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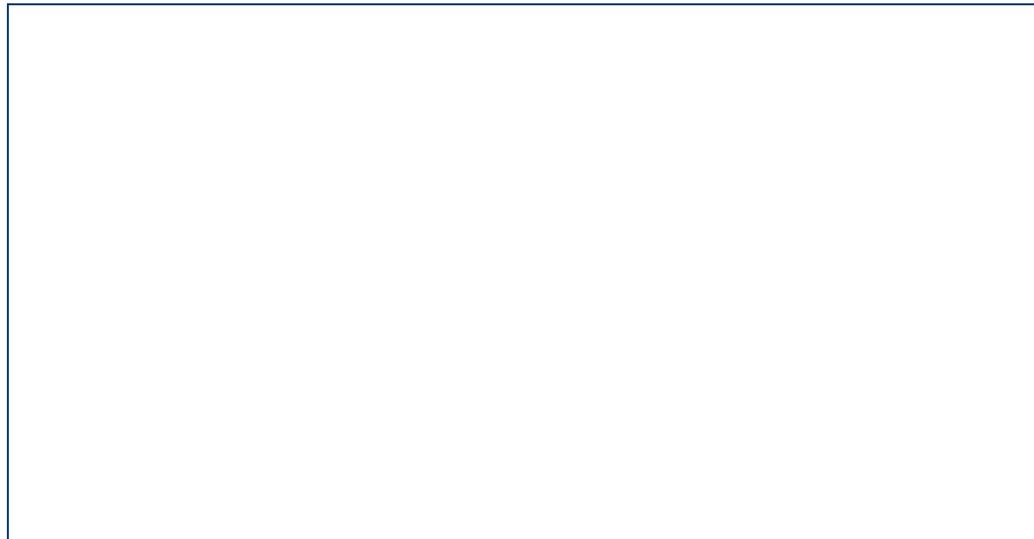
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### "Our Stories"

We have decided to devote a portion of our magazine to non-fiction. These are stories of things that have happened serendipitously, being in the right place at the right time or just heartfelt musings, thoughts, and feelings on life. Join us in our non-fiction section. These stories speak to anyone and everyone and are told by anyone and everyone who has a story to tell.





"Cottages" by Máire Morrissey-Cummins

## We All Remember That Day

by Patrick Byrne

This November 22nd will mark the 50th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Everyone old enough to remember will recollect their memories of that fateful day and where they were and what they were doing. I am no different.

That entire weekend and the days immediately before and after are as vivid and disturbing to me now as they were 50 years ago.

I was a 19-year-old sailor assigned to the public information office at Saufley Field, a U.S. Navy Auxiliary Air Station near Pensacola, Florida. Our primary mission was the flight training of future Navy and Marine pilots. Specifically, this is where they would take their first solo flights.

Lieutenant Chuck Cornett, a pilot who was also the head of the information office, was a “mustang”, the nickname given to those officers who come from the enlisted ranks. His exterior was gruff and tough, but he had a soft spot for enlisted folks.

My job was to get out the weekly base paper, write press releases, handle public relation events, and assist in planning air shows and civilian tours. I was able to work almost entirely on my own and had access to whatever I needed to get the job done. I enjoyed this great freedom derived primarily because most of the officers were first and foremost pilots and flying was their true love, not the administrative tedium of operating a training command.

On Wednesday morning, November 20th, Lt. Cornett entered the office, poured a cup of coffee, lit his morning cigarette, and announced he and another pilot were flying to San Diego and would I like to go. He knew I had been stationed there before coming to Saufley Field. I said, “Hell yes, sir, when are we leaving?”

He laughed and replied, “Be on the flight deck at 9:00 a.m. tomorrow morning.” As I stood on the flight deck early that Thursday morning on November 21st, I could have never imagined what lie ahead in the coming days.

Now there were four of us, a Master Chief Petty Officer, who was hitching a ride home to El Paso, Texas for next week’s Thanksgiving holiday, and Lt. Cornett’s co-pilot, also a mustang officer who was soon to be transferred to San Diego. So now I knew the purpose of this West Coast jaunt was more than just earning flight pay.

The twin-engine Beech droned down the runway and slowly nosed upward. Although she was designed to carry at least six passengers, the Master Chief and I were crammed into two seats with almost no legroom. All other space in the cabin, including the empty seats, was overflowing with our gear. With a cruising speed of only 130 mph, going cross country in this old bird was going to be a long haul and quite uncomfortable. Later in the day Lt. Cornett signaled me to the cockpit to take over the controls. Reluctantly, I complied but after a few nosedives and frightened gasps from the Master Chief, who had been bounced around back in the cabin, my flying career abruptly ended.

Finally, we landed at Kelly Field in Texas (now Kelly Air Force Base) for refueling. We were on break in the flight shack when a call came from the tower to “tell those Navy boys to get out of here or they will be stuck for hours.”

President Kennedy’s motorcade was coming in from nearby San Antonio. The President and his entourage were to board Air Force One for a flight to Houston for a couple of quick appearances before taking off for Dallas.

The pilots grabbed the flight plans and we ran for the plane. Fortunately, we were refueled and cleared for immediate take off. I remember how we were looking down as the Presidential motorcade filed onto the base. As we slowly circled the field before heading to El Paso, I can remember the sense of being in personal touch with the President and my Commander in Chief. President Kennedy was extremely popular throughout the military.

The events of the following days made that brief brush with history an unforgettable memory. That night, plane secured and the Master Chief off to his family, Lt. Cornett, co-pilot (time has erased the memory of his name) and I, headed for an El Paso hotel nearest to Juarez, Mexico. After settling in we went on a shopping trip across the border. Having a huge Mexican meal out of the way, both pilots pulled out lengthy lists consisting of the usual souvenirs and gifts. However, this was overshadowed by purchases of vast quantities of tequila and jalapeno peppers. I was hoping they would not start on that lethal combination in the room that night (we were all in the same room to save money). Fortunately, our drinking was limited to Mexican beer and no peppers.

The conversation seldom strayed from planes and flying. This was the first time it was suggested I apply to flight school. I did not heed this suggestion then or a year later when it was proposed just prior to my discharge.

Next day, Friday, November 22nd, we took off for North Island Naval Air Station in San Diego. It was a totally uneventful flight and I slept most of the way. Immediately upon landing the ground crew flung open the door and blurted, “Have you heard, the President’s been shot and just died minutes ago?”

The three of us were stunned and speechless. Our heads dropped and our replies were unintelligible. We gathered our gear on the brink of tears. We did not speak. Finally, Lt. Cornett said, “Byrne, don’t leave the base until I

confirm the military is not on alert.” I nodded in agreement. Shortly thereafter, I was given clearance to go but told to be back by 10:00 a.m. Sunday morning.

We then went our separate ways. It was a lonely, empty feeling as I left for what was to have been a party weekend with buddies I had served with on an Admiral’s staff a year earlier. I did hook up with a couple of the guys but talk was always about the assassination, Oswald’s capture and speculation about what it all meant. Most of the time we were half drunk and engaged in meaningless blather.

Saturday night bored and depressed, I got a room at the YMCA and finally fell asleep. When I awoke on Sunday morning, the fog and depression of the past few days persisted but at least in a matter of hours, I would be in the air headed back to Saufley.

Arriving at North Island the pilots were waiting and the engines were revving. In minutes we were nosed up when the tower called to tell us Oswald had been shot and killed.

The first leg of the return flight to Pensacola was somber, no one spoke and only the monotonous drone of the aging Beech’s twin engines could be heard. Each of us was alone with our thoughts of what was to come.

Second day out, we developed engine trouble and made an emergency landing at an Air Force base near Houston. Unfortunately, the problem was not a quick fix and we were forced to overnight there. The next day a plane from our base in Pensacola flew over and finally brought us home after a nightmarish week.

The impact of this tragedy changed the mood of everyone. An atmosphere of sadness and seething anger permeated the base. We wanted to punish somebody but we did not know whom.

Our office, once the center for pilots on break from their duties, was now strangely quiet and lonely. I missed all of the joking and kidding when they would hang out drinking coffee and exaggerating their flying exploits, even the Captain occasionally joined in the bull sessions. It was great fun and I now realize how special it was to have been a part of that camaraderie.

As the months rolled by, Vietnam crept more and more into the national consciousness. Before long we began training Vietnamese pilots. Nobody, at

least not at our level, imagined that our guys would soon be engaged in combat missions over a previously unheard of country.

Approximately a year after Kennedy's death, my tour of duty was over and once again I was a civilian. Shortly thereafter the horror show that was Vietnam paraded across our TV sets on the nightly news. Nevertheless, for many of us, the news was all too real as we lost our friends and relatives.

The division of America that still persists today had begun. We were no longer "E Pluribus Unum" but "Us vs. Them" with no end in sight.

Lt. Chuck Cornett in this story retired in 1980 as a Captain after 30 years of service. He is in the Hall of Honor at the Naval Aviation Museum in Jacksonville, Florida. My great regret is not contacting Captain Cornett before his death in 2004. I remember him with great fondness.

Bio- Patrick Byrne is a retired businessman (commercial real estate) currently residing in Tampa, Florida. His writing background after his Navy days as a young man has been limited to business matters or subjects centering on his interest in historical events. He specifically enjoys finding small events and then studying them in great detail. He is currently writing a trilogy about significant events that occurred during his time in the Navy. "Chance Encounter", the first story was published on this site in the recent spring/summer edition. "We All Remember That Day" is the second story. The third story has yet to be written, but deals with racial segregation in the south where Byrne served circa 1964.

## Out Driving Around

by Louise House

I borrowed the car from my parents, telling them I was going to take my friend Mary Lynn to do some errands for her mother. In truth, Mary Lynn wanted to drive around town looking for this guy she had a crush on. It was Saturday, early October. I was 17. I'd already graduated high school, but had no ambition to do anything beyond move away from home—my holy grail at that time.

Anthony, Mary Lynn's crush, lived in the rich part of town, where you almost couldn't see the houses because they were so far back from the road. We'd been driving around these pretty roads for a couple of hours, having

false-alarm Anthony sightings: “Wait! Stop! There he is! Oh, no, not him,” and joking about what we’d do if we actually saw him. I think I threatened to push Mary Lynn out of the car and take off, and she told me she’d hunt me down and kill me if I did that, or, worse, out me to someone I had a crush on. We traded threats for a while, threats that became more ludicrous and sexual, like: “I’d tear off your clothes and leave you in front of Paul H’s door” (Paul H. was hugely fat). “I’d tell Zalinsky you want to give him a blow job” (Zalinsky was cute, but scary).

Our overwrought sex talk was pure bravado, meant to disguise the fact that we were not girls who could have, in any universe, gone up to someone like Anthony (a football player), tossed our perfect hair back from our perfect faces, arched our perfect backs so that our perfect breasts stuck out from our perfect sweaters, and bathed in the hormonal admiration due us as 17-year-olds. We knew we were paddling around the margins of some teen utopia we’d never experience. Tired of the chase, I turned the car homeward, down a narrow road.

Trees crowded the sides of the road, almost reaching across. The leaves were brown by this time of year, but they hadn’t yet fallen. They shivered in the wind with a sound like shhhhhhhh. We had the windows open, and occasionally a branch would catch and a few leaves tear off, landing inside the car.

I was going much too fast.

Mary Lynn was talking about Anthony, the radio was playing—maybe Al Green or Marvin Gaye, since WVON, the soul station, was my favorite—the air was still warm and smelled like dying leaves, the trees were going shhhhhhh—and I was going much too fast.

I didn’t see the two-way stop sign bright as blood in the corner of my eye. I didn’t hear the highway, didn’t see the blue car looming up to my right, fast, with a terrified looking blond woman at the steering wheel, her mouth open in a silent O. I didn’t see, didn’t hear, because of the trees. That’s what I told everyone, even myself, later.

But of course I did. I saw, I heard. And I hit the accelerator. I gunned my parents’ car straight into the blue car’s path.

Here's the rest: we wound up in a field, both cars totaled, the blue car woman babbling at us, "You came out of nowhere! You came out of nowhere!" Mary Lynn reached over and turned off the ignition—I didn't even think of that. No one was hurt, for which I have carried, since then, a load of relief so heavy and dense it almost feels like guilt.

A few weeks later, I left home, got a job in Chicago and moved into a friend's apartment. The accident had nothing to do with that, at least not much. A year later, Mary Lynn called up to tell me I could be putting flowers on her grave. A couple years later, I moved to New York City. I became someone who was "good in a crisis"—someone who doesn't panic, who staunches blood, removes the nail from the foot, grabs the baking soda when the toaster suddenly spits blue flame—someone who turns off the ignition when the car's in the ditch, or the field.

But every so often this creature inside me—someone irrational, whose boundaries are too porous, who can't shut out trees and sky and music, who sees a potential crash, goes "Wheeeee!" and presses the accelerator—pops up. "Remember me?" she says. I'm terrified of her so I tell her, yes, I remember. I tell her calm down, go back to sleep. Usually, she does.

Bio- Louise House writes poetry and fiction. Her poetry has appeared in several online magazines, including *Chantarelle's Notebook*, and is upcoming in *Pirene's Fountain*. This is her first foray into creative non-fiction.

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### Le Marais, a Memory of Paris Off-the-beaten-Path

by Terin Tashi Miller

It was in the asphalt-radiating heat of July. We were visiting our high school friend Jon-Pierre, who'd grown up in Paris. He'd met us that day at the corner of the Boulevards Michel and St. Germain, at Deux Maggots, as we'd joked about doing when in high school together. He'd escorted us via metro to the off-the-beaten path area known as Le Marais, in the 3rd Arrondissement, where immigrants and refugees had for centuries set up hidden flea markets. And it began to rain. Hard.

A salesman with a long gray beard, no mustache, and wearing a skull cap bade us come under his tarpaulin-covered three-sided tent that served as a booth. I thanked him in Urdu.

“I am Afghani,” said the man, introducing himself as if his origins were his name, fingers splayed as he tapped his chest where his heart was underneath his long cotton tunic.

After offering stools for us to sit on under the taut blue tarpaulin, he ordered an assistant to bring us tea.

As my wife and Jon-Pierre sipped the tea quietly, the man and I sipped two cups and spoke in Urdu, the main language of Pakistan, of the wars in his country.

We spoke of how beautiful Kabul was before the coup that preceded the Soviet invasion, and of my witnessing it before and at the tail end of that war, and my witnessing war in India before, and of my love for the harsh, New Mexico-like area of Bahmian, where I saw the standing Buddhas carved into cliffs, and where since I’d heard from friends the various warring groups had set up artillery to command the valley below and that the Taliban were threatening to destroy.

The driving rain stopped as we were on our second cups of sweet, milky chai, sipping it out of porcelain cups with saucers while sitting on stools inside an open-sided tent made of blue plastic tarps and held up by aluminum poles. He treated us, and we felt, as if we had just visited a close Afghan friend in his home.

“Well,” our host said in English, having finished his chai and standing to check on the sun, which had appeared after the rain stopped, the wet ground and smell and tarps the only evidence of the sudden rain, “thank you all so much for stopping by. I hope you’ll come back to see me next time you’re in Paris.”

We never did buy anything from him, and despite our offering, he wouldn’t let us pay him for the tea.

“May God, who is merciful and just, guide you and protect you on your journeys, my friends,” was all he said in Urdu as we left.

My wife shook her head as we made our way through the rest of the flea market. Jon-Pierre and she were looking knowingly at each other and trying to stifle laughter.

“What?” I asked.

“Leave it to you,” Jon-Pierre said, “to find someone who speaks *your* language in the middle of nowhere.”

Bio- Terin Tashi Miller spent many of his formative years in India, the child of anthropologist parents. Since then, he has lived and worked in a variety of countries in Europe and Asia.

His writing has appeared in guide books, international magazines including *Time* and *Geografica Revista*, and newspapers including *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Dallas Morning News* and *The Los Angeles Times*. He began his writing career as a part-time reporter for *Time* magazine, then worked for The Associated Press in India and North Dakota and AP-Dow Jones News Services in Spain and New York, and as a reporter for *The Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, *Amarillo Daily News* and the *Hilton Head Island Packet*.

Miller is also the author of *Kashi*, *Down the Low Road* and *Sympathy for the Devil*.

<http://www.terinmiller.com/>

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## The Hope Chest

by Denise Bouchard

My English Lit professor in college announced, "There was only one person in this class who understood Stella's attraction to Stanley for the essay on *A Streetcar Named Desire*." Annoyed with the class, he smiled as he threw the "A" down on my desk. In a time of women's lib, the looks and whispers from my female peers made my cheeks flush. I had betrayed them in a sense by understanding Stella's response to Stanley's call, by actively pursuing the kind of passion, obsession and destruction that was taboo, the kind some of them might have secretly wished they had. While I never would've tolerated an abusive relationship in my own life, I did understand the magnetic pull of her physical attraction to someone who was wrong for her and what's more, even as the prototypical 'good girl', I didn't care that I understood it.

Late in the night after yet another argument with 'him', I was back home, safely ensconced in my childhood bedroom and I woke to the sound of rain pelting the top of the hope chest he'd bought for me. As I got up to shut my bedroom window and saw that the rain had pooled, I ran my hand over the top of the wood grain and felt a new roughness, and I knew instinctively that the relationship was changing and would soon be over.

Soon, I would take out the afghan his grandmother had hand knit for us in shades of orange and brown and gave it to my mother. She had no reason to fear the dark brooding shades of brown or the manic edges of orange in her life. The afghan would grace the top of the couch in the rustic family room facing the beautiful fieldstone fireplace.

I still remember the night he and I went shopping for the hope chest. I was uncertain even then of many things. Did I want the French Provincial I'd grown up with or the more traditional Colonial style? Would I one day be drawn to modern glass and chrome or the clean simple lines of the Quaker style with the artisan heart painted on it? Was I ready to settle down at eighteen or nineteen? Was it actually love or just two potent chemicals that could only combust?

After the breakup, my mother helped me to unpack uncertainty and fold in things that would last. We packed in sturdy, brightly colored pottery and Egyptian cotton. She gratefully took the thin sheets with Chinese birds in flight. She added some things slowly, sifting in elegant place settings for formal dining. As my mother and I added these ingredients, it was as if we were casting a spell, making a wish for the right one to come along. We'd sit and talk about life and love and what was important. There was the story she often told of her own hope chest, a memory that lingered, even though it saddened her. When she was engaged to my father during World War II, while he was stationed in Normandy, he sent his parents money one Christmas telling them to purchase a hope chest for my mother, his fiancée. He wasn't able to keep it a secret and because she was so sure that this tall, handsome, outgoing, ambitious and strong man was for her, she could hardly contain her excitement.

When she arrived at her future in-laws' house that Christmas day, she was presented with a tiny box. Her fingers trembled as she undid the ribbon and tore off the paper - perhaps inside the box was the key to the lock on the hope chest. To her shock and dismay, inside the box were rosary beads. She

had to sit and compose herself. Confused, she finally said, "Your son wrote to me that he was buying me a hope chest."

Her mother-in-law indignantly told her, "Well, I needed a new coat. Do you know how long it's been since I had a new one? Your family never has to think of things like that, you're the mayor's daughter, you have everything!" Her mother-in-law was wrong. Being the second youngest of twelve children, my mother often had hand-me-downs and didn't understand such things. My mother and her in-laws would eventually bond, but the hope chest was a story best forgotten.

When my husband and I first married, I had an idea. I hand-carried the belongings once wrapped inside my hope chest to our new apartment. I tied the sheets in gross-grain ribbons and folded and organized everything on the shelves of my lavender-scented linen closet. As I stepped back to admire my new-found domesticity, I realized that I still had something very important left to do. I went to my parents' house and explained to my mother that my hope chest would not fit into my new surroundings and I presented the woman who ended up having almost everything she'd ever wished for in life, the one thing she had never received.

The hope chest went into her bedroom and held untold treasures which delighted her grandchildren. There, she'd sit late in life with the little girl that I'd wished for. The telephone sat on top and there my daughter would receive calls from her doting and handsome daddy whenever my mother babysat for us.

When I chose this piece of furniture, I was unversed in the art of choosing well. I never imagined in my wildest dreams the hope chest being used in this way and going on its own journey but oftentimes, life has an interesting way of working out.

See Bio for Denise Bouchard on our About Us page

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The Banjo's Back in Town

by Anita Solick Oswald

The only mementos I have of the Variety Shows are some out-of-focus black and white snapshots taken with a Brownie Camera, a crumbled program printed on mimeograph paper that we found in my mother's attic after she died, and a home movie of a school chorus with no sound that was posted on the alumni Facebook page. Those shabby souvenirs remind me of a time when I was a kid and the annual St. Mel-Holy Ghost School Variety Show was a rite of passage every spring.

The musical extravaganza was THE event of the year. For months in advance after-school activities were focused on the fundraiser, and keeping little 'thugs' off the street. Father Shaughnessy, the priest who headed all the youth programs at our parish, was the self-appointed director and promoter. He gave the show a big build-up and everyone in the school wanted to be involved. Best of all, every child was guaranteed a spot in the show if they wanted it—but the big deal was to land a solo act.

The proceeds from the week-long performances were always donated to charity. I remember a kid who lost his leg jumping freight trains on the railroad tracks that bisected our neighborhood being the stimulus for one of the first shows. There was a worthy cause every year, and we inner city kids were encouraged to volunteer and raise money for the less fortunate. We did not realize we were the 'slum kids'. The event was so successful that it became a much anticipated annual program for the whole community. For months before the June performances, Father Shaughnessy would hold auditions and rehearsals in the grammar school basement. The show was held for five nights after school let out for the summer and ticket sales benefited some new charity or unfortunate case. Local merchants signed on to promote the show with signs in their windows. They donated prizes to give to the kids who sold the most tickets—\$1 a pop—and Donna Tristano always won the top prize which was a bike or some other coveted item.

Early in the school year, Barb and I set our sights on a solo number. We'd never been in the Variety Show before and figured, "Why not start at the top?" We had a plan and thought we had a great number—"Honey Bun". We had taken dance lessons at Mayblossom McDonald's after all and the fact that my voice was like Alfalfa's was no impediment since I would lip sync the song. I was a seasoned performer—I'd been dancing and singing on top of the cedar chest for a select audience since I was two years old. Barb and I both loved movies and we had become obsessed with *South Pacific* when it was released in 1958. We saw the film, featuring Mitzi Gaynor, Rossano Brazzi, and Ray Walston in glorious Technicolor at our favorite

Marbro Theater and were enchanted. We saved our pop bottle return money and bought a used copy of the movie soundtrack from Garrett's Music City down the block on Madison Street. We learned all the words to the musical numbers and practiced every day after school, playing the album over and over again on the record player that Uncle Billy left us after he moved out of our apartment. Barb and I decided I would dress up in my Dad's old Navy uniform, he was not a tall man, but I would still be swimming in it. I would play the Nellie Forbush part and Barb, who was tiny, would wear a hula skirt and play the Luther Billis role. We were sure we would be the hit of the show. Who could fail to see the humor of a ten-year-old and her much shorter eight-year-old sister singing a Broadway showtune?

Barb and I must have played that album thousands of times, singing along, "A hundred and one pounds of fun..." over and over and over again, mugging and prancing before our imaginary audience. Finally, after the Christmas holidays, the auditions were announced by Sister Veronica Ann over the school public address system. Barb and I got to the auditions early so we could grab a seat in the front row. The folding chairs were set up on the assembly hall linoleum floor. Hundreds of kids from the entire neighborhood packed the grammar school basement. St. Mel's students in their uniforms and Tilton School kids in after-school play clothes all came to try out because this was an egalitarian affair and every kid in the neighborhood was welcome. The smells of Double Bubble bubble gum, peanut butter, graham crackers, butch wax and overripe bananas filled the warm basement with a heady juvenile perfume.

Father Shaughnessy raised a hand and everyone was silent. "OK—let me hear from Mary McCarty," and Mary belted out, "If You're Irish Come into the Parlor" sure to be a hit with many in the neighborhood. "You're in," Father Shaughnessy pronounced the words of success.

Barb sat still but I squirmed and fidgeted and bit my nails while the parade of Irish dancers, roller skaters, baton twirlers, child tenors, musicians, and acrobats rolled by. The auditions seemed to go on forever. Finally, as Barb began to nod off, we heard, "Solick Sisters—you're up." We ran to the front of the hall and nodded to Sister Charlotte Marie who cued up our album to the right track. We nailed it like old vaudevillians. We tapped our best feet forward, in my case already a size 8. As I glided across the floor, I tried to gauge the audience response. They seemed to love it.

When the song ended, Father Shaughnessy declared, "Congratulations, Solicks—you're in." We ran home to tell our Mom the great news. She told us that she knew we would make the cut. Everyone would make the cut, we sniffed, we were after something bigger.

For months after the auditions, we would rehearse our acts in that school basement, practicing for the big day—"Another opening, another show" was the first number of the Variety Show, and everyone who wanted to perform could sing in the chorus. We practiced at home, in the backyard, in the schoolyard, in front of anyone who would watch us. Barb, who was the dancer and artist in the family, drilled me on my steps and my Mom coached me on my dramatic gestures. We would strut our stuff for any audience, adults, classmates, Aidan Lennon and his dog—anyone. And every day, we ran to the grammar school basement to rehearse our number for Father Shaughnessy. We were sure we were just getting better and better.

So we were stunned one day after we had performed our number, and Father Shaughnessy invited Sheila Kissane and Linda Hunt up to the front of the hall. We had seen them watching us perform and huddling with Father Shaughnessy, but had not given it any thought; he said we were in the show. And, I was flabbergasted as they cued up my record album that I had saved to purchase, and the two girl athletes performed our number. The outrage dawned on me—they were trying to steal our act and did not even have the decency to go buy their own used album. Barbara was almost in tears by the end of the song and I was furious but confident. Anyone could see these lumbering jocks had nothing on the Solick Sisters. Their performance was wooden and clumsy and I thought they looked like they were playing basketball. My friends, my sister and I agreed that they'd have to bring out the bomb sniffing dogs if these two appeared on stage. But Father Shaughnessy, who also was an athlete, thought otherwise. Sheila and Linda were two of his "pets" and he announced there would be an elimination and he would be the judge of who would perform the number.

I was almost shaking and ran all the way home from school down Madison Street and up three flights of stairs, pulling Barb along with me, to tell my mother about fickle Father Shaughnessy. Choking back tears of rage, I told my mother about the injustice, but she seemed nonplussed.

“You know he favors those athletes. Those girls’ legs look like tree trunks.” Her critique was small comfort to us. If there was one thing our parents had taught us it was that life was not fair. We had a pretty good idea what the outcome would be. And even though Father Shaughnessy dragged out the agony of the elimination round with two teams rehearsing for weeks, in the end, he announced what we knew was coming—Kissane and Hunt would perform the number. All our work and creativity was down the drain.

“Well, you’ll just have to come up with a better act. I wasn’t that crazy about that song anyway.”

Mom was a pragmatist. She taught us to “pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start all over again.” It was back to the drawing board. I racked my ten-year-old brain. What could I do now with so little time left? It seemed like a plot from an old Gene Kelly movie. Then I came up with an idea and Barb chimed in.

“What about a Roaring Twenties song?”

Barb added, “You could do the Charleston and all your friends could be part of the act.”

The little ballerina and acrobat, Barb would work out the dance numbers. We could practice the chorus line in the cement backyard now that the weather was nice. But we had to find the song. We took off running down Madison Street past the fortune teller’s parlor to Garrett’s and began shuffling furiously through the stacks of used record albums. One dusty album caught my eye, *Little Miss Hitmaker*, Teresa Brewer, and the song, “The Banjo’s Back in Town.” I remembered the tune had been a hit on the radio a few years before. It had a chorus and a 1920s theme. I thought it was perfect. We went into the sound booth to listen to the track. With our headphones on, Barb and I nodded to each other. This was the one. I plunked my quarter down on the counter. Barb and I ran home with our prize. Mom even relinquished the telephone and we called the girl chorus members to come and practice at our house the next day.

My grade school chums did not have solo numbers in the Variety Show and they were excited to be a part of the new act. They also wanted revenge because they, too, thought the judging was unfair and that Barb and I should not have been edged out of the show. We all vowed this would be the best act ever and we would show everyone. I would be the front person,

mimicking Teresa Brewer. Barb would teach all the girls the Charleston and drilled them on the dance. Mom, still dreaming of a career with the Rockettes, provided suggestions and an artistic critique of our act. We practiced all week and then we were ready for tryouts.

We didn't bother to change, but headed to the assembly hall still dressed in our school uniforms, blue serge jumpers that we wore sometimes for weeks on end without washing. The uniforms were indestructible. Made of some compound like the material in *The Man in the White Suit*, no amount of puddles, playgrounds, dirt lots, football games, jump rope, or fights could damage this fabric. No matter how hard we tried to tear or rip the uniforms, they survived to be passed on to the next child in line; the wear tracks from alterations were the only clue that these grade school fatigues had been worn before. I knew we would have to really sell this song to be transformed from parochial school inmates in hand me down uniforms to jazz age cuties. We waited through the rehearsals for the right moment to approach the now hated Father Shaughnessy. When the rehearsals seemed to lag, I marched to the front of the hall with the album in hand and confronted him—"We have a new act to try out."

He seemed to hesitate as he was taken off guard by me, the pint-sized impresario, and I gestured to our troupe to get up here quickly. I handed the album to Sister Charlotte Marie and pointed out the track I wanted to play.

And as the ragtime number pealed out in the basement of St. Mel's School, I mugged and hammed it up and danced my heart out. I had to do this, not just for me, but for my sister and all the girls who were backing me up. I kicked my heels and whirled and twirled imaginary beads. Before I knew it, the song was over and the hall erupted in applause.

We looked over at Father Shaughnessy, the Ziegfeld of St. Mel-Holy Ghost Church was grinning. "You're in!"

We did it, we pulled it off. We'd landed a spot in the Variety Show! All our friends gathered around to congratulate us.

The next few weeks were a blur of rehearsing and planning and designing our costumes. My mother, who had a great flair for the dramatic, was self-appointed wardrobe mistress and makeup artist. She enlisted her Italian American Aunt Camille, a great seamstress, to make our flapper costumes.

Aunt Camille, always good for costumes on short notice, came up with a fabulous design. I requested a green satin chemise with rows of black fringe and Barb asked for her signature color, blue. We wore sequined headbands with feathers. We were amazed that other people stepped up and offered to help with props. The nuns at the school made banjos for the chorus line to strum complete with glitter and neon paint. Since all the girls could not afford to have costumes made, my mother rummaged for jewelry, feather boas and scarves. She would make sure that every girl felt like a star that opening night.

During the weeks prior to the first performance, I sensed that all was not well with the "Honey Bun" crew. Their performance never got any better. And the girls became openly hostile to me at school, kicking me from the pew behind when we went to Mass every day. I didn't get it. They got what they wanted, so I couldn't figure out why they were mad. As the oldest child in the family, I did not have a concept of what jealousy was. I always had what I wanted or I would try to get it myself or I knew my parents couldn't afford it, so forget it. I saw myself as a protector of the younger and weaker kids and was always ready to take on the local bullies. But I could not understand what these girls were upset about. I was too busy with the rehearsals anyway and decided to ignore them as long as they did not bug my little sister. Eventually, Father Shaughnessy decided to ramp up the humor and replaced Linda with one of the football players dressed in drag and wearing a mop head for a wig. I still didn't think it was funny.

Finally, the big night arrived. The shows were staged in the St. Mel Boy's High School gym and auditorium, with a real stage and lights. The house was packed. My grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins were all seated in the audience. My mother was backstage in the locker room putting the finishing touches on all the girls' makeup. We heard the applause and the opening chorus belting out, "There's No Business like Show Business." I started to get nervous and sweaty and bit my nails some more. *What if this was a bomb? What if we were duds? What if we stank? What if, what if?* I took a deep breath, I knew I could not let my sister or the gang down and I could not lose my nerve. They were all depending on me to pull it off.

Then I heard Father Shaughnessy command, "Solick, you're up next."

We waited in the wings for our cue watching the Irish Tenor boy sing, "Come back to Erin, Mavourneen, Mavourneen..." Then everything went dark. The glittered and fluorescent painted banjos glowed iridescent in the

black lights. Father Shaughnessy had arranged for the special effects. I caught my breath and when the music played, Charlestonned out on the stage, twirling the long string of beads around my neck.

I don't know if the audience was unprepared for a troupe of eight and ten-year-old girls dressed up in false eyelashes and flapper dresses, but a roar came from the audience. When the lights came back up they were so bright, I could not see well, but I thought I spied my Dad, Gram and Gramps, Aunt Camille and her family beaming and clapping their hands. It seemed like the two minutes and thirty seconds went by so fast as I danced with my girls in front of a packed house. The song ended. The seconds before the audience reacted seemed like a century.

And then, the audience was on their feet cheering and applauding for more. They demanded an encore and we performed the song again. No crowd had ever asked for an encore. We were the hit of the show. The banjo was back in town.

The next four nights were just as successful. The audiences yelled for more and we gave it to them. Barb and I, and later my youngest sister Donna, became the Solick Sisters and headliners of the Variety Show every year as long as we attended St. Mel-Holy Ghost School.

But that night, my parents took the troupe to Elite's to celebrate our triumph and treated all the girls to hot fudge sundaes, chocolate malts and French fries. We rested on our laurels and looked forward to a summer of swimming pools, sleeping late, and playing all day with our friends. There would be no homework, no mean girls, no contests, and school could wait until the fall.

Bio- Anita Solick Oswald is a Chicago native. She's written a collection of essays, *West Side Girl* (working title), that are written from the point of view of her younger self and chronicle the colorful, diverse and oftentimes unpredictably eccentric characters and events that populated Chicago's West Side neighborhood during the 50s & 60s.

Her essays have appeared in *The Write Place At the Write Time*, *The Faircloth Literary Review*, Fullosia Press, *The Fat City Review* and *Avalon Literary Review*.

She studied journalism at Marquette University, earned her B.A. in Economics from the University of California at Los Angeles and her M.S. in Management and Organization from the University of Colorado.

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