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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.



"The Red Chair" Linda Woods; www.moonbirdhill.exposuremanager.com/

Frankie Zaita's Stairway

By Mark Barkawitz

Back when we were in our early teens, my friend Frank Zaita lived in a big, colonial, two-story house—white with green trim and shutters—on Holliston Avenue in Pasadena. One day while his parents were gone, we discovered that if we took the seat cushions off the living room couch, we could ride them down the steep stairway from the second floor to the first floor landing, where we would crash into the balustrade, laughing our heads off. As our skill level progressed, we experimented with tandem riding, going-down-backwards, and face-forward-belly-slides. It was a lot of fun. Until his little sister Brooke informed their mother Nettie about our turning her stairway into an amusement park ride. Cushion-riding the stairway was forbidden.

One Saturday afternoon while we were riding the stairs, Nettie pulled into the driveway in her 1960 Cadillac Sedan de Ville. She was a tiny Italian-American but with an ample set of lungs and we didn't want her yelling at us. So as she parked in the garage, Frank scrambled to throw the cushions back on the couch, while the rest of us—my little brother Bruce, our friend Dick, Rickie Richie, who lived in the corner house, and I— all lit out the front door and headed down the street. Frank caught up with us about a half-block later. We were all laughing about our close escape, when the Caddie came to a screeching halt next to us at the corner of Orange Grove Boulevard. Nettie got out of the big car with a cut-off piece of garden hose in her hand. Back in those days, it wasn't considered abuse—my mom had a wooden soup spoon with which she used to threaten us boys—just a means of discipline for a small woman with a big kid. Apparently,

the position of the couch cushions had tipped-off Nettie to our prohibited behavior. That and Frank's little sister Brooke, who had come home earlier without our noticing her. Brooke sat in the passenger seat of the Sedan de Ville. Nettie started chasing Frank around the Cadillac, swinging the hose after him.

"You get over here, Frankie!" she yelled.

"Ma-a-um," he countered, stepping up and catching her hand in the air. Frank was a strong little guy. He held both her hands with ease. "You're embarrassing the hell out of me in front of my friends." He was trying not to laugh.

We of course, were no help—cracking-up on the street corner like a bunch of knuckleheaded vagabonds.

"Get in the car, Frankie!" Nettie ordered, while kicking at his shins.

"Ma-a-um!" Still holding her wrists, he turned to us. "I'll see you guys later." He got in the back seat of the car. Nettie turned the Caddie around and screeched the tires for home.

I'm pretty sure that was the last time we rode the couch cushions down Frankie Zaita's stairway.

Sakura (Cherry Blossoms)

By Don MacLaren

In the early '90s, after over two years in Japan teaching English, intensely studying Japanese, karate, and paying off large debts in the form of student loans and credit cards, I fell in love with a woman I'd been teaching. She kept taking my classes, and later began calling me up, inviting me to concerts, and then offering to take me to a store that sold Chinese herbal medicine, where she said I could get something that would help heal the allergies that sometimes plagued me in Japan.

For a year or so, I ignored her entreaties but she persisted and one day in March 1993 she came to my apartment. I cooked lunch for her and we sat down on the tatami-covered floor and talked. Later, standing up to look at the map of Japan on my wall, she pointed out the place on the Izu Peninsula, south of Tokyo, where she and her mother had gone to an onsen (a hot spring) a year earlier. As we stood next to each other I reached for her and we embraced, then gradually descended to the tatami-covered floor, where we kissed and melted into each other. Raindrops splattered gently against the window as I felt her heart thumping hard inside her chest.

We recounted our life stories to each other that day as we lay on the tatami. She began coming over regularly and we made love through several long, humid summer afternoons.

As she told me that she'd worked in a Shinto shrine for a time before I'd come to Japan, I'll call her Ms. Shinto.

*

In Japan there are many layers of reality. There is the tatemae surface reality and there is the polar opposite, the honne "true reality." But there are several layers in between as well, which include several aspects of one's will between giri (following society's dictates) and ninjo (following the feelings of one's heart). Some compare Japan to an onion: the more you peel it the more layers you find, but Japan is also like a woman in a kimono.

There is not only the aesthetic surface layer of the kimono that the outside world sees; there are several layers between that surface layer and the skin. Kimono dressing, called kitsuke in Japanese, is an art and a craft like calligraphy or ikebana (flower arranging), and many Japanese women spend years perfecting the craft of dressing oneself and others in all the layers of kimono. One of the practitioners of kitsuke was Ms. Shinto.

*

At that time I was the only man Ms. Shinto loved, and she was the only woman I loved. But there was a problem. She was engaged to another man - a fact I had known about before she had come to my apartment and one of the reasons I had been hesitant to meet her outside of school. Initially, when my mind turned away from thoughts of passion and flesh to thoughts of morals and ethics, I thought that being with her was wrong. Not only would it hurt her fiancé if he knew about Ms. Shinto and I, but it was bound to hurt me in the long run as well, because I was bound to lose her. However, as time went by and she and I continued to see each other, I concluded that what was really wrong was that she was going to marry someone she didn't love. What was morally and ethically right was for us to fall in love, and if she decided she didn't want to marry a man that her parents and her fiancé's parents had decided she must marry, then so much the better. She was going through a similar psychological quandary as I, and told me she had refused any physical intimacy with her fiancé since the time she and I had first kissed.

*

I decided that I wanted her all to myself or not at all. Since she told me she didn't have any desire to get married and that if given a choice she would marry me, I decided I had to do the right thing - for me, for her, and for her fiancé. I told her that either she had to leave her fiancé or I was going to leave her. And as an alternative to marrying him, I suggested she marry me.

About a month after I gave her that ultimatum she came to visit me and told me, while chain-smoking with tears in her light-brown eyes, that she had no choice but to marry her fiancé. She also told me that she was going to have the formal Japanese engagement ceremony, called the konyaku, between herself, her fiancé, and their two families a few weeks hence (though Ms. Shinto, her fiancé and their families had verbally agreed to the marriage months before).

After she and I had fallen in love, she had tried to put the konyaku off, but the pressure from her fiancé and both their families was too great; they refused to allow her to defer or delay.

"I'm sorry," she said, and left, brushing her shoulder-length light brown hair from her face. Once she'd closed the door, I heated a small porcelain container of sake - despite the fact that it was a hot and humid, stormy evening - sat down on the tatami, slowly drank it, then went to sleep.

In the end giri won over ninjo and so it was that Ms. Shinto married a man she did not love.

*

It was my experience in Japan that people would come close to me for a

short time, disappear, and then pop up again months or years later without notice. Worse still, they would sometimes then disappear forever as do the sakura (cherry blossom) petals after a spring rain in Japan, which brings me to another woman I'll write about. I'll call her Ms. Shinjuku, because I first met her in person in Tokyo's Shinjuku district at a bookstore I frequented.

*

After a little over a year and a half in Japan I saw an ad in The Japan Times for Japanese lessons by phone which I decided to sign up for, since I was planning to take a Japanese language proficiency test given by the Japanese government. I called up the number and was assigned a teacher who lived in Tokyo - about 70 kilometers south of where I was living at the time. I took the test in December 1992, and after the test my teacher, Ms. Shinjuku, met me at the bookstore and we ate at a restaurant nearby.

A couple of months afterwards I saw her off to Taiwan, where she was going to study Mandarin Chinese.

A year and a half or so later, I received a call from Ms. Shinjuku. She told me she was in the hospital and said she wanted to see me.

The first chance I had to see Ms. Shinjuku was in March 1995, when I went to Tokyo to renew my visa. After getting my passport stamped with a one-year visa extension, I visited Ms. Shinjuku in the hospital. She was a shell of the woman I had seen earlier and looked near death. She had looked just slightly overweight when I had last seen her, but she was close to skeletal in the hospital. Her brown eyes were cloudy as they peered at me above an oxygen mask that covered her face. In those eyes I saw both the fragility and the sacredness of life. I felt compelled to be with her and care for her till her life was over, which I thought would be soon. As I was about to leave I gently caressed the side of her face, then walking outside couldn't help but cry - trying, mostly unsuccessfully, to hide my tears all the way home on the train.

Ms. Shinjuku and I exchanged letters, and I saw her several other times in the hospital. On one of those visits she told me she had epilepsy, and that after seizures she was periodically hospitalized.

I called her several times, but we only met once or twice. After recuperating from one epileptic seizure she worked as an actress in a couple of television shows.

I tried to meet her a few times, but she was always busy, and from her tone in our phone conversations I assumed she had a boyfriend. In any case, I became busy myself with other matters, started writing a novel and lost contact with her. However, on New Year's Day 2000, after a three-year hiatus in communication, I received a New Year's card from Ms. Shinjuku. "Call me!" she had written in English at the bottom of it, below a short message in Japanese. A couple of days later I did.

In mid-January, we met and had lunch. This time, we continued to talk for a few hours. Ms. Shinjuku listened to the matters that weighed heavily on my mind. I was relieved to have found a Japanese friend who, in contrast to many others I knew, really seemed to care about me - on a sincere honne level, rather than on a superficial tatemae one. On the way back to the train station I put my arm around her. She reciprocated. We kissed and parted. With that one kiss I transcended the despair and frustration I had been

living in for the last several months. But unbeknownst to me I had gotten lost in the kimono layers of reality, trapped inside the onion. Was it giri or was it ninjo? Was it tatemae or was it honne?

Whatever it was I was mistaken.

I tried calling her several times after that, but she didn't answer. I wrote her a letter in Japanese a couple days after meeting her, but still got no response. Valentine's Day came and went without a letter from her. I then wrote her more letters in Japanese. I was thinking that perhaps, because of my limited ability in expressing myself in Japanese that I had made some mistake, and had given her the wrong signal by accident, but I was also sure that if she really cared about me that she would contact me.

After several more attempts at making contact I finally got through to her answering machine when I tried to call her. (Each time I had called before I had gotten a busy signal.) I told her answering machine I was in love with her and waited for a response. None came. Over a week went by and I couldn't stand the waiting so I then sent her another letter. I felt as if every cell in my body was breaking up, as if the core of my being were falling apart. I felt as if lost inside the layers of the kimono of a goddess who had put a curse on me. I told her that if she wanted to see me again to write me by the time the sakura had stopped falling. It was early March at that time, and the sakura had not yet even begun to bloom so I figured that gave her at least a month.

The day I sent her the last letter was the first day of the year that truly felt like spring, and I could smell the fecundity of nature all around as I spent that night walking through a large park near my apartment, exploring every corner of it. I cried as I thought of her... and I continued to cry for weeks, sometimes having to hide my face at work as the tears began to flow.

When we met in January she had told me that she had "died" in the hospital about six months earlier, having an out of body experience, but coming back to life. I felt as if I were about to die as well.

For some reason fate had brought Ms. Shinjuku and I together, but in the end fate was cruel. I was destined to travel the rest of my time on earth without seeing her again, without any explanation from her as to why she had chosen to abandon me. It's funny that the times like that, when I felt closest to death, were the times that the tears and the pain in my heart made me feel I was most alive as well.

The sakura fell on me as I walked through the park and the sky was clear, but Ms. Shinjuku might as well have been in some fantasyland, beyond the stars I saw in the sky, for she was gone with the falling of the sakura, never to return.

I left Japan, took an 18-day trip through Europe and moved to New York City.

Years later, after I had found a different and more faithful Japanese woman, I received a letter from Ms. Shinto. Opening it, I was hoping to find she had come to terms with her life and was happy, but in the letter, written in Japanese, she told me that though she had given birth to two children, her lack of feeling toward her husband had not changed in the many years since we had lain on the tatami with each other in my old apartment.

Not long ago I returned to Japan and walked through the same park the cherry blossoms had fallen on me when Ms. Shinjuku had disappeared from my life. Many Japanese are buried under cherry trees – after having committed ritual suicide as part of giri.

Leaning against one of the cherry trees I felt a combination of melancholy and joy, a love both bitter and sweet, like all the loves I have known. And I know that despite their bittersweet quality, they have all made me a richer human being. In spite of the way the sakura petals fall all too quickly from their trees, they never fail to bloom again.

Clown Available For Weekend Work

By Randall Sokoloff

As a teen I took several circus classes. They were held on the weekends and I would learn the art of clowning. Juggling, skipping, tumbling, miming, hobbling and magic tricks were all apart of the course load. I had been interested in clowns ever since I was a young boy but going to circus school on the weekends was not my decision. I had been causing a lot of trouble around the house by pretending to be a clown so my father decided that if I was going to act like a clown I should learn to behave like one.

I never would have imagined that the few months of clown training almost twenty years ago would rescue me as an adult. I did not even take the training seriously. I got stoned with my friends behind the circus tent and spent more time staring at the girls than I did listening to the ring master. But somehow I have retained the fundamentals of clowning. I can transform myself into a circus clown in a matter of moments and do all kinds of absurd and slightly unskilled clowning tricks.

My wife had the idea that I make my clowning skills available to others on the weekends. Since the failing economy has become a huge elephant in my room, and my job as a high school teacher does not pay enough for me to live a modest and honorable lifestyle- I needed to find other ways to make a buck. So marketing myself as a clown for hire on the weekends did not sound like such a bad idea. The only problem was that I did not have enough money to buy a new clown suit so I had to use the one that I wore many years before as a younger man. Somehow the fact that it did not fit and was really tight around the belly and hips, played into the absurdity of being a clown. But I could not help the fact that I felt like a fool.

I put an add up on Craigslist for a “Clown Available For Weekends.” In my advertisement I said that I could do miming, juggling and general entertainment tricks. I listed the name of the circus school that I attended and said that my fee was \$40.00 an hour. For a few weeks I received no replies to my add. I waited patiently and continued to over work myself as a teacher with piles of papers to grade and student parent meetings to attend. Just as bills were beginning to go unpaid for over a month I received two phone calls from people interested in hiring me as a clown.

The first call was from a Google representative who wanted to hire me for an event that was being held in Mill Valley. It was an evening staff party for all San Francisco bay area Google representatives and they wanted for it to be a circus theme. The woman whom I talked to on the phone said that they would pay me two hundred bucks to dress up like a clown and stand like a mime for four hours at the front entrance of the event. I accepted without hesitation and at the event I was able to hand my “Clowning” card to a few Google representatives who stuck crispy dollar bills in my tip pouch. The only reason that I took that demeaning job was because I thought that it was a good opportunity to network.

The second phone call that I received was for a job offer to work as a clown at a birthday party. It was an upper class family that lived in Palo Alto and they wanted to hire me to entertain at their child's second birthday bash. I was nervous about taking the job because I had a premonition that I would scare most children. I knew that my clown suit was a little awkward looking on my body and the cheap make-up that I had to use caused my face to look a little haunting. I said yes (because I was offered one hundred and fifty bucks for three hours of work) despite the fact that I knew that I might appear to look like a frightening version of Ronald McDonald to all of the kids. However, I desperately needed the cash and as it turned out- things did not go as badly as I thought. A few infants seemed horrified by my appearance but the overall mood at the party was one of amusement, fascination and laughter.

Even though there is a part of me that is still humiliated that I am a thirty-eight year old teacher with a graduate degree in English Literature who has to work as a clown on the weekends, I still am able to enjoy the absurdity of what I am doing. In the past two summer months I have had clowning jobs almost every weekend and the extra money that I am earning has allowed me to slowly creep out of debt, buy a new clown suit and enjoy a few more nice dinners with my wife. I do not tell anyone in my professional or personal life about what I do for extra money, and I have asked my wife to keep my clowning antics between her and I- but I know that it is only a matter of time before word gets out that I am working as a clown on the weekends. I can see it now in the headlines of my local city newspaper: "EDUCATION IN AMERICA FALLS TO ALL TIME LOW, TEACHER HAS TO WORK WEEKENDS AS CLOWN."

The Spiritual Materialist

By Randall Sokoloff

I went to a Tibetan Fair. There were all sorts of Tibetan rugs, scarves, sweaters, ornaments and jewelry for sale. There was Tibetan music and "Save Tibet" booths, along with booths trying to bring attention to various imprisoned Tibetan activists. However, I was not there for any of these things. What I was looking for was enlightenment. I had been asking around about 'enlightenment'. A co-worker told me to check out the Tibetan fair because they might sell it there. Since I was in desperate need of enlightenment I figured I had nothing to lose. I paid the \$10 entry fee and was overwhelmed by the amount of people, vendors and music that sprawled all over the three acre park. With so many booths to choose from I started going up to various vendors to see what they were selling. Most seemed to offer material goods but I asked anyways if they sold enlightenment. The response was always the same "no" and the degree of the laughter depended upon how well the vendor understood me. There were also booths for acupuncture, massage and psychic readings. There were even meditation booths. Since I had nothing to do for the rest of the afternoon, and a pocket filled with three hundred dollars- I decided I would take my time and look around.

An acupuncturist told me that he did not sell enlightenment but that he could help me find it. I only let him put three small needles into me and after ten or so minutes of lying still on his table I had to ask him to please take out the needles because I was feeling anxious. I had a massage from an old Tibetan woman who told me that her hands could bring me close to enlightenment but she had none for sale. I gave her ten bucks for ten minutes- but half-way through the massage I felt so uncomfortable being rubbed in public that I had to ask her to stop.

"Maybe you try more meditation," she told me as I thanked her for taking some of the stiffness out from my neck and upper back.

I paid a psychic fifteen bucks because she told me that she could not sell me

enlightenment but she may be able to guide me in the right direction. After fifteen minutes of her sitting still without saying a word she opened up a flood gate of prognostications that made me feel a bit uncomfortable. She told me of my bad luck and the various ways that my impatience has caused me to make several bad decisions. She told me that soon I would make a career change and that the reason that I have so much stress and tension in my body and life is because I am not getting the recognition that I feel I deserve. She also told me that I am smart and possess an analytical mind which causes me to be unhappy because I am angry at all the less intelligent people who get ahead in life while I remain behind. All of it was too much for me to take. I stopped her in mid-sentence as she was saying, "...you are getting older and you are afraid that..." I thanked her for her revelations but told her that I felt no closer to finding enlightenment than when I began. She smiled, shut her eyes and I went on my way.

I continued to travel around the fair looking at all the wide eyed Buddhists. In the background, music played from the main stage but was muddled by the multiplicity of various voices that traveled through the fair. It felt like the entire city of Berkeley was making their way through those two acres of land. I had to squeeze my way up to booths that seemed like they could be potential sellers of enlightenment. "Do you sell enlightenment here?" I would shout so that the vendor would hear loud and clear what I was trying to say. People would look at me in disbelief as I was told again and again, "No, no enlightenment here." The afternoon was ending and I could feel the heat being put off by the sun begin to decrease as the sun made way for the moon.

Relentlessly, I traveled around from booth to booth determined to find the object of my search. If I could not find enlightenment here where else would I find it? Some vendors who could not sell me enlightenment offered me a good deal on items that may bring me close. I purchased some sandalwood prayer beads and a t-shirt with the "OM" symbol on it. I also purchased some incense and a new meditation cushion, but I knew when I bought these material goods that they were only steps to enlightenment, and not enlightenment itself. With bags containing my new purchases I asked old Tibetan women, pretty Tibetan women, young Tibetan men and older Tibetan men if they knew where I could purchase enlightenment. None did, except one. She pointed her decaying finger, callused by such a long life, at a lone booth that sat on the top of a hill. The old woman without any teeth in her mouth and more wrinkles on her face than that of a redwood tree said, "Up there... he may have it for you."

I walked toward that booth like a man making his way towards a visible pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. A lone, middle aged Tibetan vendor stood contentedly behind a pile of beautiful Tibetan rugs that had intricate patterns hand woven into them. An array of colorful Tibetan scarves blew in the wind above his head. He stared eagerly at me and I could tell that his eyes had achieved some semblance of nirvana. "Do you sell enlightenment here?" I asked him like an eager pupil. Since he was a little hard of hearing I had to repeat my question.

"Enlightenment, do you sell it here?" I asked again. He did not laugh like all the rest.

Nor did he look at me with dumbfounded disdain. Instead, he opened up the doors of communication by saying, "Ooooooh enlightenment, you looking for it here?"

"I have been looking for it everywhere," I replied, feeling some sense of relief overcoming me. Maybe I had finally found a man who can sell it to me, I thought.

"You know why you no find enlightenment?" he asked me. "Why?" I replied. "Because you look for it. You need to stop, stop, stop looking for enlightenment and then you will find that it is everywhere... all around you, all the time!"

I looked around me and then I had a brief "aha!" moment. Time stood still and it felt as if I was in the center of the universe. I allowed the bags filled with all of my purchases to fall to the ground as I listened to the sounds, smelled the scents and looked around me. For the first time in years I was free from my desire to find or need something I did not have. Instead I

simply let go, opened my eyes wide and for a brief moment or two I just enjoyed what was. It was then that I felt something akin to enlightenment. "You not need what is in your house, your bags or on your shelves, just remember the breathing," the man said in a calm tone as I smiled at him and took a deep inhalation.

"Thank you," I told him, "you have helped me find exactly what I was looking for."

"And it's even free," he said and then let out a little laugh.

Saturday Morning

By Joseph M. Lombo

When I got downstairs, Mom was slurping her coffee at the kitchen table.

"What's for breakfast?" I asked even though we always ate cereal on Saturday mornings. Mom reached into the cabinet and tossed what was left of a variety pack on the table. She was wearing a thick yellow bathrobe and fuzzy slippers even though it was humid and the kitchen windows were closed.

"Did Daddy start working on your room yet?"

I grabbed the last box of Frosted Flakes since my brother Mike was still sleeping. We would have fought over it if he'd been there.

"Yeah, but he had to go to the lumberyard. He's trying to get done early so he can go bowling this afternoon with Pop Pop and Uncle Joe.

"Somebody needs to do something about Mike's stupid snoring. I can't stand it anymore."

"We took him to see Dr. John." Dr. John was our family doctor. He always shook his bald head from side to side and sighed whenever he listened to my chest. His fingernails were yellow and he smelled like tongue depressors. "Your brother's adenoids are enlarged. Dr. John says they're the biggest he's ever seen."

Mom sounded like it was something to be proud of.

"Can't he give him some medicine for it?"

"No. He has to have them taken out."

Picturing Mike in a hospital bed made me happy. I'd have the bedroom to myself. I'd spread my baseball card collection all over the place and sleep as late as I wanted on Saturday. But he'd also get lots of attention. Pop Pop would probably buy Mike a new bike or TV if he needed an operation.

"We can't even think about it until your father gets full medical at his new job."

I didn't know exactly what full medical was, but I thought the chances of Mike getting his adenoids out, and me getting a good night's sleep, weren't too good because the old man changed jobs a lot.

"Well, somebody better do something soon. He keeps waking me up. Maybe I'll get a knife and cut the darn things out myself."

"That's it, mister. You're not to touch a knife without my permission until further notice, you hear? And if you go anywhere near your brother while he's sleeping, you'll be in for a month, so help me."

Missy, the next door neighbors' dog, started to bark. Then the squeal of our Dodge Dart's brakes drowned her out. I wondered how much more those brakes had to wear down before the squeal got so high only Missy could hear it.

"Go see if your father needs help."

"Do I have to?"

"I'm not going to tell you again, mister."

I walked so slowly it must have looked like I was part of a chain gang. I felt kind of guilty about not being in a hurry to see the old man. I hadn't seen much of him lately because he'd been working a lot.

Instead of going right out the door I stood near the front window. I watched him loosen the dry rotted twine he'd tied the lumber to the roof with. I didn't understand why the old man always wore his work clothes on Saturday mornings when my friend's dads didn't. The same welding cap he wore during the week hugged the back of his head. His T-shirt and jeans were full of holes and scorch marks from stray welding sparks. The only difference was he rolled his cigarettes up in his shirt sleeves on Saturdays but during the week he stuffed them in his back pocket.

The old man tapped on the window and waved for me to come out.

"I need you to keep your finger right there." He pointed to the middle of the stack of lumber on top of the car. I had to stand on my tip toes to reach it. When he cut the knots with a razor blade the stack shifted. I thought the whole load was going to fall and the old man would blame me for it, so I closed my eyes and waited. When I finally got the guts to open them, the old man was putting the lumber on the sidewalk.

"Can I help you carry them upstairs, Dad? Can I, please?"

"I'd better do it myself. They're pretty heavy."

He never let me lift anything heavy. It wasn't my fault I couldn't gain any weight because I always had bronchitis from breathing in his cigarette smoke.

"I'll tell you what you can do. Go double check my measurements." He always told me to measure because I was good at math.

My parent's bedroom smelled like sawdust and the rotted insides of my mother's bedroom slippers that were stacked under her side of the bed. Sawhorses, scraps of wood, and boxes of tile surrounded their bed. The ceiling was full of water stains. Now that he'd mucked the roof, the old man was ready to tile the ceiling.

I took the old man's folding stick measure out of his toolbox. Every time I opened that stick measure up I pinched my fingers, just like I did when I closed an umbrella. I hadn't gotten too far when I saw a piece of paper taped to the top of a box of tiles. The old man had written the room measurements on it. Even though he had me double check them, his measurements were usually right. I counted the boxes of tiles, and then I

went looking for him.

He was bringing the lumber up the stairs. He told me to get out of the way but everywhere I went a piece of lumber came close to hitting me in the face.

“Dad, you got too much tile.”

“That’s okay,” he said, dropping the lumber in the corner of his bedroom. “We’ll keep the extra in case we mess up. But we ain’t gonna mess up, are we?” He rubbed my hair even though I’d asked him a bunch of times not to do that anymore.

There was a big round mirror on top of my mother’s nightstand. I watched myself make a muscle with my right arm. I didn’t see anything at first, but when I flexed real hard a little hump appeared.

“Hey, looking pretty good there. It won’t be long before you’re old enough to work out in the basement with me.”

I dropped my arm and pretended I was looking for something on Mom’s nightstand.

“Pop Pop told your mother you foul tipped one the other night.”

I hadn’t gotten a hit in Little League all season. I crushed everything in practice, but I froze during the games.

“Yeah, he thinks I’m so good he told me I was built for golf.”

“Are you holding that bat up high like I showed you?”

“I’m trying.”

“Golf? That’s a rich man’s game. How about bowling? Maybe you can keep score for us this afternoon, and we’ll let you toss a few frames before we leave.”

“Why does everybody want me to try some other sport? I’m going to be a baseball player, okay.”

We moved the sawhorses in front of the bedroom closet. Mom thought we didn’t know that she kept our Christmas presents in there, but Mike and I knew where she hid them. The old man wanted to start the tiles at that end of the ceiling and work his way across.

“Dad, how come you’re not a milkman anymore? I liked riding in the back of the truck.”

“I’m better off welding. I don’t have to listen to those old windbags tell me their milk’s sour or I didn’t get their order right.”

The old man put a piece of lumber across two sawhorses. He cut it in half and then cut it in half again. “Here,” he said, tossing a piece at me. “Finish it like I taught you.”

I penciled over the line the old man had drawn on the wood. Then I put the stub in my ear just like he did. I started out good, but then my saw got stuck. It took me a long time to loosen it. When I did, my cut was crooked.

When I started sawing again, I couldn't straighten it out.

"Next time take it back straight, like this, see." The old man put the saw back in my right hand and pulled my arm back and forth. My practice cuts were always straight.

"Throw that piece away. We can't afford to waste them. I'll finish the rest. You go get me a beer."

Whenever I helped him I usually ended up being his slave. I took my good old time getting that beer. I noticed that outside it had stopped raining and the sun was shining. My friends were in the lot next to my house choosing up sides for a whiffleball game.

When I went back upstairs, the old man was standing on the ladder, stapling the first few tiles to the long lumber runners he'd nailed to the ceiling.

"Put the beer on my dresser. Then come over here and hold the ladder for me."

"How much longer are we gonna be, Dad?"

"We just started."

The old man's legs were shaking as he stood on that rickety ladder.

I heard the thwack of a yellow plastic bat smacking into a whiffle ball. Then everybody started to yell.

"Hold the ladder still, goddammit."

I had one foot and one hand on the ladder while both ears were tuned to what was going on outside. Sometimes, the old man's staple gun would misfire and a staple that hadn't stuck would land on my head.

"Jesus Christ, get me some more staples."

I hovered over his toolbox because it was near the window and it was easier to hear the game. Anne Marie and her brother Richard were arguing over a call. He'd better be careful because she could punch harder than he could.

I wasn't sure if the old man needed the big or little staples. He'd gotten off the ladder and was leaning against his dresser.

"The runners are just a hair crooked, but its good enough for government work. What's going on out there?"

"I don't know."

"I need the big staples, not the little ones. This is for your own good, helping me with stuff around the house, you know. A man needs to know how to work with his hands. Someday, you'll have a house of your own." He arched his head back and finished the rest of his beer. Then he crushed the can in his hand and burped.

"Maybe I'll pay somebody else to do it."

"You better make a hell of a lot of money then." He took his cap off and scratched his head. "Maybe you've got the right idea, Joey. Pay somebody else to do this shit for you. Come here."

He knelt down so we were face to face. When he grabbed my shoulders, I could see the red squiggly lines that filled most of the white parts of his eyes. "Make sure you stay in school, you hear."

"I will Dad."

"Now go the hell outside. It's too nice to be stuck in here."

"I'll help you finish."

"You'd better go before I change my mind."

It felt great to be out of that house. We played whiffleball for hours, one game after another. I even hit a couple of homers.

When I finally came in, the old man was standing in the parlor. Mom must have been fuming because she didn't like anybody messing up the parlor. He'd shoved the coffee table against the couch so he had enough room to practice his four step approach. He'd showered and shaved, and his bowling bag and a bottle of rubbing alcohol were next to the fake fireplace. He cleaned his ball with alcohol because the ball cleaning machine at the alley cost too much, and he said it didn't do a real good job anyway.

"So, what were your scores Dad? Did you beat Pop Pop and Uncle Joe?"

"I didn't finish up in time. Maybe next week. I got a lot done upstairs, though. Take a look."

As I walked up the stairs, I started to feel guilty about going outside instead of sticking around to help the old man. The tiles he'd put up were pretty straight, but a few of the corner pieces didn't quite match up when I looked at them real close.

"So, what do you think?" he asked.

"Looks great, Dad."

Learning The Hard Way in Hawaii

By Danielle Radin

"Maybe I didn't love him," she says with a glance down to her right shoe, "...maybe I was just desperate to give my heart to someone." She ties her long black hair up into a ponytail.

"Maybe," I respond.

It is silent for a while. We both know what she just uttered was a cover-up. Like her boyfriend's excuse for breaking up with her. It was something generic. Something like, *'Oh, it's not you it's me. I have to let you go to make sure I really love you. I truly believe in the saying if you love something, let it go, if it comes back to you it is yours to keep...'* She had a pretty good response to that, I thought. She said, "You're not letting me go, Donald, you're giving me up."

I never know what to say in these situations. I look at her with wide, sympathetic eyes.

"Do you think I loved him?"

I look at her with a sharp glance. I was not expecting this.

"Yes," I say, without hesitation.

"Do you think he loved me?"

She stares into the distance.

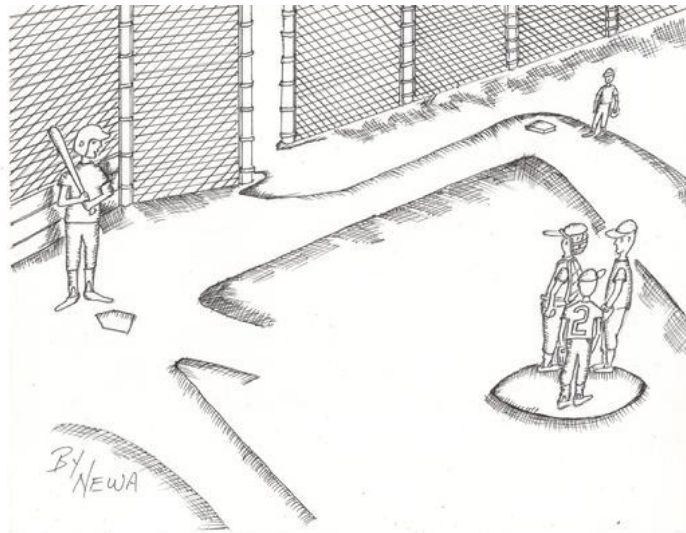
"No," I answer.

I wonder if the words sting her like they would sting me. He never made her a priority. I look out at the beautiful sunset that surrounds us. Even now, she makes him a priority. Even in the midst of a tropical paradise, the farthest from him that she could possibly be. I wonder if I could ever feel that way about someone. If that isn't love, I don't know what is.

I notice she has not touched her peach margarita- the one I bought her, mostly out of pity, for thirteen dollars.

"Why don't you down your margarita and just try not to think about him?" I whisper, immediately regretting the words as they leave my mouth.

She stares at me with the saddest eyes I have ever seen. Eyes that are slaves to his memory. Eyes that ask me *'How, exactly, do you propose I do that?'* I stare back into them with a blank expression. I do not have the answers she needs. I do not have the experience to handle this situation. I do not have the confidence to comfort her in her loneliest, darkest hour. So I turn to the waiter and ask him to bring us another peach margarita and put it on my tab.



"Mighty Mites" by Newa; Copyrighted Illustration

The MIGHTY-MITES

By Mark Barkawitz

I first met Kurt Gnewuch back in Farm League, which at the time was the lowest/youngest division of the East Pasadena Little League. He, my little brother Bruce—both had just turned nine—and I were on the Mighty-Mites. It was a stupid name for a baseball team but we didn't get to vote on it, so we were stuck with it. Bruce and I switched back-and-forth from first base and pitcher because we were just about the only two kids on the team (in the division) who could throw relatively straight and in-turn catch the

ball—the advantage of having a brother with whom to play catch daily. Kurt was our catcher because he had an old catcher’s mitt and could catch the ball, too. We would’ve been in first place but for the Dodgers, who had this big kid who was twelve-years-old on their team (at ten, I was the oldest player on our team) because he was recovering from a broken leg and couldn’t run fast. Previously, he’d played in the Majors! All season long, all he did was hit homers over the fence and trot around the bases like he was Mickey Mantle, beating-up on little kids.

The final game of the season, the Mighty-Mites were scheduled to play the Dodgers. If we won, we would tie them for the division title. I was the starting pitcher. By the fourth inning, that big kid—their ringer—had already hit two homeruns over the fence off me and we were losing by a bunch. So when that big kid came up to bat again, I called Kurt out to the mound. From first base, Bruce joined us, too.

“Whatta ya say we plunk ‘im?” I proposed. I’d heard Vin Scully, the future Hall of Fame announcer, use the term plunk—to intentionally hit a batter—when broadcasting a recent game between the Los Angeles Dodgers and their hated rivals the San Francisco Giants. Apparently, it was common practice in professional baseball—a way to send a message to the other team.

We three looked at each other, Kurt from behind the bars of the mask he still wore. No one smiled; even at nine and ten, we had on our game faces. They both nodded in agreement, and then hurried back to their positions before our manager came out to ask what was going on. We weren’t interested in any adult supervision.

I stood on the rubber and stared-in at Kurt in his crouch behind home plate in front of the blue-shirted ump. That big kid stood in the right-side batter’s box, slowly, menacingly swinging his bat through the strike zone. In fear for his life, our third baseman adjusted his athletic cup and backed-up onto the left field grass. Kurt put down one finger between his legs to signal the fastball, and then moved his catcher’s mitt way inside. I nodded back, went into my wind-up, and threw the baseball at that big kid’s left knee (Vinny had cautioned against head-hunting). That big kid didn’t move and the ball hit him right in the knee of the same leg he’d broken. He dropped his bat and crumpled in the batter’s box. The ump stopped the game. The big kid’s manager came out on the infield and helped him up—like he was really hurt or something—making a big deal out of it. Heck, back then I couldn’t throw hard enough to break glass. Bruce and Kurt and I just stood around waiting, still wearing our game faces, letting on nothing. They took the big kid out of the game. But we were too far behind to catch up and we lost the game anyway and the East Pasadena Farm League Division title to the Dodgers.

After that game, I didn’t see Kurt again until he was a freshman at Blair High School. I was a sophomore at John Muir High. As soon as we figured out that we were both former Mighty-Mites, he smiled and asked me:

“Remember that time you plunked that big kid in the knee?”

Of course, I remembered. Unless you’re a dolt—the unexamined life—you don’t forget that kind of stuff about yourself. Even in Farm League. Or a best bud like Gnewuch, with whom I hung-out—in varying degrees of proximity—for the next forty years.

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