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Come in...and be captivated...

"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.



"Finding Tomorrow" by Linda Bigness; <http://www.bignessart.com/>

About the paintings on this page: "Painting in the abstract gives a 'voice' to the silence that our own emotions create. My favorite expressions are 'seeing red' or 'feeling blue' and often when I paint these colors my feelings may be just that or more. As the painter, I can allow the viewer into my private world and yet share the space with others that may relate to the shapes and colors with their own personal experiences.

"The colors are meant to be shared without preconceived ideas or rules. Nature does not govern our thoughts but will give over its mysteries to those who want to take the time to experience the colors and shapes it offers.

"Painting in the abstract is a natural response to nature around us. For me, it is natural."
—Linda Bigness, statements of process from the artist's book, *Why Abstract* (Copyright 2017).

Our Stories non-fiction

Spiderman

by Vern Fein

I only remember two names from first grade. No other kids, not even my teacher. I even forgot the name of my second grade teacher who told my mom I was a genius. Third grade was sharp-tongued Mrs. Hoster. No one could ever forget Hoster because her dad owned the local pickle factory, the largest employer in our small area.

I do remember Rob Malone, the class bully, and Brenda Burriss, the dark-haired class belle who was my first girlfriend, standing in for Margaret O'Brien and Shirley Temple.

How curious it is that children often, at an early age, begin to act out what they will become. Later on in high school, Malone would roam the boys' locker room like a prowling lion, threatening with his elastic belt to snap the naked rear of any boy who would not give him pocket change. Brenda was a petite beauty who perhaps predicted the diminutive young lady who would come into my life and become my wife years later, a brunette at the beginning and a brunette for life.

Rob, Brenda and I were standing at the swing sets at recess. Once, I had spouted off I was not afraid of spiders. Why I bragged about bravery toward arachnids I will never know. Perhaps it was to impress Brenda as so many tried to do because she was the princess of the class. And she really seemed to like me, once pecking me on the cheek without warning. Rob saw this and fumed as he was an awkward boy, ungainly, gruff, and insecure like many nascent bullies.

He had heard of my bragging, so one bright spring day he approached Brenda and I by the swings, holding a stick, not to threaten me this time,

but to transport a fierce looking black and yellow crawler with the harmless name of Garden Spider that terrified us all whenever we saw its sometimes throbbing web.

“Fein,” he barked at me. “Heard you’re not afraid of spiders!”

My breath fled. I remember the quizzical look on Brenda’s face, her black button eyes gleaming, wanting to see what the bully was up to for he had challenged me in various ways whenever Brenda was present, trying, like Bluto, to steal Olive away.

At the end of the stick was the huge black and yellow spider. It probably wasn’t that big but it must have seemed like a tarantula to me, as decades later I can still transport myself back to that scene.

“Yeah, so?” I snapped back, instantly understanding what he had in mind, pushing my courage ahead of my abject fear. I was deathly afraid of spiders.

“So let’s see. If you say you’re not afraid, let my buddy here crawl down your arm.”

To be tested at six years old! My entire reputation, a word I barely understood, flashed before me. If I refused, Brenda would never look at me the same—the bully squashing me like the bug I was as I was indeed the smallest kid in the class, other than Brenda, both of us the opposite of Big Rob.

I had no choice. I stuck out my arm and Malone nudged the spider on to the top of it. It just sat there a bit, checking out its new scene, no way in a hurry, unable to hear my pounding heart.

Every other part of my being froze, but I tried to look brave. My eyes focused on the top of the swings. I never looked at Rob or Brenda. The recess crowd collapsed around us.

Finally, eight black legs, the yellow shining in the sun, sprinted (hooray!) down my arm to my wrist where I quickly flicked the spider off. A couple of girls screamed.

It felt great to be a hero, to stand tall before Brenda, to forecast years later that I would be the one who strode into the principal’s office in high school

with the courage to turn in Malone for his bullying in gym class, which caused him to be suspended from school.

Brenda moved away. I am sure she does not remember the spider or me, nor does Rob. Whatever heroism I demonstrated in life—no more or less a hero than most of us who navigate our average lives—I will remember the black and gold monster that liberated me.

Bio: Vern Fein has published poems in **82 Review*, *The Literary Nest*, *Silver Birch Press*, *Rat's Ass Review*, *Bindweed Magazine*, *Gyroscope Review*, a haiku, *Spillwords*, *VerseWrights*, *Viet Nam War Poetry*, *1947 Journal*, *Spindrift*, *Ibis Head Review*, and has a non-fiction piece in *Quail Bell*, and a short story in the the online magazine *Duende* from Goddard College.



Photo Caption: "Alex recovering in post-op with his wife, Teresa, after having a cancerous tumor removed from his left leg, June 15, 2016."

For the First Time, My Wife Thanked God for My Cancer

by Alex J. Harrington

The apology

As my wife and I were getting ready to head out for another daily grind in the Washington D.C. metro area, Teresa called out to me in an affectionate tone from the bathroom, "Alex, can you please come here?"

Stopping what I was doing in our home office, I quickly responded, “Sure thing!” I walked into the bathroom, and with a sly grin on my face I said, “What’s up, babe?”

“Please don’t be upset with me, but I was praying to God this morning, and”—she had a slightly apprehensive look on her face—“I thanked Him for your cancer. I hope you understand.”

She paused.

As seconds ticked away, she patiently waited for a response from me. But I had none.

I just gave her a tender smile.

Teresa said, “For the first time since your diagnosis, I genuinely thanked God for bringing cancer into your life. It has truly changed us for the better.”

Again, she paused.

“I hope you understand,” she said with a rueful expression on her face.

“I totally understand. I’m thankful too for the blessings He has given us through cancer.”

We embraced, and then resumed getting ready for the daily grind.

I can only imagine what most folks would think of this. *Are they out of their minds!? Why in the world would either of them—especially Alex—thank God for allowing cancer to come into their lives!?*

Most would see my cancer as an affliction, a terrible disease that takes the lives of nearly 600,000 Americans each year. When you look at its true nature, the uncontrollable and unnatural growth of abnormal cells in one’s body, cancer is like a maggot infestation that only wants to spread and devour healthy tissue and leave its host devastated and weakened.

I should probably be thinking the same things as everyone else. *Are we out of our minds for thanking God for cancer!? Why should I be thankful for this?*

It is an agonizing disease.

It disrupted our life and work.

Cancer has given me more than a foot of new scars—permanent battle wounds from the surgical resection of the tumors.

And most patients with Stage IV Melanoma do not live a long life.

But, I continue to remain thankful to God for allowing cancer to come into my life.

Some might accuse me of being some type of masochist, but I assure you, I'm far from it! Prior to my first diagnosis in November 2013, I would have never thought cancer would be a part of my life, nor would I ever have wanted it. I still would never wish it on my worst enemy. But I have it. And I must live with it.

From Despair to Seeing the Blessings in Cancer

When I was first diagnosed with cancer—the type of shocking news that is followed by a sucker punch along with a roundhouse kick to a person's emotional gut, laying them out flat on the floor in despair—and after the initial horrifying acceptance, I realized that I had to make a choice of how to face cancer. It would have been acceptable, at least for a time, to be angry at God and despondent around family and friends. Yet taking that approach would not have changed the diagnosis. Regardless of how I feel or behave, the cancer has become my uninvited bedfellow in life.

So, before I embarked on the path of surgeries, infusion centers, medications, oncology appointments, etc., I willfully accepted the fact that cancer was now—and would be—an undeniable, unwanted, uninvited part of my life. Once I reached this acceptance, I then marshaled all my strength and determination to wage a spiritual, emotional, and physical war against this cancerous enemy. I was also compelled to search and learn about the life-giving aspects that cancer can bring to one's life. To seek out the meaning that could only be found in the experience of having cancer. This alone, in fact, was the most important aspect of living a life with this illness. It became my own existential opus—a life made more beautiful and fulfilling because of cancer.

It was only after I decided to simultaneously accept, fight, and search for the meaning in cancer, that I began to see the blessings—blessings that seemed, from my perspective, to increase in tandem with the sequence of the treatment phases: from the surgeries, chemo/immunotherapy infusions, countless medications for the side effects to the post-cancer treatment, such as body and brain scans, blood tests, and counseling. My growing gratitude did not rest on the fact that I was getting better, but rather, through what it was teaching my wife and I, it rested on how the disease had first come to enter my life. This struck me as being a paradox that only one with cancer could comprehend.

For us, what we found, accepted, and embraced, changed us for the better. Instead of grasping for reasons why it happened and holding onto the miseries brought about from this disease, we saw how cancer served as an unexpected catalyst in three key areas of our lives.

The first, was how it spurred us onto strengthening and fortifying our marriage and personal life. We've grown to love each other intentionally. We now take each day as an opportunity to love one another with our words, actions, and service. With the strong possibility that cancer may return, we do not allow a marital conflict to linger for longer than twenty-four hours. We work through it and do not allow a day to pass without telling each other "I love you" and "I was thinking of you."

My love for my wife has amazingly grown stronger and deeper than ever before. It has grown so courageously. So kindly. So blindingly. When I look at her now, I see a deeper beauty that was previously hidden from me. Each day I am enraptured by her eyes and the way her golden hair caresses her soft face. I stand in awe of the way she has taken her stand to fight alongside me.

The experience of having cancer has made both Teresa and I realize that life is so precious, albeit short-lived. With each day comes new opportunities, decisions, and how one chooses their time. After two bouts with cancer, we've reassessed on what is important in our marriage and for one another individually. We've redefined and reprioritized those things in our life that are most important to us now—spending time together, hanging out with family and friends, and making time for those experiences that enrich our lives.

The second area cancer served as a catalyst for was fulfilling my goal of writing. For more than a decade, I've pondered the idea of writing non-fiction. However, I vacillated between *I'm not good enough to be a writer* and *Who am I to write something for others?* But now, after fighting a few rounds of cancer, I realize my life may come to an end sooner than once expected. So I am taking my pen. I am not going to have regrets lay beside my gravestone.

The third area the illness affected was our faith. It triggered a deeper intimacy with God, renewing our hearts and building upon our power of belief. Throughout the entire experience of fighting against cancer, we have felt God's grace and peace. Like an eagle protecting its young against a wild predator, we feel that God has watched over us both, giving Teresa and I His strength and comfort, so that we could endure the fight.

All these things in each of these three areas, I owe to cancer.

Conclusion

It was not the typical morning dialogue one would have while getting ready for work. But on the day that Teresa and I acknowledged our shared revelation of gratitude for my illness, we realized everything the experience had given us in our eyes.

Even though I have to undergo regular body and brain scans for cancer, today I am in remission. And despite the fact that cancer has advanced throughout my body—from Stage I (2007) to Stage III (2013), and finally to Stage IV (2016)—I get to live life today.

Our story is only one of many different stories about cancer.

My humblest hope is through my response to cancer—the willingness to accept, determination to fight, and the openness to see the life-giving aspects of this disease—to show, despite being an inadequate example, that even though we all equally share this human condition where we must endure life's episodic moments of struggles, disappointments, sickness and loss, we hold the fundamental freedom of choice in how we stand up and face life's hardships and personal afflictions.

Bio: Alex Harrington is a cancer survivor and aspiring writer. He also strives to exemplify his life vision: "To be selfless and of service, committed to take care of, benefit, and be of

value to those around him by truthful and compassionate thoughts, words, and actions." Alex lives in the Washington, D.C. metro area with his wife, Teresa. His experiences with cancer can be found at:
<http://www.alifeswalkwithcancer.com>.

A Sense of Self

by Lois Greene Stone

The skirt billowed as my tiny right foot, on the rubber grip, slid the scooter down the concrete sidewalk; my left foot did the pushing. I felt far away, about six houses from very familiar. Soon, tricycle became bicycle, and adventure was wherever I could propel the object of independence. No one else in my family rode horses, yet, perched on an English saddle, I had a connection with a breathing animal that could also take me into parks where dirt paths wound around quiet trees. I controlled the reins, and the importance of my influence made a difference between a safe ride and one where I could be tossed by bucking. Self-assurance brought a special satisfaction. Maintaining composure and balance while spinning on ice skates was exhilarating, but going alone by train to the indoor ice rink was "grown-up."

Empowerment was not a common word during my adolescence—I called it confidence.

Rosie the Riveter posters, during World War II, denoted approval for a snood and apron to be traded for a working woman's hair net and slacks. Different from a 1920s Flapper who made a statement by having long locks removed by scissors and made into a bob, Rosie was fee-for-service, just like a man. She even wore trousers! Even the WACS, women in the armed service, had to accept skirts as uniform. A first cousin, in the army, was whispered about as relatives wondered why any woman would allow herself to be willingly part of war, be paid rather than a volunteer which was socially acceptable; my cousin didn't share her reason.

My first paying employment was during a summer when I was in college. Working at a pattern company, I punched a time-clock, had limited lunch period, navigated train schedules to and from the city, got a pay check. What I gained was way before Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. The experience was educational yet not part of my formal education.

When did the word *empowerment* become popular? It has a strong sound, almost a bitter tone as it comes off my lips. Like black outfits and purple lipstick, the term seems at odds with how I still "see" myself, in pastel colors and gloss, so it isn't a word I'd typically use. I don't want to be male—though yes, I do want same payment for the same service which I expect will eventually happen—but what about power? What exactly IS power?

Having been raised during a social period of well-modulated voices, and dainty walking rather than big strides, women had a required behavior. Still, women found universities during the time when many were male-only, and the challenge to succeed while engaging in traditional family life was enlightening. Few were embarrassed to respond "stay at home mom" when asked what their job was—it was a full-time position. Having academic degrees was never wasted, and offspring didn't stay "little" long.

In my later adult years, I faced a situation that rejuvenated my sense of self: being able to return a spoiled chicken to the supermarket. Are you laughing?

I often came home from the grocery and opened the plastic wrapper to the stench of chicken. Back at the store once more, the butcher would ask what I did to cause this problem. He insisted I must have left it out of the refrigerator, or forgot it was in the trunk of my car. The store was not responsible for my careless handling. Did I need instructions for food storage? He succeeded in humiliating me, which was his intention.

Armed this time with a paper listing the questions/comments I knew I'd hear, and finding, yet again, the whole chicken had gizzards inside emitting an offensive odor, I addressed the butcher. I glanced at my list with each anticipated remark he made, but gave my written assertive answers. Yes, at my age, and having had three children, I understood refrigeration, and so forth. I was early-on assertive and had to progress to the right degree of aggressive instead, but I did accomplish the return. For me, it was what today is called empowerment.

From scooter to bicycle to horse to train to a car—complete with a GPS and hands-free phone—that drives to the grocery store for reparation, I can see how an individual's journey through her allotted years is built on small steps.

Bio: Lois Greene Stone, writer and poet, has been syndicated worldwide. Poetry and personal essays have been included in hard & softcover book anthologies. Collections of her personal items/photos/memorabilia are in major museums including twelve different divisions of The Smithsonian.



"Breakwater I" by Linda Bigness; <http://www.bignessart.com/>

Anatomy of a Pear

by Toti O'Brien

1.

I am young, depressed, and desperate. I need help. Quietly, I sit in front of a therapist I have begged to receive me, for what I am not sure. She has conceded but—aware I can't pay for a session, let alone a cure—she intends to excuse me as soon as convinced I'll not kill myself.

Perhaps not tonight.

She brings in two plates from the kitchen, one holding a pear, the other a large slice of cake.

"Would you care for a fruit?"

"No, thank you."

"Some cake?"

I'm not looking for food. I need love. They are not interchangeable. I decline the second offer as well, after a slight hesitation. If I truly had to choose I'd go for the pastry. Why would I?

An unbearable longing takes hold of me. Unexpected, guilt-stained, it makes me more miserable than I already was. As if while avowing my preference to myself I had fathomed a terrible fault. An irredeemable loss. Of what? Some kind of virginity. Integrity, maybe, embodied by the lonely fruit I cast off.

Well-shaped yet slender. Its skin thin and delicate, amber, dark-spotted as if freckled. Harmonious in its slight asymmetry. Full with personality and still unobtrusive, discrete. Its cute little stem standing out like a question mark.

Yet I would decline its pure sweetness for the fatty scrumptiousness of the nearby dessert. More tempting. Forbidden perhaps? Cake costs a bit more than a pear, which means it is pricier. Therefore, if offered for free, must be chosen. Someone baked it and made it unique. The occasion cannot be passed by.

Pears are all the same. You buy them in bulk. Nothing special.

Yet...they each have a different taste, firmness, texture—each individual fruit its own universe. But I must have lost the capacity for appreciating such things.

2.

I am sitting with a friend at a bar. While I sip my tea, her fork is about to attack a thick slice of cobbler. But she stops, her motion frozen in mid-air.

She just gave me an update about minor weight problems, slightly bothering her. The subject is common—a regular filler of relaxed afternoon small talk. My friend is not fat, but as most girls I know would like to be slimmer.

“This pie, for example!” she exclaims. “Why can’t I resist it? Why don’t I go crazy instead for a pear?”

I am mildly shocked for no reason. Her face looks inspired, philosophical. I hope for an instant hers was a rhetorical question. She must know the answer, of course. She’s about to tell me.

Is it just physiology? Are our neurons meant to fire for compound, manufactured delicacies, dulling our response to plain, simple food? Looking too modest, too poor, undesirable, if compared with a bomb of calories enthralling our tasting buds. Are we built this way? Perhaps.

3.

During World War II Grandpa keeps a journal.

An army engineer, he is sent to a remote construction site, quartered in an isolated cabin. He has little of everything: clothes, blankets, food, water. He has time, especially at night, and he writes—fastidiously recording the adventure of daily composing a meal.

The few items he either purchases, or salvages, shine across the pages like jewels. He’s not a gourmet. Tall, slim, dry, and muscular. Yet right now he is worshipping every crumb. He greets a cucumber, salutes a small onion with quasi-religious awe. He melts with gratitude in front of a half tin of

potted meat. He calls milk “magnificent.” Salt brings him to tears.

He harvests wild pears on his way to work—the only thing he can warm up when the last chicken cube is gone. He boils pears, ripe or not, with a pinch of soda which tinges them dark green, also softens them. He craves boiled pears. They are his main filler when things more substantial are missing. He eats boiled pears for entrée, fresh pears for dessert—and nothing of course in between. The fruit provides energy in the morning, comfort at the end of day.

War, hunger, and stress left Grandpa with a fragile stomach. He ate little, with Spartan simplicity, did not drink though he smoked like a chimney. Still he marveled at the food he could manage—basic things, steamed, unseasoned—with a sort of reverence.

Bread and milk were sacred to him. He taught me the wonder of eggs, freshly gathered from the chicken coop. Of whatever came from the garden, or the orchard. Bean or cabbage. Tomato or tangerine. Harvested with love, held up for me to admire its wholeness, its beauty. Though I had not been at war, I understood.

Was I able to see the blessing a fruit represents? Can I still?

It’s a flash, Grandfather, a fleeting impression. A nostalgia that stabs me, steals my breath with a need for something I cannot name. Not yet. It will come back eventually.

Bio: Toti O’Brien’s work has most recently appeared in Gyroscope, The Birds We Piled Loosely, Indicia, and Wordland.

Sorry

by Darlene Patrick

"I'm sorry." I must have said those words a million times, asking to be forgiven for what, I wasn't sure. For having been born? Mom made me feel that way.

"You were a problem from the beginning," she lamented. At ten years old, it was hard listening to her tell me how bad I was. "Three days and nights of excruciating labor I suffered to bring you into the world." She reminded me that I was a big baby, eight and a half pounds, and a colicky one. No matter how many years passed or what I did, I could never make up for the pain I had caused her. If I objected to her grumbling or tried to defend myself, she would point to her belly and threaten, "Don't give me any more trouble or I'll put you back where you came from!"

Apart from her difficult labor, I was trouble because I didn't look like her. I should have been a boy, but to be a girl with *his* olive complexion, round face and deep brown eyes was unforgiveable. *Sorry*. "You look exactly like your father." Her proclamation was delivered like a death sentence. She shook her head, amazed and distraught that she, a blond with an oval face, fair skin and hazel eyes, could have produced such a child. My brain was also suspect. "Such a dumb-dumb I brought into the world. The man says, 'I'll give you whatever the child picks.' Then he shows you one hand with bills and another with change and you reach for the change. Unbelievable!"

"Mom, I was two! What did you expect?"

"I expected a child of mine to know the value of money." From birth, apparently.

I was perceived as slow to progress, didn't even begin to talk until after my second birthday. My parents' relationship persisted in fits and starts over the next several years. Then, one day, Dad decided to end it all. *Sorry, sorry*.

After he left, Mom was never able to find the "right" man. "Good men don't want the responsibility of another man's child, especially a child like you." I was stubborn, loud and pushy, even as a little girl, but no more than other kids. I know I didn't want to be a problem; I wanted her to love me. Toward that end, I excelled in school, bought her trinkets with the money I saved from doing errands for the neighbors, and told everyone I knew how beautiful my mother was. Nothing changed her opinion of me. I was her nemesis, the primary reason no man would marry her. I was *very sorry* about that.

As the years passed and my mother's chances for a life of luxury with a rich husband dwindled, she transferred her hopes onto me. I would get the guy,

the ring and the house with the white picket fence. Accordingly, at fourteen, after I started menstruating and "became a woman," she pressured me to pay more attention to my looks and go shopping with her. The emphasis on my outer shell conjured up an image of me on an auction block, waiting to be sold to the highest bidder. Preserving my virginity was also a major concern of hers. It was all so superficial and depressing.

Food became my escape, my buffer against female stereotypes, like Harriet Nelson and June Cleaver, the perfect wives on the popular TV shows, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave it to Beaver*. I'd always had a healthy appetite, mother frequently admonished me for having too much of one. "You ate a whole lamb chop before you were two!" It was easy to eat my way out of uncomfortable situations. Before long, my 5'4" frame had ballooned to a solid 185 pounds.

No longer a size that could wear the cute fashions of the day, Mom agonized about what to do with me while I had college in my sights. "Ridiculous," she mocked me. "High school is more than enough education." She wanted me to get a job as a secretary or salesgirl, be ravishing and catch the eye of the boss, just as she had done when she was a young woman working in one of my father's clothing stores. Only she wanted me to go further and score big with a huge rock and a marriage proposal.

We argued, but then she had a change of heart. "Maybe college isn't such a bad idea." I didn't know whether she was just anxious to get rid of me or had an ulterior motive. I didn't care. I was ready to set out on my own and follow my dreams, though I felt guilty for not fulfilling hers.

After I left home, she kept in touch by mail, frequently asking if I'd met anyone. I wasn't looking and since I went to classes in a disheveled state wearing whatever was close at hand, nobody was looking at me either. Perusing old photos of her when she was about my age, I was struck by how poised and confident she appeared in tailored suits. The only time I felt sure of myself was in a classroom. *So sorry*. But I wasn't sorry to get her letters. They were long and filled with news.

She'd gotten a job doing nails at a beauty salon and had a new boyfriend. She also expressed interest in what I was studying. "I love you like crazy" and mountains of kisses closed each letter, making our relationship seem normal, even nurturing. We were better at a distance, as her occasional trips to see me proved. From the moment she saw me, the criticisms came

spewing out, including commentary such as "Your hair looks like a brillo pad," and "Haven't you been sleeping? Those bags under your eyes are huge," or "You're too fat for those pants."

Five years later, when I was twenty-three and Mom had given up hope of ever seeing me as anything other than a schoolgirl, a hotheaded Hungarian came into my life. Tibor, an immigrant without family or resources, was ten years older than me. When we met, he was working as a foreign car salesman—not exactly the promising catch that my mother wished for, but she was relieved that there was finally a man in my life. He referred to me as a gem, a "diamond in the rough" and yet, the apologies continued.

"Why do you always say you're sorry?" he asked early in our relationship after listening to my *sorry's* for everything from why it was raining to why the economy was bad.

"I don't know...habit, I guess."

"These things are not your fault. You need to stop."

"OK," I wanted to please him. "I'll try."

I did try and eventually, I did stop, although it would be many years before I understood that I was not the cause of my mother's unhappiness. The momentous event that turned my thinking around happened just one month before she died. An accident and her failing health brought her long-time companion, Merle, and I together at the Assisted Living Center where she had been taken for care. That's when I learned that my father never married her. But it wasn't all I learned.

My mother's fate was sealed once I exited her womb. Dad was an Orthodox Jew, married with three grown daughters and several grandchildren by the time he met my mom. It was a fling, a midlife crisis—she wasn't supposed to get pregnant.

"Sally didn't want children," Merle told me flat out, "unless they came with a beautiful house and a rich husband. She certainly never wanted to be a single parent."

"Then why did she get involved with a married man in the first place?"

"I'm not saying she was innocent...I don't know the full story," Merle stammered, "but your dad was a good liar. He strung her along with promises of devotion and his undying love."

Pieces of the puzzle were falling into place. I recalled her telling me that Dad was a *pathological liar*. "So after she got pregnant, which I guess was not part of the plan, why didn't she get an abortion?" I asked the logical question with some trepidation at the thought of not being alive.

"Not Sally. She was afraid of doctors. Besides, she was sure she was carrying a boy and that your father would be so overjoyed to have a son, he would divorce Sonya and marry her."

"Why didn't she tell me?"

"She said you idolized your dad and didn't want to spoil that."

"But, but..." I struggled to complete my thought, "if she had confided in me, if I had known what she went through, I would have commiserated. We could have been close."

Merle nodded, accepting my heartfelt sentiments as genuine—and they were, to a point. She didn't know how much and how long I'd hated my mother. She didn't know about the times I'd wished she were dead. Scrapping a fingernail across my teeth, I turned away from her gaze and thought about Mom, a wildly enthusiastic woman who was more an event than a person. I thought about the woman who was happy to *not be like other mothers*. The woman who forced me to call her *Aunt Sally* in public. The woman who never praised me or said how proud she was that I was her daughter.

On the other hand, she did feed and clothe me while my father conveniently disappeared. I always gave him the benefit of the doubt, though I saw him only a handful of times in my whole life. No matter. I regularly boasted about him—how worldly and smart he was, and continued to feel that way even after Mom revealed that he'd served time in prison for fraud. I assumed he must have had his reasons and that made it all right. There were other clues about their true story along the way, like no picture of my parents' wedding, that should have roused my suspicions, but it was easier to believe the fantasy I'd concocted about him.

"Darlene, are you OK?" Merle pulled me back into the moment. "She should have been the one to tell you and I told her so, many times, but Sally..."

"It's fine, Merle, really," I interrupted her. "I'm fine."

I wasn't. Words that I'd worked so hard to excise from my vocabulary came barreling back to me. *I'm sorry*, I mumbled under my breath. I was sorry. Not because my mom was dying—she had been alone and miserable for some time—but because I understood how the shame she bore alienated us from one another. I was also sorry that I had let the hatred I felt for her hurt me. Still, I persevered with my education, personal, and career choices, though more as challenges to her words than accomplishments needing or wanting acknowledgment. Appreciating how my mother persevered—with an illegitimate child to raise on her own—offered a new perspective, one that has given me the strength to move forward free from bitterness.

Bio: Darlene Patrick is a former librarian and ESL instructor who has always loved to write and tell stories. After the death of her mother, she found that writing also helped her to heal. She has spent the last decade living in Canada, mostly on Vancouver Island. As beautiful as it is there, she misses her home and so, is currently making plans to return to Minnesota this summer with her husband and two very spoiled cats.

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