toys with no one to tell me what to do and when to do it. I could stand around and gab with customers for as long as I wanted and not get in trouble. I was finally the boss.

And the myriad jobs that I held through the years—as well as my biochemistry knowledge and my love of pets and people—helped to create a store unlike any other, offering only top-of-the-line products, especially focusing on healthy foods for the animals. In 2006, Sammy became our first feline floor manager, holding court at the register until he passed over the Rainbow Bridge in 2012.

In addition to employing felines, we had four canine associates who diligently worked doing demonstrations, tasting treats, testing toys, and greeting customers. Most notably was Gilligan, who was trained in the Pawsitive Partners Prison Program where he did 8 weeks hard time in the Pender County Prison. Upon starting to work for the store, he was given the difficult task of choosing Sammy cat's successor. He chose Salvatore Luciano during an adoption event with the Brunswick County Shelter.

Zeetlegoo's Pet Store celebrated seventeen years in business before the pandemic forced us to close our doors. The store won "Best Pet Store in Brunswick County" nine years in a row. And I finally had my dream of owning a store with a cat on the counter.

Born To Write

Sherry Strickland

Life Experience

Born To Write

Character traits run deep. Don't you think? Let me share an interesting first hand account.

I lived for the first thirty-nine years of my life not knowing where I came from. It wasn't that my mother and father suffered from some kind of geographical amnesia. It was that they both disappeared and didn't leave a forwarding address. How could such a thing happen, you may ask. Adoption. My birth mother and birth father were unlikely candidates for parents. Both were, in fact, parent impaired themselves.

My mother was one of five siblings and the youngest child of deceased parents. From reasonably affluent extended families, the siblings were kept together in a beautiful victorian home smack dab in the middle of a small town where my great and great-great grandfathers were mayors and justices of the peace. Without benefit of parents to provide love and care, my mother must have been emotionally lonely even in a house full of family and one housekeeper paid to live-in.

My father was the oldest of four, and after the death of his father, he was burdened with providing for their care. Although his mother was still living, she didn't work. The absence of the breadwinner left a huge void for a very young man to fill.

The distance between the home of my mother and my father was a short walk along a dirt road. I guess my birth is due, at least in part, to that dirt road.

I don't doubt the character of either of my parents. Young and living without strong male role models, they must have met along the dirt road, and ultimately the necessity of my birth was impressed upon them both.

In my thirty-ninth year, I learned the truth of my origins with the help of a genealogist who was doing some research in the county of my birth. He had already developed a rapport with the staff who worked in the birth and death records, and his comings and goings weren't anything unusual for him or them. With just my date of birth, this knowledgeable and experienced researcher was able to find my original birth certificate.

When the genealogist called me to tell me the news, it was not all good. My birth mother had passed away due to metastatic breast cancer. There would never be a chance to meet her and hear the details of that dirt road. There was no father recorded on the birth certificate.

The genealogist had already done the research and provided information for the widower of my mother. He was still living and his whereabouts just down the road from the cemetery where my mother was buried. They never had any children in their marriage to each other.

I am forthright, if nothing else, and this character trait served me well in determining whose name should have been placed on that birth certificate. Within twenty-four hours, I was standing on the doorstep of my birth father's home.

He still lived just down the dirt road from the big Victorian on the other end.

I believe my birth father had waited for my arrival not just for nine months. He'd waited for thirty-nine years.

So where does the first hand account of character traits running deep come into this story?

It didn't take any convincing to get my father to submit to DNA tests. After a month of anticipation, the test found that I was nearly a one-hundred percent match to this man's DNA. I'm not sure I'd ever seen so many numbers after a decimal. Melvil Dewey of Dewey Decimal System fame would have surely been impressed.

You may wonder why I reference Melvil Dewey. I have loved going to the library all my life. I am a wordsmith through and through. I love books! I would read the same book over and over as a child when the library was too far to walk.

They say when an innate curiosity and the need for expression meets a passion for reading, it creates a strong predisposition toward writing. (Information summarized by Gemini [accessed March 15, 2026]).

You see, I was predisposed to become a writer. I was predisposed to even write this.

Did I actually have an ancestor who shared my love of wordsmithery? Do I have a professional wordsmith in my family tree?

It is with great humility and perhaps even some megalomaniacal pride that I share this fact: my paternal grandfather was a columnist in a newspaper which received a Pulitzer Prize during his tenure. To be truthful, his column wasn't the basis for the Pulitzer, but I secretly choose to believe he helped the newspaper win even if in small ways.

My grandfather wrote a recurring column under a pseudonym. He would naturally acquire stories in his everyday life and turn these little gems into colloquial and quite visual essays for his columns.

I believe, humbly, that I share this innate ability.

I've spent hours digging in microfiche and reading, and yes even weeping, my grandfather's words. Why did I weep? I marveled that although we had never met, our writing style and capacity for the written word was so very similar.

Although I won't share from my grandfather's column, I will share some from my own: Lilypad Lane. The following essays are some I've shared on social media recently. Granted, I don't write for a newspaper like my grandfather, but my words have reached and engaged and, hopefully, brought a smile to readers.

I write for me. It is a part of who I am.

I hope these words here will make others smile — make you smile.

The world has so much bad news; I'm trying hard to stir up a lil good.

FROM THE HEART: Here on Lilypad Lane

Over the last few days, I've been creating some homespun, homemade Valentines. There's a reason.

Years ago, on the budget of a sharecropper's wife, my mother made our clothes. It wasn't always a great thing back then to be wearing homemade clothes. Now, hand-tailored clothing is a luxury, but as a young girl, it was a sure sign you were different if you wore one of a kind hand-sewn pantsuits.

Being different got me here but with some tears and tears and trials.

Wide lapels and bell bottoms ... Schew! So long ago.

One Valentine's Day, my mother made a calico heart with lace ruffles for me. I am weeping at the thought. The memory is so poignant.

So ... I sew.

Raised under a quilting frame with the buzz of much older women above me, I learned the value of needle, thread, and stitches made of necessity and love.

I actually wondered this afternoon how the same expressions of love and care would be created today. The clothing would be worn - yes even worn - so the heart element could be present.

What I wouldn't give for some of my sharecropper father's old clothes and his mother's - the quilter - Sunday meeting dresses, but alas, those woulda-been treasures are long gone.

Today I have worked on expressions of love from a variety of sources.

I have quilted many quilts, and I have fabric scraps and leftovers laid out now.

I think my next project will be made of denim from actually worn and frayed jeans, some old neckties, and maybe some once loved shirts.

I guess I'm still that sharecropper's daughter.

A little different ... a little homemade ...

Here on Lilypad Lane.

BEIGNETS ON THE BRAIN!!: On Lilypad Lane

Every single year I vow and declare that I am N'Orleans bound in February.

I so enjoy travel and taking the scenic route. I like to stop in out of the way places to eat, and I prefer my food comes with a view.

One of the very best Fish Fridays I ever had happened somewhere in Alabama, and I may never even find my way back! It wasn't even a proper restaurant, but the sign enticed me so that the driver wheeled us 'round. Bless her heart. We ate in fervored euphoria, and I'm sure the catfish would have felt proud of his sacrifice.

Or was that Mississippi? See, I will never find that pinnacle of pescado again. But I digress.

It isn't the lure of purple and green argyle that draws me southbound in February. It isn't the challenge of sparkly beads. It isn't even the love of zydeco and jambalaya, though I do love a good muffuletta.

It is the dough. It's all about the dough. Fried dough! I love that deep fried dough. It's sad I know and quite telling, but oh that dough! I tend toward fluffy. Giggle. Nothing compares to pulling those lil yeast dough pillows from the hot oil and smothering them with powdered sugar.

I know they say "sex sells" but I'm sure whoever made that up had never had the nose whitening, ecstasy encompassing, lip smacking, life changing moment where a still steamy, wee small fried morsel meets my lips.

I won't make it to N'Orleans on Tuesday yet again.

But beignets will bless my heart come Monday.

Here on Lilypad Lane.

POLLEN FOR PROBLEMS: From Lilypad Lane

With the news so serious and concerning in the last few days, I have decided to lighten up the mental fare by sharing some interesting albeit cheeky news: pollen for problems.

Please permit me.

When venturing out today, I was surprised to find a hardy helping of pollen waiting for me.

Isn't it early for pollen? Do trees actually follow meteorological spring?

I'd have thought trees would be more vernal equinoxical.

Not here at Lilypad Lane.

Here the pollen is falling like mad and makes me want to pollinate something.

If I was a bee ...

or would that be "if I were a bee"?

If I were a bee, I would be, lol, buzzing about trying to find some early daffodils to taste-test.

I think I would be a great pollinator since, as a human, I'm a great bloomer-groomer.

But I promised you cheeky, and don't want to disappoint.

Did you know that all this pollen could bring about some very interesting results?

For the record, pollen is actually an aphrodisiac. It is! I looked it up:

"Pine pollen contains natural plant-based hormones called phyto-androgens, including testosterone, DHEA, and androsterone, that mimic human hormones. Emerging research, including small human pilot studies, suggests it may help raise testosterone levels and improve symptoms of low testosterone in men, such as fatigue, low libido, and decline in mood." That is according to Google's Gemini AI.

That said, I would happily drive my black car and meet with those who need this "hot" commodity (gol -- giggle out loud).

I, however, will need to do further research as to whether the pollen needs to be sniffed or snorted or swallowed.

Should the pollen be placed on a mirror and lined up in lil straight lines with a razor blade for snorting, or maybe a dab on the back of the hand for a quick sniff would do, or should we collect it and fill little empty capsules for swallowing, or maybe just a lil pinch 'tween the tooth

and gum would suffice?

Perhaps I'm aging myself, but the image of a present day John Travolta doing a line of spring pollen in order to ... hustle ...

Chuckling and sneezing.

And considering a side hustle.

Here on Lilypad Lane

ANCHOR OATMEAL: Served on Lilypad Lane

The last few weeks have been a challenge even for me.

If you don't know, I am now in my fifth year caring for my invalid mother.

I think that sentence should preface everything I say, do, or even think.

Truly.

Prior to these years, I looked after my mother, just not to the degree I do now.

For many years -- too many -- my mother can't even open the refrigerator door to remove something.

After many strokes, perhaps a dozen or more, she can't stay balanced enough to open the door and retrieve anything while holding her walker with both hands.

Years ago, she suffered paralysis due to a stroke. Thankfully, after several years wearing a leg brace and special shoe, the next stroke gave her back the use of her leg and foot. Sadly, that stroke stole her speech.

Among many other diagnoses, my mother now still suffers from aphasia and dysphasia. Not only are words hard to speak, but words are also hard to grasp in her post stroke jumble.

So I serve.

Meals, snacks, coffee, or tea must all be carried by me, though a bottle of water can fit into the vintage waist apron with pockets that I now tie on her walker.

The apron is a most vivid reminder, at least for me, of the mother who served me. It was much, much longer that she served me than a mere five years. Then my mother gladly doted on my two daughters, often donning the bib apron that hung behind the kitchen door there by her harvest gold wall oven.

Should I live to be her age - she's 97 - the debt of gratitude I owe her would never be repaid.

Piano and piano lessons.

Voice lessons.

Clarinet.

Cheerleading uniforms.

Pageants.

The most awesome car handed to me without a cent owed with no insurance or taxes to pay.

The list goes on.

But I'm sure you may be wondering ... the subject today is oatmeal.

Anchor oatmeal.

My mother has eaten oatmeal for breakfast for half a century.

Seriously.

If my mother didn't have oatmeal, it was because she was traveling or someone else decided for her to forsake the oatmeal for something easier or maybe more extravagant.

Rose, (you can call my mother Rose), likes oatmeal plain, no sugar, with just a lil salt, and a splash of milk.

Over the last year, I will present the oatmeal first and then follow up with something else perhaps a lil grander, at least to me. A second course, if you will, may be a danish, a donut, or a cookie to finish out her coffee.

But there's always oatmeal for breakfast here on Lilypad Lane.

Many mornings in the last months, and especially so the last weeks, I have had to encourage my mother to leave her room. She is content to sit on her bed and look out the window at the new bird feeder she got for Christmas.

"Are you ready for your coffee and oatmeal?"

Many times - too many times - she asks me "What's oatmeal?"

Although it breaks my heart every single time, I hide the hurt and encourage her that she loves oatmeal and always eats oatmeal.

Last week my mother fell twice.

The look on her face when she falls is not something that can be described.

To know you are at the mercy of others to raise you up ...

I've been told that I can call a non-emergency number to help when she falls, so others stronger than me can lift her.

But I can not.

The look of terror and desperation that I witness means I can not introduce strangers into our crisis.

Each time she falls, I sooth my Rose and encourage her that we can do this together.

We can do this together.

Sometimes there are tears and panic and sometimes it's even MY panic, but each time Rose, me, and God manage to find a footing and return to some semblance of normalcy.

You see, the oatmeal has become more than a staple for us.

It is an anchor.

For a half-century, my mother Rose has eaten a humble meal and led a humble life.

As long as I can help her remember what oatmeal is, and get her to eat oatmeal, then we can keep on ... rising.

Some mornings now, she asks for more milk in her oatmeal and multiple times. Each time, I take the bowl to the kitchen and attempt to add just the right amount of milk to that glorious bowl of oats.

It's been a hard week.

But we're still here, me and mom.

Rising.

Anchored with oatmeal.

On Lilypad Lane

Beginning

By

Robert Vanderbeek

2026 Brunswick County Senior Games

Silver Arts Life Experience

My earliest memory in life is when I was 3 ½ years old. I lived with my mother, father, sister and brother in a small row house with yellow ochre stucco and green trim. August in New Jersey can be scalding. I was playing with some blocks on the sidewalk. My mother was standing guard to protect me from some older children, who would amble by and knock down my architectural “masterpiece”. A man driving a bright red pickup truck stopped in front of our home. He wore faded blue overalls. He was selling produce. My mom was looking at some string beans. The man had hairy fore arms to match his muscular hands. He reached into a bushel basket to take a perfectly ripe peach. He quickly rubbed the peach all over his plaid shirt to remove the fuzz. He held the peach in his hands and twisted to create 2 halves. He handed me one half saying “here kid eat this”, as he ate the other half. At that moment my mouth exploded with exquisite joy, as the succulent elixir streamed down my chin before sizzling on the scorching pavement. Up until that moment that peach was the best thing I had tasted in my short life. Predictably, I called out “Mommy! Mommy! Buy some of these!”. That day was an epiphany that sparked a life long passion for food and a foreshadowing of my future career.

Smoke Across the Hudson

By

Robert Vanderbeek

2026 Brunswick County Senior Games
Silver Arts Life Experience

September 11, 2001 began like any other workday. My alarm woke me at 4:00 a.m. It was still dark outside with a slight chill in the air which belied the warmth of the day to come, but hinted at the coming of autumn. September in the Northeast is a beautiful time of the year. From our home in Florham Park, New Jersey, my wife, Danuta, drove me to the station in Madison, where I caught the train to Hoboken. From there, I transferred to the Port Authority Trans Hudson line – known as the PATH – on my way to the South Tower of the World Trade Center, where I was the executive chef for Morgan Stanley’s executive dining room.

I reached the 66th floor and unlocked the glass doors to the receptionist’s area. Behind her desk hung a magnificent oil painting of San Francisco Bay dotted with tiny sailboats dwarfed by the towering Golden Gate Bridge. The executive suite had six private dining rooms, one reserved for executives not entertaining clients. Each room was decorated with artwork and oriental carpeting. The atmosphere was elegant and conservative yet modern. Five of the rooms had breathtaking views of Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens. I unlocked the kitchen doors. The staff arrived and began setting up for breakfast and lunch. Our main service was lunch, and the slow morning allowed me to place some of my orders for the next day. We began preparing breakfast for some of the executives and a handful of quests. A waiter burst into the kitchen. Clearly agitated, he blurted out something – his words were tangled and garbled: “A terrible accident...a tornado...a plane...I don’t know.” Before I could ask him what happened, he disappeared toward the elevators.

I went into the dining room and looked out the window toward the east-facing side or the North Tower. I saw a jagged hole, black smoke billowing out and reams of paper streaming through the opening. Someone said a small plane - a Cessna - had hit the building. From what I see, that seemed possible. I could only see the gash blown out on the east-facing side, not the north side where the plane initially struck.

I hurried back to the kitchen and told the staff, “I don’t see any immediate danger, but let’s get out of here anyway.” I began turning off the ovens and stoves and removing anything that was cooking.

At that moment, a lawyer for Morgan Stanley poked his head into the kitchen and shouted, “Bob! What are you doing? We have to get out of here. Let’s go! Let’s go!”

We started down the stairs. When we reached the 50th floor, an announcement came over the P.A. system “There is a problem in Tower One. Return to your offices.” The door to the stairwell had locked behind us. We continued down to the 44th floor, the sky lobby, where hundreds of people were gathered. A security guard with a megaphone announced, “No danger, no need to evacuate. If you want to leave, you must use the stairs.”

Suddenly, I heard a thunderous explosion. Outside the window, I saw a massive fireball erupt, a lot of smoke, and debris raining down. The building began to sway. By my estimate, it leaned at least eight feet. I thought for certain the tower would topple. Everyone instinctively moved away from the blast. Some people fell down. After a few moments, the swaying stopped. If the second plane had hit a few minutes later, I might been on the elevator and likely would not have survived. I thought I heard what sounded like elevator cables snapping.

Everyone started down the narrow, crowded stairs in an orderly, quiet manner. A few times we passed firefighters climbing upward with full gear. Nobody said a word. A man behind me was breathing heavily. I turned to ask if he was alright. He nodded yes. Fortunately, the lights stayed on for our descent. During the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, people had to go down in darkness.

When we reached the ground level, the scene made it clear this was no accident. Outside, I saw three or four feet of rubble - chunks of concrete, twisted rebar, and broken bricks. The floors were strewn with cables and slick with some kind of liquid. I smelled smoke and what I presumed was jet fuel. The scene reminded me of the final scene of the Bruce Willis movie *Die Hard*, except this was real.

I had no idea where to go. Every 10 or 12 feet a police officer, firefighter, or security guard pointed the way out. They all said the same thing, “Get away from here as fast as you can, as far as you can.” I remember thinking, I’ll stop when I get to Montana. By the time I reached the street, the only familiar face I saw was Ian, my garde manger, the cook responsible for cold food. I said to myself out loud, “I guess I’m not going to work tomorrow.” Ian overheard me and replied, “Of course you are not

going to work tomorrow. The building is burning down.” Later, it was reported that around this time people trapped on the upper floors were jumping to their deaths. I have no recollection of seeing anyone leap or fall. Either I didn’t see it or my mind has blocked it out. What I do remember is a pair of shoes laying on the sidewalk, in a pool of blood. The police urged everyone to get away from the area. They tried to stop people from using their cell phones in order to keep the lines open for official use. Ian and I walked a few blocks north to catch the subway uptown. I had no MetroCard, so he swiped me in. Somehow the subways were still running. I got off at 34th Street, planning to walk to Penn Station and take the train home. Ian stayed on the train to go to his home in the Bronx. I found a payphone and called Danuta only to reach our answering machine. I was lucky the phones were still working. I left a message. “This is Bob, there is a problem at the World Trade Center. I am out and I am okay. Kocham,” meaning, I love you in Polish. Danuta had gone to the store. When she returned home, she heard the phone ringing. She answered – It was her aunt from Poland. “How is Bob?” her aunt asked. Danuta replied, “He’s fine. We just got back from vacation.” Her aunt repeated, “How is Bob?” Danuta inquired, “Why are you asking?” Her aunt said, “We have been frozen here in front of the television for several hours. The World Trade Center has fallen.” Danuta looked at the answering machine to see 17 messages. Concerned and confused, she said, “I will call you back.” The first seven messages were, “How is Bob?” The eighth message was mine.

I reached Penn Station at 10:15 a.m. I bought a ticket from a vending machine. My train was scheduled to leave at 11:12 a.m. The waiting room had a long bank of payphones. I tried calling my mother five times before I got through. At first, she didn’t believe it was me. At 11:00 a.m. an announcement came over the loud speaker, “All trains are cancelled. The station is closing.” I left the building, planning to go to the Port Authority Bus Terminal, but the people outside said it was closed. I knew there was a ferry leaving from the west side of Manhattan. I walked toward the Hudson River. I encountered thousands of people waiting in long lines. Nobody knew where the end of the line was. I took a place that seemed to be the end of the line. I was still wearing my chef’s clothes. The hot sun on that cloudless day beat down on my fair skin and bald head. I draped my apron over my head to prevent

sunburn. We waited silently for five hours. The ferries alternated between Secaucus and Hoboken. I boarded one for Hoboken. When we arrived at Hoboken an announcement came. “If you were at the World Trade Center get off the ferry now. If you were not at the World Trade Center, remain on the ferry.” As I stepped on to the dock, a man in front of a pallet stacked with cases of water was tossing bottles to passengers getting off the ferry. I caught one. I didn’t have anything to drink in over eight hours. Police directed us toward the parking lot, where firefighters hosed us down, spraying us from different directions as we passed through the gauntlet. It was a precaution – they didn’t know if there were any chemical, the biological, or radioactive threats. Although the day was hot, the water was so cold that it took my breath away. I was completely soaked, even the money in my wallet was waterlogged.

In the parking lot, ambulances and dozens of nurses, doctors, and orderlies waited. Tables were piled high with bandages and supplies. What struck me was how few patients there were. It seems the people either escaped – or they hadn’t. A doctor checked my blood pressure. It was fine.

I bought a train ticket. From the terminal, I could see the site of the World Trade Center. I stared for a few minutes. All I could see was smoke across the Hudson. A stranger came up to me and said, “Both towers collapsed.” That was the first time I heard of the destruction.

Suddenly, people ran toward the exits. An announcement said, “The terminal is closed. Everyone must leave.” I understood that it was a bomb threat. Soon someone said that the trains were running again. I called Danuta to tell her what time I would arrive in Madison. I boarded the train and found a seat. I couldn’t find my ticket. The conductor told me not to worry. I was still soaking wet, and the air conditioning was blasting. I was shivering uncontrollably. The woman next to me, offered me her crocheted shawl. The gaps between the strands were large enough for a tennis ball to pass through. I thanked her and declined her offer, but I will never forget her kind gesture. The train stopped in Summit, where the local hospital had sent a cadre of medical personnel. One woman, in my car had injured her leg, but she declined treatment. I arrived in Madison at 6:30 p.m. Danuta was waiting for me on the platform. We embraced and kissed. The words of John Denver drifted into my mind, “Hold me like you’ll never let me go.”

We drove home. Danuta cooked a simple dinner – grilled chicken, potatoes, and vegetables. That evening someone from my company called to check if I was safely home. Later, the owner called me personally and said there would be a meeting on Friday. I told him I wanted to come but, I was scheduled to be off. I asked if I could have off on Monday instead. I planned to go to Lake George to visit friends. He agreed.

I had not seen my boss, Peter since leaving the kitchen. I called his home about 9:00 p.m. His wife answered and said that he wasn't home yet. My heart sank for a moment, but she quickly told me he was safe and would be home shortly. I was relieved. After leaving the World Trade Center, he had taken the Staten Island ferry, hoping to continue to Long Island. The ferries were not running to Long Island, so he had to return to Manhattan and take the Long Island Railroad home. I knew my friend, John worked in Tower One. I called him to make sure he was safe. He answered the phone. I said, "Boy, am I glad to hear your voice."

That night I barely slept, watching television and trying to make sense of what I had lived through.

In the morning, I hung an American flag outside our home. Many neighbors did the same. Flags were draped on almost every overpass in the area. We decided to give blood at a local college. A long line of cars stretched down the road. After a few minutes, someone told us the delay would be six hours. We opted not to wait.

The phone rang all day. Friends called from nearby and from as far away as Canada, Germany, and Poland. Former employees called. Even a stranger from Chicago called on behalf of a friend in New York who could not reach us because the phone lines were not working. My sister told me later that she was afraid to call. I understood because, I was hesitant to call my boss or my friend the night before, fearing the worst.

On Friday, I met Peter at Penn Station. We were early for the meeting. We stopped by the Oyster Bar at Grand Central Terminal to see my friend and former employee, Sandy, who was the chef. We were

offered oyster pan roast, a kind of stew, which is their signature dish. I accepted his offer. At the meeting, Peter asked me to call him next week when I got home.

Morgan Stanley was operational again by Monday morning. They rented office space all over the city. They leased computers, had them installed and obtained temporary kitchens to prepare lunch for the employees. I called Peter Monday night. He said, "Do you want to work?" I said, "Yes," even though I meant no. I was terrorized, but I was not going to let the terrorists win. He gave me the address of where I should go on Tuesday morning.

Early the next day, Danuta drove me to Manhattan. After passing through the Holland Tunnel, the police would not allow us to go farther south. I walked to my assigned workplace. There I met a chef I knew from Prudential. With a few inexperienced workers, we were tasked with the job of producing salads, sandwiches and other food to be loaded onto a truck by 8:00 a.m. I worked at that operation until December. At a large Christmas party, people came up to me to congratulate me. I found out later that I was chosen to be the chef at Morgan Stanley's executive dining room near Times Square.

After the attack, Peter made counseling mandatory. I spoke to the counselor, and she told me not to hesitate to share my story with others. After that, I have been more willing to talk about it. I went through many emotions the week of September 11, 2001. I don't hate the people responsible, but I hate what they did. I don't think that I will ever be the same as before that day or will ever forget. I am grateful that I didn't lose anyone close to me and I wasn't injured. I feel that every day since 9/11/2001 has been a bonus.

REBIRTH

Literary Arts — Life Experiences

by Eric Mens

REBIRTH

5 AM, Saturday, September 15. It's my day off. I wake with a start, pick up my bedside journal, and begin writing. I had dreamed of being pinned under something—a desk or a chair, perhaps. I can't free myself no matter how hard I try. The smell of something burning invades my nostrils; the sweet, sickening stench of burnt pork. I am back in Vietnam. Only I am not.

* * *

8:58 AM, September 11, 2001. I stand outside 5600 Columbia Pike, smoking a cigarette, anxiously waiting to escort my boss to our meeting, which should have started almost an hour ago. Inside, the room is abuzz with chatter about the news of a plane crashing into the North Tower in New York City. Numerous monitors in the room replay the scene unfolding in New York. We convince ourselves that a small plane has tragically strayed off course. Minutes later, we hear of another plane hitting the second Tower. Someone mentions a possible terrorist attack. Some of us still naively attribute it to a bad run of events.

Outside, the sky is a vivid blue. A soft, cool breeze blows as I watch and listen to traffic flow past on Carlin Springs Road. *A fine, early fall day.*

I grow increasingly impatient—after all, our Pentagon offices are only a mile down the road. *How long can it take, boss, to work your way through rush-hour traffic to our meeting?*

Finally, he arrives. Colonel V acknowledges my anxiety, “Sorry ‘bout that. I got held up leaving the office,” he paused, “This traffic is something else...Let's have a smoke before we go in.”

“No problem, Colonel.” Reaching inside my jacket, I offer a cigarette. For a few minutes, we bask in the early fall sun.

Before entering the computer-laden room, we huddle with the facilitators to rehash our strategy for the coming week. Once inside, Colonel V apologizes for the late kickoff and briefly explains the importance of our work over the coming week: formulating a plan to reorganize and streamline our agency. I follow with background remarks and explain the process to the group before the facilitators run through the agenda. At 9:15, we break into small work groups.

Group One begins and completes its presentation at 9:30. Ten minutes later, as the second group finishes presenting, Colonel V receives a call. A plane has hit the Pentagon. There is no doubt now—this is a terrorist attack. We gather our things to return to our offices. Pandemonium erupts as multiple cell phones ring simultaneously. A naval officer enters the room and orders us to evacuate the building.

My phone rings. My brother is calling from New Hampshire, wanting to know what is going on. I tell him I am safe and that we are evacuating the building. He does not know that I am not in my office in the Pentagon. I hang up as my son Eric calls. I tell him the same thing, but also that I am at an offsite meeting a short distance away, and NOT in my office. Within seconds, my youngest son, Matthew, calls. He has heard the news and believes that I am still at the Pentagon. I tell him I am safe, that we are evacuating, and I will call as soon as I can.

Quickly, I write each group member's home phone number on my list of meeting participants. My hands are shaking. Colonel V will take one group to the Pentagon to see if they can help and account for our people. I will take others in my Suburban to see if they can retrieve their vehicles from the Pentagon, or if I need to drive them home or to a Metro station. Five of us pile into my SUV.

As we leave the parking garage, the radio reports that roads around the Pentagon and Crystal City are clogged. Metro stations at the Pentagon and Crystal City are unreachable, so we

make alternate plans. The traffic that had flowed smoothly earlier is crawling now. People aren't panicking; they're in shock. As we inch along, there are no blowing horns, no blaring radios. People clog the sidewalks. Everyone is looking skyward. There is an eerie hush in the air, broken only by the soft swish of my SUV's tires rolling on pavement.

I drop someone off in Ballston. As I start to drive back to Columbia Pike, I spot a woman wandering, seemingly in a daze, appearing lost. Every few steps, she looks up at the sky. I don't realize until much later that the plane that hit the Pentagon flew low and directly over Columbia Pike, shaking buildings as it did so. We were oblivious to it.

The radio announces that the Office of Personnel Management has released all Government personnel, and offices have been ordered to evacuate. I call Cindy on my cell phone. Her headquarters are located near the National Mall. The airwaves are jammed with callers. After several tries, I get through. I tell her that I'm driving people to their homes in Maryland and Virginia.

"Grab your things and get out of the building!"

"My managers haven't released us yet," she replies.

"It doesn't matter!!! The Office of Personnel Management has released all government personnel! Metro is going to get shut down sooner or later! Leave now and take the Metro Orange Line to Virginia as far as you can! I'll meet you at the Vienna Metro Station after I drop everyone off. Get out before all public transport is shut down!"

On our way to Stafford, I stop at my home in Woodbridge for a rest stop. Matt is home early. His face is ashen. It's obvious he's shaken from the morning's events. We hug, and I reassure him that I'll be home after I pick Cindy up in Vienna.

Southbound traffic moves quickly, and I feel as if I am riding just ahead of a tidal wave. After dropping off my last passenger, I turn north onto I-95. Traffic is unusually sparse. Heading west to cut across the county, I encounter heavy traffic. When I turn north toward DC again, traffic is light. Everyone is heading south or west to escape DC.

Late afternoon. Cindy is relieved to see me after I finally arrive in Vienna. We hug and begin the long drive to Fredericksburg to bring home one of her co-workers. We drive along in stunned silence, listening to the radio.

Finally reaching home, I am exhausted. I turn on the television. Until now, we have only heard the news on the radio. Now we have pictures to go with the words. The scenes are horrifically unimaginable. One, then two, passenger planes fly into the Twin Towers. Fires burn, the skies are laden with smoke, and people fall or jump to their deaths. Then, as the Towers crumble, huge plumes of dust and debris rain down. People run for their lives. It's hard to hold back tears.

This cannot be happening.

As I watch scenes from the Pentagon on TV, I recognize the helicopter pad. It is just outside the wing adjacent to our offices. Ground Zero. The wing is destroyed. Our Finance and IT staff had moved into the recently renovated wing. Rebuilt with rebar-reinforced concrete, it was fitted with bulletproof glass. I had toured it a week earlier and visited our IT and Finance offices. Colleagues had begun to move into their new offices. I marveled at the marble floors, the escalators that had replaced the dimly lit stairwells, and a new snack bar and coffee shop. I looked forward to taking advantage of the new perks.

I begin calling my staff, but none are home yet. One would wander around Arlington for four hours before securing a ride to her home in West Virginia. The calls continue—friends and family checking to make sure we are safe.

Through the days that follow, I sleep fitfully and wake early. I know others are experiencing the same. Thinking of my colleagues at the Pentagon and watching the scenes at the Towers, I recall scenes from Vietnam—the wounded, the dead, the body bags. I remember what it was like to handle the dead. The charred, swollen bodies. The smell of burning aviation fuel, accompanied by the sweet, heavy stench of death.

I imagine the moment of death. For those sitting at their desks, I pray the end came swiftly and painlessly as the screaming jet thrust itself violently into the building, spewing burning fuel, body parts, and hot metal in all directions. I imagine the panic that engulfed the survivors. I feel the relief of those who survived, mingled with anger, sorrow, and guilt.

Eleven days later, the smell of smoke still hangs heavy in the air as I emerge from the Pentagon City Metro station. I walk to join the long line of workers waiting to enter the Pentagon. Only badged workers are permitted near the building. Heavily armed soldiers are everywhere. Access into the building is now down from one hour to just a few minutes. Once inside, past the guards and scanning machines, I notice that the Post Office drop boxes have been removed. *Potential bomb receptacles.*

Throughout the day, as I move around the Pentagon, I notice an increased FBI presence. The center courtyard, once a temporary morgue, has reopened but only partially. The rest is fenced off. Two weeks after the tragedy, body parts are still being discovered and recovered. I am thankful that the plane stopped at the edge of the courtyard and did not continue to the

directly opposite wing. I quickly squash any thought of how much greater the tragedy would have been.

I cannot reach the ATM I usually use because it is near the impact zone and has been destroyed. The smell of smoke still hangs in the air as I visit friends and colleagues in their offices. I encounter the survivors from our finance office—they seem detached, sticking to themselves or gathering in small clusters.

I understand. Over thirty of their colleagues were killed. Several remain hospitalized with severe injuries or burns. A few share their harrowing stories of trying to escape the building through the fire and dense smoke. I know without a doubt that I am among the fortunate ones.

The Pentagon will never be the same. New York has changed forever. We will never be the same. The world we knew changed beyond whatever we could have imagined. Who could have foreseen thousands of lives lost in such a short time through the acts of a few fanatics? Those of us who live will mourn and celebrate the lives of those who died on September 11, 2001, and its aftermath. We, the fortunate ones, find comfort through love and with loved ones.

* * *

Several years later, after retiring from Government service, I am a consultant to the Federal Transit Administration. I work on an auditing team overseeing the contracts to rebuild the Port Authority Transportation hub at New York's Ground Zero. Over the next eight years, I have the privilege of visiting the site regularly, watching the Towers rise like a Phoenix from the ashes.

The End

Life Experience

New Beginnings

758 words

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The sunlight poured into the room. So bright that the men in black suits seemed that much larger. My brother and I are facing a firing squad of men with briefcases and papers, oh so much paper. The conference room of the Little Flower Orphanage is large, yet at this moment, it seems so small and smothering. The smell of Old Spice cologne mingled with burnt coffee and cigarette smoke makes me feel sick.

It's hard to concentrate. I want to be outside in the sunshine. My mind immediately goes to the many visiting Sundays happily spent with my siblings and parents. It was only once a month, but each time felt like time itself stopped. Gathering at the picnic area, we took a head count to see who might be missing, then quickly raced off to play. The youngest boys found fun rolling down the hill in garbage cans, littering all the way to the imaginary finish line. The older ones wandered over to the pond, watching for tadpoles as they waded into the water. My twin Kate and I lingered in the playground, lazily being pushed on the swings by our dad as we leaned back and laughed. Meanwhile, the older girls traipse through the tall trees that lie beyond the playground, trying not to get lost as they sneak a smoke. Five girls and five boys, better known as a handful of trouble.

I realize that the men are talking, but I can't hear them as my thoughts are just too loud. I look at Michael with his face grim, and he gives a slight shake of his head. He had said I was an idiot; I guess he's right.

Picking at my cuticles, Michael reaches out and holds my hand. Giving strength, though he has none to spare. I give a fake smile as an unspoken thank you.

We're not going home. We're not going home. We're not going home.

The nun is beaming. Our social worker gives a smile, with gritted teeth beneath.

“They signed away their parental rights,” the fat man says. The tall one with pimples walks toward us, as he trips over his own feet. He leaves papers on the table in front of us both. As if we can read them?

The fat one goes on, “you have rights as 13 and 15-year-olds.” All I can think of is the picture of a home Dad said he was building for us. The bedroom he promised me, with a poster bed with a canopy—the rosebud bedspread. The backyard would have a swing set, a treehouse, and dirt paths to ride our bikes. Each of us would have our own room. I take a deep, steady breath, trying desperately to calm my nerves.

I don’t understand. I don’t understand. I don’t understand.

“Sign the papers,” the man says as he stands over us, smiling.

Smiling? Why is he smiling?

“Of course, read them first and let us know if you have questions,” he says.

Read and sign? I can’t see through the curtain of tears that covers my eyes.

Questions? What the hell!

I expected this of Mom; she never really cared. But Dad’s talk of the house in New Jersey, and then meeting his new bride, Gloria, gave us reason to hope.

I’m an idiot. I’m an idiot. I’m an idiot.

I had entered the room bouncing on my toes, full of expectation. I looked for my Mom or Dad, thinking we were going home. But, instead, I saw the bright, happy sunlight of memories of visiting Sundays past, playing out in my mind just beyond the window, in contrast with dark, black suits and briefcases telling us, “it’s over.”

Well, they actually said it was a new beginning.

But no, it was over. The dream is over. Our hopes are dead. Never again another “visiting Sunday”. The something to look forward to, gone.

Does every ending start a new beginning?

Leaving the room, our foster parents shout, “Surprise, we’re adopting you both”. A hug. A kiss. A pat on the head. Congratulations from our social worker. A “praise Jesus” from the nun.

A plastered smile on Michael and me. We return hugs with no energy. A faint pat given on their backs. A quiet whisper, “Jesus,” answered back with Michael’s “Oh, Hell.”

After ten years of foster care, it’s not exactly a new beginning. I suppose it’s not even over. A shift, maybe.

Yes, the dream ends. Yet, pretending to be happy lives on.

Only the audience changes.

ON THE WAY TO FOREVER

Dave Rogers

Life Experience

It had been a lovely day, sunny, dry, and a balmy 80 degrees Fahrenheit, and I even had the moon roof of my minivan open to enjoy the gentle outdoor air. I was on my way home from work on a Friday night. I travel along several major arteries slicing through mostly wooded areas connecting two distant cities. My job as a Construction Projects Manager requires a serious mind, with a good memory. Unfortunately, and distractingly so, it also involves the constant flux of unending complex issues and sometimes emotional clashes.

All-of-a-sudden I was alerted to not seeing familiar places, and realized I did not know where I was. It is a very scary feeling to momentarily not know anything, who you are or where you are going. Slowly I began to communicate with myself while looking for signs. The big picture told me I was going home from work, and it was starting to get dark out. The biggest question was, did I make the turn at the highway interchange, and how far back? I had absolutely no memory of it. If I was going in the wrong direction I was getting further from home every minute. I had to stop, and decide what to do. The traffic, now ablaze with headlights, was risky but I found a dirt road and drove up and down a wooded rise to a widened area overlooking a stream. It seemed peaceful and quiet; a fisherman's delight I thought.

Because the glare of headlights bothers my eyes, and, that I had bought a cheese burger and milk shake earlier from the luncheonette in our building, I decided to use my fold down seats to stay the night. I kept a knife, flashlight and wool throw in the van and felt safe even from a bear. Basically, I was in bed early and began to review my day. After a while my thoughts were shifting to issues of forgetfulness.

Everyone with the gift of gab, it seems, has a theory about what is causing Alzheimer's and Dementia, and how to cure it. All the money-making solutions on the internet are cut from the same doubtful formula. But how I ask, can we deny the validity of doctors and highly successful people who swear it is so? I still think reality (truth) would not escape the best of our investigating journalists... given a little incentive. Which leaves us, the public, wondering what the hell is causing it. Too much sugar seems to be the biggest scapegoat but everything, including the kitchen sink is a close second. Every proposed solution is intellectually indemnified by an anointed professional who tells us not to eat what his competitor is telling us to eat. Can it all be just a huge conspiracy of lies for the benefit of the greedy? Where are all the dedicated doctors and trusted media sources, to counter this mess in real time?

I try to eat the Mediterranean diet which has been around for eons of time, and it is as good a bet as any! Truthfully, I have a sweet tooth and a penchant for fruit... sort of avoiding vegetables even though I like them. It feels a little like playing roulette, when your neighbor says his doctor told him his blood test was good and six months later, they find he has stage four pancreatic cancer. Sometimes you just cannot help being a

little paranoid. For a hundred years we have been funding cancer (and others) research, which have become monolithic institutions financially sheltering thousands of people. We need solutions now, and not at the expense of a pandemic to light a fire.

Yes, I notice little incidents, when I discover that I have left a project uncompleted to take up another task. Or when tired find it difficult to recall certain names... or why did I come into this room... or what was I going to look-up on my computer, etcetera? I knew several people who died of dementia and a few who are mid struggle with it right now. If you do not live with the person, it is not always easy to detect the condition, but as the person continues to decline, they struggle to hide the tell-tail signs. They know better than anyone what is happening to them, yet want to preserve the social façade of normalcy as long as possible. They become withdrawn because it is so agonizingly embarrassing and debilitating with every slipup they perceive. Once they have been definitively diagnosed by a doctor it is easier to accept. Although I think too, that it weakens their resolve to beat the odds - the balance of what to know and not know versus positive and negative attitudes.

My nephew, at age fifty, returned to the USA after twenty years of work in Saudi Arabia. Security at Logan Airport called my sister to let her know that a fellow carrying a lot of money and very confused about who he was and where he was going might be her son. She confirmed the info and that we were waiting for him, and yes, we would pay to have him driven home. That was the beginning of a five-year nightmare for my sister. The joy of having him home was constantly undermined by his cognitive decline. The first few years were bearable, she worked hard, including him in social activities and some travel as a member of her seniors' group. She bought him aids, like wooden blocks, to tell him the day and time of the week so he could function more independently, and took him for walks around the neighborhood. But slowly he became more withdrawn and angrier with himself and the world. He became difficult and demanding often losing control of his bowels or urinating on the rugs thinking he was somewhere else. The toll on my sister was intense - physically and emotionally!

Because he had joined the US Air Force right after graduating from High School and left after ten years of service, my sister had consulted with the Veterans Administration for assistance. They were sympathetic but there were many tests that had to be performed and issues to be resolved. It took a couple of years but the VA had found a slot for him in the men's section of their hospital; a campus like Institution, west of Boston, MA.

The day came when she alone would bring him to the facility and was expected (as planned) to leave him there. A harrowing emotional experience ensued. He instinctively knew something was not right and fought through tears and terrifying fear of not being able to leave with his mother... something she guiltily never forgot. It took a week of medication and adjustment for him to become part of the patient community. My sister

went to visit him often and said he was getting worse. A few months later my sister and I went together to visit him at noon lunch-time. I was shaken to my core when we walked into a well-lighted very large day room filled with large round tables, which were surrounded by men in wheel chairs facing each other. With-the-exception of a few grunts, and an outburst here and there, they all looked hauntingly comatose and heavily controlled with medications. My sister put on her happy face and greeted him exuberantly as though everything was perfectly normal. He seemed to have a vacant recollection of her but did not remember me. After getting a couple of chairs to sit beside him, the non-solid slurry food was served. Unable to eat on his own, she spoon-fed him. A few of the other patients also had a relative to help but most had no-one except the staff. The nurse staff was wonderful, cheery, and respectful, even to dignify changing his diaper and cleaning his feces.

The enormity of the reality of his/their demise, with total loss of control, was very sobering to me, and I decided I did not want to end my life this way. Which I would think would be an average response. But in a declining fog of well-being how is one to get, and know, the best time to self-administer a cyanide pill; especially when you love the song "I WANT TO LIVE FOREVER"! My sister became my hero. She had a difficult life and quietly endured unbearable sorrows. With a broken heart she would smile and hold her oldest son to the very end. My nephew passed at sixty after five years at the VA. My sister is three years older than me and passed from covid at the age of eighty seven.

Why I Am Not a Concert Violinist

Life Experience

Barbara D. Parente

Why I Am Not a Concert Violinist

Sometimes, talent discovered early, combined with interest, leads to artistic triumph; other times it is perseverance that is credited with leading to the bronze, silver, or gold. Then, of course, there is luck that people factor into a run, a jump, a pass or a catch. But what about the dreams that are not pursued? Why did you choose to become a skier is asked of the winner of the slalom. What made you decide to play football, goes the sportscaster's query to the newly drafted NFL player. They don't ask him why he doesn't play the tuba or the skier why she isn't an accountant. That could be valuable information. Sometimes it just happens. Here is my story.

Sweet and sad sounds filled the space as I sat, mesmerized, at my first concert. As the tempo changed, the music evoked joy, and my interest intensified as I observed the nimble fingers and elegant bowing of the auburn-haired woman creating the beautiful and varied melodies on a violin.

"That's what I want to play — the violin," my 9-year-old self told my astonished parents. Mom and Dad had their misgivings since they had heard the violin was one of the most difficult instruments to master. I was not deterred, and Mr. Jenney proved to be a patient and encouraging violin teacher from 4th to 6th grade.

I was shy and self-conscious, so private lessons at school worked well for me. So did closed windows. In our suburban neighborhood of small, cookie-cutter homes on 50x100 foot lots, in the years before air conditioning, warm days meant open windows, and conversations could easily travel the 15 feet between houses.

My bedroom faced the bedroom of neighbor Rusty, a boy a little older than me, a couple of years before crushes, but the perfect age to be embarrassed by mistakes. And poor bowing on

the violin tended to end in a screech and dominate other sounds. I hated to be teased, and pictured having to tolerate violin teasing from Rusty in order to play with his dog, something I didn't want to give up.

So not only did I play an instrument not nearly as cute as the flute or cool as a clarinet, but also one that announced errors with chalkboard-scratching intensity. The only solution was to close the windows of my room, where I practiced with fierce concentration. I still remember sweating as I played, and the air in my tiny room felt thick and still. But I didn't pass out, and I didn't open the window. I'm fairly sure Rusty never found out I played the violin. I'm very sure I continued to play with his dog.

Why I ever said "yes" to playing a violin solo in the 6th grade, I'll never know. It was the annual Christmas and Chanukah Concert, and I was to offer "The First Noel." I was prepared, but probably nervous although I have no personal recollection of my pre-concert mindset. The daytime audience included classmates as well as many Moms, including mine. Other music and skits were presented and politely applauded and then it was my turn. I played my tune not missing a note, then did a little bow, as loud and energetic applause erupted. I left the stage, quite pleased with the level of applause. At the end of the program, I went to see my mother, who was surrounded by people offering congratulations. "Your daughter has such poise," I heard. "She just kept playing and didn't stop when the scenery fell down behind her."

The scenery fell down? I was so frozen with fear I didn't hear a thing when it crashed to the floor a few feet behind me in full view. Must have been all that stubborn closed window practice that steeled me for anything.

The transition from elementary school to junior high brought students from four schools together in one building. With larger numbers came more opportunities. I could leave the solo

behind and now be part of an orchestra. A myriad of clubs beckoned. Of course I joined the school newspaper, and even tried out for a part in a play. While I didn't get a speaking role in the musical, I did qualify for the chorus. This could be a little tricky since I was already a member of the orchestra for the production. But I was young, limber, and not the only one with duplicate roles. After playing a piece on the violin, we — I think there were four of us— would gently but quickly put our instruments down, and sprint to the back of the stage, and walk on with the others in the chorus. Finishing our song, we'd slip out the back and hightail it back to the orchestra. Play the violin. Repeat. My memory says this was exciting, rather than exhausting. No wonder I could wear those size 7 dresses.

Distracted by boys and new activities, and with a new, uninspiring violin teacher, I was practicing less and less between lessons. I was growing up in the 60s. Girls wore skirts and dresses to school. Pantyhose was a year or two away, but we had stockings. Garter belts held them up.

As I was walking to the music room, hauling books along with my violin case, a smart boy I liked offer to carry the violin. By 7th grade, in my school, there was no shame in being smart — or playing the violin. We walked along, happily chatting. In the (luckily) empty music room, he handed me the violin case. As I bent over to put it on a low shelf, my garters snapped open and a stocking fell down around my ankle. We both blushed bright red and didn't know where to look. "Uh, turn around for a minute," I finally said. Protected by a voluminous skirt, and deft fingers possibly from my violin exercises, I swiftly snapped the stocking back in place. The rest is blurry. He may have run from the room. I know he never walked me to the music room again. And I was an enthusiastic pantyhose customer the minute they came on the market.

By high school, boys, dances, school activities and talking on the telephone all ranked higher than playing the violin. Still, I joined the orchestra. It was the serious musicians, however, those who practiced every day, who made up the first violin section. We social butterflies were the second violins. While the firsts studied a difficult passage during the breaks, we seconds tended to chat. I tried to take my music pursuits seriously, but there were many interesting things competing for my attention and rather than choosing a focus, it was more fun to do it all. Our music director did not agree. He became more than critical. He started yelling and picking on individual musicians, or as a group, the second violins. He got a well-deserved reputation as mean. Eventually, four second violins and several other musicians quit the orchestra because of his verbal abuse. I was one of them, and put my violin in its case for the last time in my sophomore year in high school. It is ironic that this music director was married to the violinist whose beautiful music caused me to choose the violin 7 years earlier.

My mother was disappointed with my decision. She enjoyed the music, especially when I did practice and the results were melodic. She looked for ways to get me to open the violin case again, and thought she could shock me into action.

“If you’re never going to play again,” she said, “give me the violin, and I’ll hang it on the wall, and plant ivy in it.” It painted quite a picture. “Go ahead,” I said. She didn’t and I didn’t. The violin remained in the case. It was loaned out a few times and then lay untouched for decades.

Just before we moved to North Carolina two years ago, I opened the case and discovered a large crack in the wood across the back of the violin. An artist friend suggested turning the instrument into an art piece that could be hung on the wall, and showed me some pictures. My mother might be smiling down from heaven at the thought. I left the violin with the friend and

haven't heard a word about it since.

When we go to concerts today, I always watch the strings, and mentally mimic the bowing or the fingering, and truly appreciate the beauty of the sound of the cello, the viola, and the violin, as well as the skill and perseverance it must have taken to become a concert violinist. It was not to be for me, but I think I make an excellent fan for the string section.

My Greatest Run

Personal Essay

Curtis Holbrook

My greatest run.

The year was 1983. I was 24 years old. Days before, I had run a half-marathon in the Chicago area at a blistering pace of 109:30, the fastest I had ever done. At that point I was feeling really good about everything, I was out of college, out of money, and just loving to run. I was in training for the No Frills Chicago Marathon, a low budget marathon. Life was good. I was running strong and just kind of in a good place, even though I had a low-paying job at the newspaper.

Off I went on a normal 8-mile run, cool but bright outside (38 degrees) February day. Those were my favorite conditions. I was heading toward Campbell Rd. and was feeling great. Flying along. I reached the main road, toward downtown and turned right onto Campbell, heading north. I went over a bridge leading to the park of Roses, toward Henderson West heading down the hill. There was a strong headwind coming off Lake Michigan, then up through a housing division and around back to Campbell I went, -- going north to the high school,

I circled the school, ran through my old neighborhood, then ran my old course to Valparaiso street, then south all the way to Evans St., turned and ran back to Campbell turning south and back to downtown Valparaiso all the way to Lafayette St. which was parallel to Lincoln Way, the main city street.

As I got to Lafayette, I noticed people standing and putting up chairs along the route. They were waving and cheering. I ran a little further and it finally began to dawn on me that this was a Valentine's race and the crowd thought I was coming in first. I picked up my pace and started waving back, as I climbed the slow grade to the finish. People called my name and cheered. It was nice and cool, I felt like the winner, being cheered on. I approached the YMCA and a church on the left. I saw police lights flashing and a banner for the finish.. Announcer said, "here comes the first finisher!" At the last seconds, police tried to force me through the finish chute, I told them I wasn't in the race and pulled up, the policeman then looked at the clock and said, "Wow, that would have been a be a world record if you were."

I waited around to see the winner and a few others come in, keeping my legs warm by trotting. It fired me up so much I continued running for a few more miles. I circled down the main drag, back down to Campbell turning west again and went up the biggest hill in town on Marion St. and back to my place., I was running top of my pace and happy. I could have done anything. My run was complete and I felt confident in doing whatever came next.

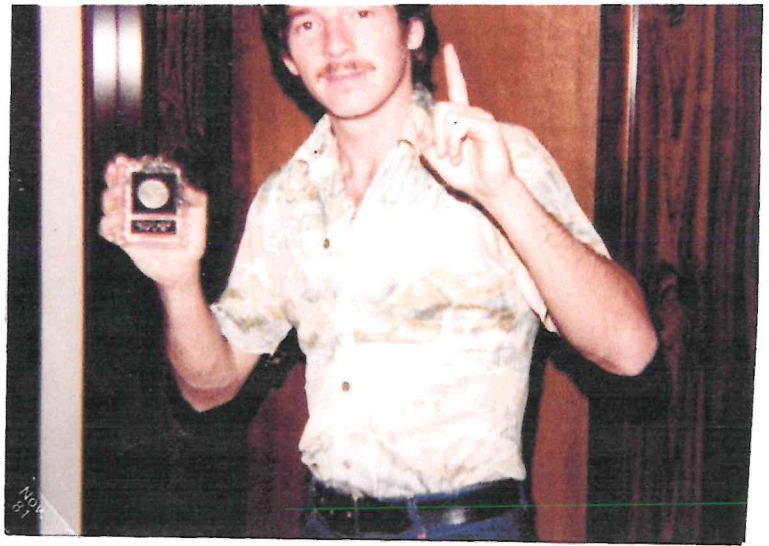
At 67, I still have the desire to run, but as a heart transplant patient, I will take it slow and make it as easy as I can for my new heart. But I will never again have the feeling of that day and the race I didn't win!













DATING AFTER 50: BROWSING THE CLEARANCE RACK WITHOUT LOSING HOPE

Life Experience

BY GLORIA ROSE LAURIA

January 2026

In the new year, I am vowing to lighten up, focus on what is in my control and accept what is not. In the latter category is the dating pool of single mature men. The comedian Joe DeVito aptly expressed the situation with his quote: "Dating after 50 is like trying to find the least damaged thing in a thrift store that doesn't smell."

I have been single again for almost 15 years and have accumulated many *first and last* meetings with an array of characters. My top observation is that most people would benefit from a course on interpersonal communication. Conversation should be like a ping-pong game; we go back and forth on a topic, you share something, then I share something, and we get to know each other. After all, the intent of a first meeting is to determine whether there will be a second meeting. As Lyndon B. Johnson once said, "You aren't learning anything when you're talking." Incorporation of active listening with reflective questions is a huge plus. And of course, while getting acquainted, light topics are best.

To find potential matches, I sift through profiles on dating Apps or websites. In a profile, one would presumably provide recent, best pictures that highlight a person's interests, such as cycling or hiking. Apparently, many love-seekers haven't figured out how to use a timer to take a selfie or have no friends to assist, so they pose for a picture in their bathroom mirror, giving me a glimpse of their most private space. Other profiles feature group pictures, and I think, "Can I pick?" If someone is wearing a baseball cap in all pictures, they are usually bald. And if "eyes are the gateway to the soul," then I will assume someone always posing in sunglasses is trying to hide something. I seek happy people, as I define by smiling faces, but too many photos look like mug shots or like they just woke up with a hangover.

To elaborate on the thrift store analogy, I will highlight a few fellows whose profiles were reasonably engaging, and we met. Let's start with Jack, a banker whose only activity was walking a few blocks in the morning. My higher activity level concerned him as he texted: "It's like you're running and running, trying to get somewhere and don't realize you're on a treadmill, and will never get someplace where you want to be." That was deep, I simply enjoy numerous

activities such as cycling, running, pickleball, and dancing. We met for a walk on the beach, and he mentioned his recovering ankle issue, wore a knee brace, and claimed he would try pickleball once his shoulder stopped hurting. My thought? He has more injuries from being inactive than I do with all my sports!

I also walked on the beach with creepy Cory. At this first meeting, every so often, he'd stop and ask for a hug. Ugh! While we strolled along in the sand, he told me about his investigative prowess and everything he found out about me on the Internet by using my phone number. He learned where I lived, my former employers, and my involvement in the Cape Fear Cycling club. Cory even watched a video on my neighborhood Facebook page of an interview with me talking about activities in the area. After that encounter, I got a non-traceable number from Google Voice that screens callers, and I no longer share my personal number initially. Safety first!

First impressions matter, so I arrive nicely dressed, with clean, combed hair and makeup. Tim, a guitarist who claimed he had 40 hit singles, including Whitney Houston's "I'll Always Love You," had a different approach. He showed up in worn flannel pajama bottoms, wearing flip-flops. I quickly noticed he must have aged considerably since his profile picture was taken. And amongst his brown-stained teeth, there was one missing. Without any prompt and forget about HIPAA, he chose to share, in detail, his health issues, which included medical disability due to sepsis from a stubbed toe and a lung nodule from his days of smoking. I suspect he still smokes.

Speaking of commonalities, my entire career has been in healthcare or the medical industry, and most recently, continuing medical education programs for physicians. Thus, I thought meeting a physician or other healthcare provider would be ideal. Gordon, a gastroenterologist, and I had a record of 6 dates, including tennis, his favorite sport. I was surprised he texted so much during the day, but apparently, there was time while colonoscopy patients were being prepped. He was a player, though, and moved on without any closure. Months later, I saw him at Waterline Brewery's Oktoberfest with a blonde woman who did not look like a tennis player.

Coincidentally, I was there to meet another Gordon, this one a lawyer from New Bern. What were the odds, two Gordons under the same tent!

Another medical professional was Stewart, a retired OB/GYN with a profile boasting of white-water rafting and travels abroad. He was 67, a few years older than me. We had an engaging conversation about cycling, health issues in our country, and his time living in New Zealand. However, Stewart's last wife was 25 years younger, and he now has shared custody of a 6-year-old daughter and a 7-year-old son. Stewart disclosed that his little girl said she wishes her dad were younger. Understood! He's like a grandpa who will not be around for much of her life. Is it ego or insecurity about aging that steers a baby boomer to chase after a millennial?

An interesting aspect of these meetings is learning about various careers, like in the book *Working* by Studs Terkel. I've heard the inside scoop on health care system incentive programs for physicians, the financial rewards of crowns in dentistry, cybersecurity, the Military, and from John, what it was like to work in the Secret Service. John may have done well protecting our President, but couldn't find our way out of Brunswick Nature Preserve during a hike. The sun was setting, and we were completely lost in over 900 acres of wilderness! I took the lead by using the GPS on my cell phone to track us back to my car. However, every time it looked like we were getting closer to the parking lot, another turn took us further away, and my phone battery was dying; John did not bring his. Eventually, we made it back.

Occasionally, someone gets nasty, like Mark, whose profile was so remarkably different from reality that I didn't realize we had already met. From our first get-together, I learned that he works in security for a parking garage in Wilmington, lives with his parents, and his only social life is sports bars—not my type. Once I realized the duplicity, I tried to let him down graciously, and he texted, "Then goodbye once again. And don't bother responding, you dumb broad."

Then there was crazy Bruce, who randomly accused me of trying to use him for tennis lessons. The following text conversation ensued:

Me: I think you meant this message for someone else

Him: Huh!? Read the past thread about pickleball/tennis

Me: You did not offer to teach me tennis, nor did I ask

Him: Do these stupid details really matter? You have an agenda WAY different than meeting potential dates, and terse remarks don't sit well.

Fortunately, I know how to use the blocking feature on my iPhone.

Above all, these initial meetings should be pleasant with light topics that interest both parties. I am not a therapist or licensed medical practitioner, yet Zeke detailed his mother's health problems for almost an hour. Greg consumed our time telling me about his GERD and chronic cough, and then there are those who rehash their divorce. Divorces are generally not a positive life experience and belong in the rearview mirror. However, on the 45-minute drive back from the Ft Fisher Aquarium, David chose to describe his divorce and his ex-wife's borderline personality disorder. What does one say after all that? Thank you, that was so interesting, I'd love to hear more next time.

Supposedly, there is a "lid for every pot" and "it only takes one." And maybe there is someone on this planet for me, but until then, I'm avoiding the clearance rack and holding out hope for something that doesn't smell like regret.

Goose Huntin'

A Son's Recollection

(Personal Experience)

Charles Bins

Goose Huntin’

(A Son’s Recollection)

In Washington County, North Carolina during the fall huntin’ season, hundreds of geese overnight on Lake Phelps. At sunrise, they sound off and climb a half-mile high, forming V’s and heading for the cut corn. My younger brother and I, shivering with our shotguns, watched this majestic sight with our father on many occasions.

I recall the smell of black coffee rising up from your red plastic Thermos as we boys huddled there on that mound surrounded by reeds waiting for the sun to come up, and waiting, waiting for the swell of sound to rise from Lake Phelps beyond the tree line. The cup was worth holding if only to warm our fingers, but the taste was bitter, and the smell, nothing like that velvety aroma from that ‘Good to the Last Drop’ billboard passing Maxwell House many years earlier “up north.”

The gilded blanket above would slowly give way to creases of grey and blue, fitting colors for a Carolina fight. And ready we were with our new Remington’s from East Carolina Supply, barrels oiled and shiny on the inside screaming for a hint of a target, if only a sound. The steel gray sky would brighten at the edge and finally an orange shaft would appear. You told us to stay very quiet and listen, listen. We could see our breath now in the crisp dawn light, but there was no sound save for our breathing.

There was way too much waiting in all this it seemed at the time, but we kept still as you sipped the last of your coffee. We watched you slowly screw the red top back on and then listened closely as you reminded us in a whisper about switching the red safety by the trigger before we would try to fire -- but not to play with it, and to only switch it off when the time would come. We hoped that it would come, and we heard in it the promise that it would, if you said so. Boys always believe their fathers that way, and it may be the most important thing that a father can give a son.

We listened hard as the scene slowly filled with patches of color. A breeze began to tip the tops of the reeds and nipped at our ears. We pulled the red flaps down from inside our tan camouflaged hats as the need for warmth instantly overtook our need for keen hearing. We hoped that we would soon understand why we had left our beds at 4:45 that morning, and at least for a moment we really wondered. But you knew. Fathers always know, and we knew you did.

“Listen...Hear that?” you’d say. We risked our ears and then we did. A few sweet sounds at first, and then a distant squawking, building to a ruckus on the lake we could only imagine. But as that orange ball slowly heaved over the distant tree line, we could see flocks of geese taking flight. Loose lines formed and straightened, and then formed Vs. Other groups would fly in with them and make larger Vs to join this growing procession high in the sky.

We hoped that at least one of these gaggles would soon arrive at our blind so that we might get off a shot as they alighted to the cut corn around us. But the cornfields stretched beyond the road to the other side, and then in every direction like some dirty brown quilt. The geese knew something, too. They soared at least half a mile high off the lake, and more than a mile away on most mornings like this during huntin’ season.

Endnote:

Both my father and younger brother each bagged a goose the two seasons we lived in Plymouth, N.C. in the late '60s. The goose my father bagged became Sunday supper. My brother's defeathered bird, however, lived in our kitchen freezer for six months before we threw it out.

When I related the above memory of goose huntin’ to my Dad on Father’s Day many years later, his recollection was that we bagged the limit both seasons, enough to last us all winter.