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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.



"Joy" by Christopher Woods; <http://www.moonbirdhill.exposuremanager.com/>

It Was a Very Good Year

By George M. Flynn

Ice skating was the rage during the winter of my high school freshman year. Practically every neighborhood kid purchased skates. A large, shallow pond near the river had frozen over and provided the setting for hours of wintertime fun.

"Dad, can you buy me a pair of ice skates?" I asked, after being hounded daily by my ice hockey-loving friends to join them.

"I'd love to, son, but you know my union is on strike, and money's very tight now," he explained. He had already been out of work for a month.

Sadly, I realized we had to cut back, to tighten our belts, to do without.

“If you want ice skates, you’ll have to work and save for them. You might as well learn young that in this world you have to work for what you want.”

While the girls executed flawless figure eights and the boys shot a puck for goals, I sat sullenly on the sidelines and watched.

My best friend, Willis, felt sorry for me and shared his ice skates part of the time. His skates were pretty beat up but fit me perfectly. I loved the feel of the runners gliding over slick ice, the wind whistling in my ears.

To help pay bills during the winter, I shoveled snow. I prayed for blizzards so I could charge home owners a lot. The money proved a godsend. I remember arriving home after eight hours of clearing sidewalks with blisters and an aching back— but with a lot of cash.

In the spring I washed cars. My dentist, who learned of our hard times, paid me to wash and wax his Oldsmobile. Impressed by my professional job, he recommended me to his other patients.

During the summer, lawns needed mowing and gardens, weeding. Even though I didn’t earn a fortune, the money helped out tremendously at home.

By this time, thankfully, Dad had returned to work, and things started to normalize.

Autumn brought falling leaves. Neighbors solicited help raking them, shredding them, adding them to compost piles, and stuffing them into large bags for collection. My father frequently told me money didn’t grow on trees, yet all those colorful leaves resulted in cash in my pocket.

By early December, I had squirreled away enough money to buy the ice skates, along with two Frank Sinatra albums for Dad for Christmas. I shopped around for the best deal on the skates, and at a mall sporting goods store I bought them. I couldn't wait to pull them on, lace them up, and rocket across the pond, feeling the north wind brush my face.

That night I proudly showed my father my purchase. His jaw dropped; then he removed a box from the hall closet and handed it to me. "Happy early Christmas," he said.

When I opened the box, I discovered ice skates. We both laughed loud and long. Next day, I wrapped the extra pair of skates and would give them to Willis for Christmas. His skates were pretty worn, and I knew he'd love the new ones.

Funny thing—the pond never froze over that winter. It proved one of the warmest winters on record!

Since I couldn't ice skate that season, I spent a lot of quality time with Dad. We talked about the merits and drawbacks of strikes, about the future, about the strange weather, about life.

At night, while falling asleep, I could hear Dad crooning along with Frank Sinatra on "It Was a Very Good Year."

Looking back, yes, it definitely was a very good year.

Remembering Marilyn

By George M. Flynn

Marilyn Fox was a middle-school substitute teacher where I taught English. Short and feisty, she loved her job, claiming it kept her young and “on her toes.”

One time when I was ill and missed a week’s worth of classes, Marilyn jumped in, teaching grammar lessons like a pro, assigning homework, giving and grading tests, keeping order. She possessed an uncanny way of making students feel comfortable with her firm but gentle demeanor. Students loved her.

Marilyn was the mother of twins, Melissa and Fred. They were born prematurely and Marilyn almost lost them. When I taught them, they were model students— polite, smart and well-behaved. Always kissing them good-bye each morning, Marilyn loved her role as a mom.

Besides window boxes full of geraniums, Marilyn also tended a little garden— a few tomato plants, some basil, catnip for her felines, and summer squash. In August, she harvested a boatload of zucchinis and transformed them into zucchini bread. At school, she often brought in her baked goods for the teaching staff’s enjoyment.

“I see you’ve been baking again, Marilyn. There goes my diet!” one of the science teachers chuckled.

“Marilyn, your zucchini bread is tops!” I raved, as I cut a large piece—and then a second.

“Thanks, George, zucchini bread is my specialty.”

Marilyn saved her subbing checks to pay for family vacations on Cape Cod where she would sightsee, relax with a best-seller, or engage in her favorite pastime: cross-stitch.

In September, she showed me her latest handiwork, a framed 5x9 stitchery

that read, "Friends divide pain and double joy." Little did I know then that it would become a gift for my math-teacher wife, Carole.

Marilyn was always thinking of others. One time, out of the blue, she surprised me with a maroon-and-white blooming African violet in a ceramic pot. Moved by her thoughtfulness, I hugged her thank-you and displayed it on my desk for all to see. It was gorgeous, and from that specimen, I propagated many new plants. Marilyn, a plant-lover herself, marveled at my horticultural talents.

"George, your increase in plants reminds me of the miracle of the loaves and fishes in Matthew. I just love that story," she admitted.

Last autumn, Marilyn's health faltered and doctors diagnosed advanced leukemia. Always optimistic and with a sunny disposition, she trudged headlong through difficult treatments.

One cold winter's day, I bumped into Marilyn and Melissa at the supermarket where they were stocking up on baking supplies. Marilyn shared that she felt better, stronger, and would be returning to work soon; but shortly after that brief encounter, she died.

At Marilyn's wake, admirers crowded the funeral parlor. Carole and other girlfriends had chipped in to buy a huge spray of baby roses, Marilyn's favorite flowers. By contrast, I brought Marilyn's small violet and displayed it on a little table so all could be witness to her kindness. Like the flowers themselves, many of her other kind deeds had blossomed in our close-knit community.

"Mr. Flynn," Melissa asked, "...would you like to be one of Mom's pallbearers tomorrow?"

"Certainly," I consented. I had never been a pallbearer before and felt honored.

The next morning, mass was followed by interment in a nearby cemetery. Gale-force winds rendered umbrellas useless and cold winter rains drenched everyone. No one could distinguish teardrops from raindrops.

Now when I think of Marilyn, I'm reminded of John Ruskin's quote: 'Kind hearts are the garden / Kind thoughts are the roots / Kind words are the blossoms / Kind deeds are the fruits.'

The Valentine Dance

By George M. Flynn

I first met Julie O'Connor at a high school dance. Mutual friends had introduced us. Julie sported light brown hair tied in a ponytail, bright blue eyes, and a cute pug nose dotted with freckles. I was instantly attracted to her.

At the high school dances back then there wasn't a lot of dancing going on. The boys huddled together on one side of the gym, and the girls, on the other. As the night progressed, though, boys started slowly asking girls out onto the floor.

I longed to ask Julie to dance, but I feared she'd reject me, a fate worse than death. Our eyes met across the dance floor a few times, and I thought she smiled at me, but I chalked that up to wishful thinking.

Julie and I attended the same church, and sometimes after mass we tarried as our parents talked politics.

"How'd you like last Friday's dance?" I asked, making small talk.

“Oh, I had such a fun time,” Julie replied.

“The DJ should play the music louder,” I suggested.

“Yes, I agree,” she said.

After a long pause, I tested the waters. “Are you going to the Valentine Dance?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” she stated.

I swallowed hard. “If I asked you to dance with me to ‘Angel Baby,’ would you?”

I held my breath, hoping beyond hope she’d say yes. I felt my face flush and my palms go cold.

“Maybe,” she said, smiling. “Maybe.”

Well, it wasn’t a yes, but it wasn’t a no. I couldn’t wait for the Valentine Dance. The days sped by and soon it was time to get ready. I showered, dressed in tan cords and red sweater, and dabbed on some of my dad’s Old Spice cologne.

I arrived at the dance early, hopeful for a memorable evening. An hour into the dance, I cruised the gym looking for Julie. Was she late? Two hours later, still no Julie. Didn’t she say she wouldn’t miss the dance? I felt crestfallen.

When my father picked me up, he told me the news. Julie had been in an

automobile accident. As a passenger in the back seat, she was shaken but was expected to be okay. She was in Saint Luke's for observation.

Next morning, I climbed the hospital's staircase and, clutching a bouquet of white daisies, appeared in her doorway.

Julie stood by the window.

"Oh, George, come in," she smiled, happy to see me.

"Are you okay?" I asked, handing her the daisies.

"I think so, just shook up," she confessed. "I'm sorry I couldn't make the Valentine Dance. I dreamed of attending it ever since we talked. I just couldn't wait for you to ask me to dance."

Did I hear right? I grinned from ear to ear. *Hallelujah!*

"Well, aren't you going to ask me?" she questioned.

"Here? Now? But there's no music," I blurted.

"I can hum 'Angel Baby,'" she offered.

Julie rested her head on my shoulder and we danced.

After high school, Julie joined the Peace Corps and traveled to Africa. I was drafted into the army and served during the Vietnam War. We corresponded for a while but eventually lost touch.

Now as I chauffeur my son, Jimmy, to a high school Valentine Dance, I reminisce about pretty Julie O'Connor and our long, sweet slow dance.

“Way to go, Dad,” Jimmy pats my back, impressed. “Way to go!”

A Celebration of the Lord

By Carol J. Rhodes

Four trucks loaded with heavy brown canvas pulled into the big open lot next to the school yard where we third graders were having our morning recess. By lunchtime, the trucks had been unloaded and the canvas lay on the ground in neat rows. Lined up along the fence like birds on a high wire, we watched as several bare-chested men unrolled huge coils of thick hemp rope and erected massive poles of various heights.

Everyone in the class, including the teacher, could hardly wait for afternoon recess. Instead of our usual games, we watched the men lift the canvas into place over the poles by pulling on the ropes that were then stretched tight and anchored to steel stakes which they pounded with sledge hammers into the hard Texas dirt.

The next morning when my bus neared the school, I saw that a large banner had been strung between two posts in front of the tent. It proclaiming the arrival of Brother Paul, World Famous Evangelist, not the circus as I had hoped. When I arrived home from school, my mother had already heard the news about the revival and announced she and I would be attending the event that evening.

“You’d best start your homework right now, young lady. We’ll have to leave here at six o’clock sharp if we want to get good seats.”

It seemed as though the whole town had turned out to hear Brother Paul on this hot, muggy evening. The sides of the tent had been rolled up to take advantage of what little breeze might come up after dark. Down in front was a small wooden stage which faced rows and rows of battered metal folding chairs. After greeting a few of her friends, Mother and I found two seats about halfway down in the middle section.

The same men I had seen erecting the tent earlier in the day, only now dressed up in white shirts and ties, were bringing in more folding chairs and directing late comers to some empty seats right in front of the stage. Two dressed-alike young girls walked up and down the aisles passing out cardboard fans with a picture of Jesus on one side and an advertisement for Woodson's Funeral Parlor on the other. At an old upright piano adjacent to the stage, a large woman wearing a black hat leafed through a tattered songbook, marking her selections with tiny scraps of paper.

Promptly at seven o'clock, as the woman played "When We All Get to Heaven", one of the white-shirt-and-tie men took his place down in front and began singing. As he moved through a medley of spiritual music, the song leader invited the congregation to join in and clap hands. After a few minutes of this, a burly, red-faced man, carrying a well-worn Bible, came through the crowd and leaped onto the stage. Holding the Bible high above his head, Brother Paul's words of hellfire and brimstone soon worked the crowd into a frenzy of clapping and shouts of "Amen" as he read scriptures, prayed, and sermonized. Pacing back and forth, he repeatedly pulled at the suspenders holding up his too-short trousers and mopped his face with an already sweat-soaked handkerchief.

Halfway through still another long-winded prayer, Brother Paul abruptly fell to his knees. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he began an impassioned appeal for donations to support the work he was doing for the Lord. His helpers passed baskets among the crowd while the woman in the black hat played, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." After the baskets had passed from hand to hand through the first several rows, he rose to his feet.

"Now folks, don't you be droppin' no loose change in them baskets, y'hear. The Lord only wants the foldin' stuff, you know what I'm talkin' about, the kind that don't make no noise," he warned. I looked at the dime in my hand that Mother had given me earlier for the collection plate and decided to put it back in my pocket.

The people in the row in front of where mother and I were sitting got up and left. I looked around and saw some people in the back were also leaving. "Let's go, Mama," I whispered. She shook her head and told me to be quiet.

Brother Paul then prayed over the money baskets, and quoted scriptures about how it was more blessed to give than to receive. When he resumed preaching,

he told the remaining crowd: "I know some of you folks don't like what you're hearin' tonight, about idolatry an' wickedness an' the evils of sin. An' I know some of you folks won't be back tomorrow night for what will be my final appearance in this fine little town. But let me tell you, I'm gonna give you hell while you're here."

Brother Paul's admonitions continued well past my bedtime and that of some of my friends who had also come with their parents. But we were still wide-eyed when the service was finally over and the crowd was invited to partake of refreshments. My mother laughed when I asked her if the cookies and red punch they served was kind of like Holy Communion.

Later on, I told her how disappointed I was that we hadn't gotten to see a circus in the big tent.

"Oh, but we did," was her reply.

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