



SHORT STORIES TO WARM THE HEART

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The Smile

*Smile at each other, smile at your wife, smile at your husband, smile at your children,
smile at each other--it doesn't matter who it is--and that will help you grow up
in greater love for each other.*

-Mother Teresa

Many Americans are familiar with *The Little Prince*, a wonderful book by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. This is a whimsical and fabulous book and works as a children's story as well as a thought-provoking adult fable. Sadly, far fewer are aware of Saint-Exupéry's other writings, novels and short stories.

Saint-Exupéry was a fighter pilot who fought the Nazis and regrettably died in battle. Before World War II, he also went to battle in the Spanish Civil War against the fascist. He wrote a fascinating story based on that experience entitled, "Le Sourire," the English interpretation is, *The Smile*. It is this particular story I would like to share with you now. It is not clear if he meant *The Smile* to be autobiographical or fiction. I choose to believe it to be the former.

He said the Nazis captured him and threw him into a jail cell. He was certain from the contemptuous looks and rough treatment he received from his jailers they would execute him the next day. From here, I will tell the story as I remember it in my own words.

I am certain they will execute me. I became terribly nervous and distraught as I

fumbled in my pockets to see if any cigarettes had escaped their search. Luckily, I found one, but because of my shaking hands, I could barely get it to my lips. Still, I had no matches, as they had taken them.

I looked through the bars at my jailer. He would not make eye contact with me. After all, one does not make eye contact with the enemy, a rotting mass of flesh and practically a corpse. I called out to him "Have you got a light, por favor?" he looked at me, shrugged and came over to light my cigarette. As he came close and lit the match, his eyes inadvertently locked with mine and I smiled at him. I am not sure why I did that, perhaps it was nervousness or because when you get very close to someone, it is very hard not to smile. In any case, I smiled. In that instant, it was though a spark of light joined our hearts and souls together. I know he was resisting, but my smile leaped through the gated steel bars that generated a smile on his lips, too. He lit my cigarette, and he stayed nearby, looking me directly in the eyes, continuing to smile.

I kept smiling at him, now aware he is a person and not just a jailer. Likewise, when he looked at me it seemed to have a new dimension too. "Do you have kids?" he asked. "Yes, here, here," I took out my wallet and nervously fumbled for the pictures of my family. He also took out the pictures of his niños and began talking about his plans and hopes for them. My eyes filled with tears. I told him, "I feared I would never see my family again, never have the chance to see them grow up." Tears began to trickle from his eyes. Suddenly, without another word, he unlocked my cell and silently led me out of the jail and thru the towns' back streets. At the edge of town, he released me, then without another word, he turned and retreated toward town.

"My life was saved by a smile."

The smile is an unaffected, unplanned, natural connection between people. I tell The Smile story because I want people to consider what lays underneath the self-protective disguise we invent to protect ourselves, our dignity, our titles, our degrees, our status and how a person perceives us in certain ways. Underneath our disguises is where the authentic essential self conceals itself. I am convinced and not afraid to call this sacred place our soul. I honestly believe if our souls could recognize and connect with each other there would not be enemies, hatred, envy, fear or wars. I sadly conclude that every counterfeit layer which we so carefully construct through our lives, distance and insulate us from truly connecting with others. Saint-Exupéry's story speaks of that magic moment when two souls recognized each other.

I have had just a few moments like that. Falling in love and looking at a newborn baby are two examples. Why do we smile when we see a baby? Perhaps it is because we see a pure soul free of any defensive layers. We know and feel their smile is genuine and without deceit and our own baby-soul within us smiles wistfully in recognition.

Hanoch McCarty

Sticks and Stones

Words can make or break hearts.

—Unknown

Valentines Day means many things to lots of people, though when that particular holiday rolls around, I always think of my friend, Joan.

As a little girl, Joan believed the childhood chant, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." At least, she tried to believe it—once upon a time, when she was young, plump, and constantly teased.

Then things changed. Joan grew up—and-out.

Now an adult, she tips the scales at more than 700 pounds. Her friends politely say she is heavy. Her doctor calls her "morbidly obese." The rest of the world calls her fat. Some people whisper the word and some say it to her face. Unbelievably, some people say and call her even worse things.

Some assume she has not heard the cruel words. Unfortunately, she has, and they hurt her deeply. Nevertheless, Joan has learned how to avoid the cutting remarks; she simply avoids the people who make them and stays in her house, where she feels safe.

All the same, with their 25th wedding anniversary approaching the upcoming Valentine's Day, her husband planned a romantic night out for the two of them. Knowing it would be difficult; Dan began a persuasive campaign to convince Joan that she must agree to join him for dinner at a fine restaurant.

If there was anything Joan dreaded more than going out in public, it was eating in public. Nevertheless, for Dan, she reluctantly agreed.

To distract herself from fretting about the impending event, Joan, an

accomplished tailor, decided to make a stylish new blouse for their celebration. Then, all too soon, the big night arrived.

Dan picked a top quality restaurant; the food was perfect as was the romantic ambiance, soft music, and the attentive wait-staff. Unfortunately, the patrons were just the opposite.

Joan managed to ignore the rude stares. She even managed to disregard most of the tasteless whispers and blunt comments. At any rate, no matter how hard Joan tried, she could not overlook the young girl at the table across from them. The youngster never took her eyes off Joan. When the child stood up and headed toward their table, Joan cringed. Previous experiences had taught her that kids could be especially cruel!

The wide-eyed little girl paused next to Joan. Reaching out a single, tentative finger, she stroked Joan's indigo velvet blouse. "You're soft and cuddly, like my bunny," she said. Joan held her breath while the girl's tiny hand gently stroked her sleeve. "You're so pretty in that shirt." Then the little girl smiled at Joan and walked back to her seat.

That was all there was, a simple comment and a single compliment, yet they changed Joan's life!

Joan now says, "When people stare-I immediately think of a miniature angel's fingers caressing me, and I'm certain others are merely admiring my outfit."

Joan went on to say "when people mutter-I swear I can hear a young angel's voice reminding me that I'm pretty, and I'm equally sure the words others whisper are flattering. That's all I hear now, only compliments, words that can never hurt me."

Carol McAdoo Rehme

A Greater Plan

"Sometimes we don't know the strength we have within until we are tested."

–Unknown

I awakened from a sound sleep as I tumbled across our motor home. Dishes crashed all around me. In an instant, a wall of flames separated me from my husband Rusty, who was driving, and our twenty-seven-year-old daughter, Nikki, in the passenger seat.

The fire's intense heat forced me away from them. I pleaded with God to save all or none of us. I spotted a gash in the inside of the motor home's aluminum wall, and I began kicking my way through it, as I tried to escape. Even though I was not on fire, I could see my skin melting; blood gushed from my forehead, into my eyes, and blurred my vision.

The grass in the gully where I landed was in flames. As I frantically crawled away from the motor home, the fire pursued me. As I was racing from the horrific flames, I screamed, "Save my family! Save my family!" I crawled to a wire fence and tried to climb it, but fell off because my feet were severely burned, in extreme pain and powerless. Billowing black smoke practically blinded me as our motor home quickly incinerated. I collapsed, sobbing, sure that Rusty and Nikki had burned alive since the seats where they had sat just moments before were consumed in the inferno. Through my blurred vision, I could see two men running towards me. Screaming sirens from the ambulances and fire trucks were arriving, "thank God," I thought.

Rusty, Nikki, and I had been heading north on I-5 near Corning, California, on

our way to Washington State that Saturday, August 28, 1993. Rusty had pulled off the road onto what looked like the shoulder but was really a gully hidden by tall grass. Our motor home fiercely careened into the gully, landing extremely tilted to one side. We found out later the main gas tank punctured and we tumbled into the ditch.

When the paramedics lifted me into the ambulance, they told me my family was alive. I am not sure how long I lingered in a hazy like fog in the hospital; it could have been several days or a week. When I finally awakened, I slowly became conscious to the enormity of the accident. I learned that 48% of my body suffered burns and my back had been broken. Our daughter had crashed through the front windshield, luckily away from the fire; still she broke several bones throughout her body. My dear husband was laying in a coma two rooms from my own in the burn unit. He had 15 fractures in his head, 68% of his body was burned and only had a 9% chance of living.

Our lives, in an instant, changed forever. It was so hard to believe this was really happening. There were days I wanted to die. As I lay helpless in my hospital bed, I watched the seasons change from summer to fall. Everyone and everything seemed to be moving, except me. I felt trapped inside my severely burned body and the constant pain was ferocious. Tears poured from my eyes but my injured arms and hands would not allow me to reach my face to wipe them away. I had in fact become a prisoner in my burned, uncontrollable shivering flesh. At 47-years old, I was now facing the biggest challenge of my life, and falling into the deepest pits of despair and depression. My anguish felt as described by Georgia Shaffer in her book, "A Gift of Mourning Glories," when she writes, "winter existed both on the inside and outside of me."

Life had become nothing more than a routine, as had my care. Encased in

bandages from head to toe, my first few weeks consisted of five skin grafts and one surgery to repair my broken back. My stomach, once a place for luscious meals had now become my skin donor site. Doctors harvested skin there every three to five days, and then they stapled my stomach in place. I could not move on those days, and because of the idleness of my body, each muscle forgot how to move about.

The only thing I had left was a slight glimmer of hope that I would eventually recover. That belief carried me through every day and sleepless night, and I knew my view of life would never be the same again. I clung onto my faith like never before, and listened to music that helped lift my spirits. Each time the therapist entered the room I repeated Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Each time I repeated the line I got a little more hope. That hope gave me the strength to recover a little more each day.

I am what they call "A Hidden Burn." You might never know of my burns. I can cover my arms, legs, and feet. However, each time I remove my clothes I flashback to that August day which changed my life. Little did I know then, life had a bigger and greater plan in my families' future.

Thankfully, my husband and daughter survived, and we have since made it our mission to share our story with burn victims all over the world.

I hope anyone in need will find a glimmer of hope within the deep repository of yourself, as I did, to help you make it through the challenging times in life, knowing whatever obstacles life offers, there is a greater plan.

Susan Lugli

The Music's Gone

Ken Helser is an excellent musician who uses his talents very effectively communicating with incarcerated prisoners throughout the Southeast. He often shares with the inmates, "when I was a young boy I was given a little xylophone for Christmas. With it came a set of instructions. I was well on my way to learning how to play it when I lost the instruction booklet." After he and his parents had searched the house, the yard, and the family car, all to no avail, he sat down and began to cry.

"Mother," he whined, "the music's gone!"

"No, son," His mother replied, "The instructions are gone, but the music is inside you, listen to it, and you can play it."

"Here in prison," he tells the inmates, "you may feel cut off from everything, as if life is closing in on you, and like the music is gone from your life. But the music's inside of you; if you listen to it, you can play it!"

Wherever you are, whatever your circumstances may be, whatever misfortune you may have suffered, the music of your life has not gone. It is inside of you-if you listen to it, you can play it.

Nido Qubein

A Burning Desire

"Boys, there ain't no free lunches in this country. And don't go spending your whole life commiserating that you got the raw deals. You've got to say, 'I think that if I keep working at this and want it bad enough I can have it.'

It's called perseverance."

—Lee J. Iacocca

Life during The Great Depression was extremely difficult. Daily survival required enormous strength, courage, creativity and resourcefulness. The constant concern of making ends meet overshadowed the pursuit of any luxuries.

Because money was scarce, the basic joys of life, such as going on a picnic or taking a hike, were the sole sources of entertainment. Love was the glue that held families together and allowed them to survive the hardships of those trying times. Any money saved had to be protected and used for bare necessities or dire emergencies. During this time, a determined lad, named Melville, possessed a burning desire to attend college, despite his dismal circumstances. He held fast to his dream of earning a college degree from the time he was a young boy. He knew that his family was one of the poorest in town, but that never dampened his spirits.

The youngest of six children, he often helped his widowed mother as she took in laundry for a meager four dollars a week. Every member of the family worked hard to supplement their mother's measly income, doing whatever jobs were available. During the warmer months, the children planted a garden that provided most of their food for the months ahead.

Melville realized early on that he would have to assume full responsibility for his own college education. Determined to make this happen, although he did not yet know how, he kept his yearning alive.

In June 1935, at the age of fourteen, he overheard some school friends talking about the Civilian Conservation Corps (C.C.C.) that was in town to recruit able-bodied young men. They were seeking a team of laborers to help build state parks, restore, and maintain forests. Melville made himself a solemn promise that he would be selected to go.

As he entered the enlistment office, he knew the minimum age requirement was eighteen, but he would have a distinct advantage because he looked older than his true age. Melville wore a hat and suit that belonged to his older brother, with two bulky sweaters concealed underneath his shirt, to enhance his muscular facade.

The tall, burly man who stood behind the enlistment desk seemed nice enough. After asking countless questions, he made a motion with his large arm toward the stairs saying, "Okay, Mel, you appear to be qualified . . . provided you pass the physical. Report upstairs, strip down to your shorts, and take your place in line. The doctors are examining a group up there now. Good luck son."

Taking in a deep breath, Melville's shaky legs carried him up the steps. Removing his clothes, he prayed he would pass the doctor's scrutiny. As he compared himself to the muscular, hairy brutes in line ahead of him, he could not help but notice how young and puny he appeared. In order to look older and more confident, Melville took in a deep breath, stuck out his chest, threw back his shoulders and held his head high.

After dressing and returning to the main desk downstairs, another official

approached Melville's group saying, "You twenty men have been accepted for a six-month enlistment. Report here at 7 a.m., the day after tomorrow. A truck will take you to camp, where you will build a state park."

Suppressing his overwhelming enthusiasm, he watched as his papers were stamped and handed to him. He hurried over to the home of the superintendent of schools, Mr. Hawley, and knocked on his front door.

"Mr. Hawley, sir, I've been accepted to go to C.C.C. Camp. Here is my chance to earn money for college. Will you excuse me sir, please sir?"

With a serious look on his face, Mr. Hawley crossed his arms over his chest and then broke into a broad smile. "I'll give you permission to be excused from school for the fall term so you can work at the camp." Shaking his index finger at Melville, he added, "but I expect you to be back here in January to resume your studies. Good luck, Mel." "Yes sir!" Breathing a sigh of relief, Melville ran home to pack. He planned to save the money he would earn to begin college in four years.

In January 1936, this determined boy returned to school a strong-minded man, \$180 richer from six months of hard labor in the frigid Michigan woods. In fact, he was in such a hurry to attend college that he completed high school in just three years.

The money he had saved covered the cost of books and tuition for the first two semesters at Michigan State University. Charles, his oldest brother, who held several college degrees, surprised Melville by contributing enough additional money to cover college expenses for the remainder of the first year. Melville continued to work hard throughout the next four years, taking on odd jobs and studying into the wee hours of the morning. Graduating with a Bachelor's Degree in Chemistry was one of many goals he

would achieve in his seventy-two years with us.

My father's burning desire to earn a college degree was something he had visualized for years. Driven by The Great Depression and motivated by the premature death of his father, Melville knew an education would be his passport to a promising future.

Dad knew the importance of being "on fire" with a dream and the need to persist, in the face of all obstacles, in order to make it come true.

Laura Lagana (assisted by Melville J. Hayes)

A Letter of Love

Suffering becomes beautiful when anyone bears great calamities with cheerfulness, not through insensibility but through greatness of mind.

—Aristotle

How long has it been since you told someone special you loved them? After more than thirty years of carrying anguish in the caverns of my soul from fighting in the Vietnam War, one of the loves of my life renewed my spirit for living. I decided to return her acts of kindness with a letter of love, written to my stepdaughter.

Dearest Chelsea:

This is the 3,310th day I have loved you. I am a profoundly proud father! You have persevered and proficiently achieved a momentous challenge in completing your Bachelor of Arts Degree. Joy and merriment permeate all of Santa Cruz in celebration of your colossal accomplishment.

We have shared many wonderful experiences. The brainstorming sessions, book reports and short stories at times seemed never ending. Usually about when I was ready for bed, you had writers block or just wanted to talk. The many disparaging car experiences in the past few years are also unforgettable. Holy cow, I thought your car would never get out of the repair shop! Three of the most memorable calamities are; forgetting where your car broke down on the freeway; and getting lost on your way to Sacramento. Thank goodness, you had a cell phone and I had a map. Then there was the party at our Edison Street house when someone slashed your schoolmate's tires. I loved helping you through those challenging times. I admire you for going the distance to venture out and have fun even though there were risks, car problems, and parents that

muddied the way. You are very brave!

Chelsea, I want to tell you a story. I chose to bury it within me for a very long time. I guess I have been saving it just for this special moment. It often makes me feel sad. However, I recently uncovered a new and refreshing bright light inside my sadness thanks to our relationship. It was a life changing moment and a relief to feel sunshine in what I perceived as a dark hole in my past. As you read my story, try to focus your consciousness on peace and love, letting any sorrow drift away into nothingness.

December 2, 1967 was a sunny day in Vietnam. Local villagers tended their rice paddies. Near my U.S. Army jungle camp, water buffalo grazed peacefully near a small stream filled with clear flowing water. The one hundred-ten degree heat blisters my lips. My throat is parched and dried from the dust of a nearby road. Buses filled with young children go by my camp often as they return home from school, all singing and waiving as they travel past me.

The humid air and afternoon sun brought a surprise, a young boy. He is about twelve years old, almost the same age when I first met you, Chelsea. He has a mile-wide smile, his eyes bright and gleaming. He came to sell cold cokes to the American soldiers. We all welcome him, especially his cold drinks. He seems happy, full of energy, a nice boy. My fellow soldiers and I bought all his cokes, filled his pockets with money and enjoyed his company and laughter. As the sun disappeared just before dusk, he left for his village.

Darkness overtook the jungle quickly that night. The smallest glimmer of the moon peaked through the sky. It was pitch black and scary even in the confines of our safe encampment surrounded by concertina wire fencing. Outside our camp, six men

from our unit lie silently in the jungle; their mission was to listen for any approaching enemy soldiers and alert our company of their presence. Two man teams sit in foxholes also searching the darkness for any Viet Cong trying to infiltrate our camp.

Around eight o'clock over a thousand Vietnamese soldiers attacked our position. The battle began with a barrage of mortar fire followed by a ground assault. Our tiny stronghold of 240 combat infantry soldiers fights for our lives. The battle lasted all night; the severely wounded are in need of attention, while the dead lay scattered throughout the battle zone. Daylight could not come too quickly as I knew the fighting would end when the sun peaked over the horizon.

When the mornings first light peaked over the horizon, I walked through the battlefield searching for any survivors. Saddened by what I found, it was difficult to harness my emotions as I inspected the horrific carnage. In the distance, a large bulldozer dug a mass grave as I continued through a field of death. I was horrified when I found the young boy who had sold me cokes just the day before. His body laid face down in a crust of blood soaked dust. As I surveyed his lifeless body, my heart thrashed in my chest and anguish chilled my soul. I continued to stand next to him for many minutes silently asking myself how this could happen.

I noticed he was wearing long pants with four large pockets sewn on the legs. Hand grenades fill the pants pockets. Lying next to him was another casualty; an adult Vietnamese man, probably his father, with a grenade clutched in his hand. The innocent boy had accompanied his parent, helping carry grenades in their quest to overrun and kill my infantry company. Grief-stricken, I ordered a soldier to lift the boy's distorted body and carry it to the mass grave where we buried over one hundred enemy men, women and

children.

Though many years have passed, I have relived the image of that young boy thousands of times. His tragic death is sad, but I am grateful he helped me learn how fragile life is! Recently, a life changing moment came when I allowed myself to unlock my troubled soul and realized a person's spirit is unending. Now when I think of the young Vietnamese boy, I focus on his mile-wide smile, the same beautiful smile you have, Chelsea. Then I picture you in my mind and begin to remember the many loving things we have done together. They meant more to me than you could ever imagine. I think of you and how much joy you bring into my life. You are so loving and special. I love being your dad and I appreciate you more than I could ever express. I will always love all my children unconditionally and completely, including you, Chelsea, my only stepdaughter. You changed my life. -Daddy Duane

Duane B. Shaw

...

Dusting in Heaven

"Her courage, gentle love and affection touched the hearts of many!"

—author unknown

In loving memory of Melba C. Peebles - 1941-2002

My 8-year-old son, Jonathan is an exceptionally inquisitive and cheerful child who must have an answer for every question that enters his mind. I truly admire this awe-inspiring quality in him! However, what do you say when you do not have an answer for his question?

While tucking him into bed one night I faced the hardest question he posed to me up until now, "Mommy," he said, "where is my Granny now and what is she doing there?" I was entirely lost for words. There was a long pause of silence as I searched my heart and soul for an appropriate answer.

I guess Granny must have been listening to us because my answer to him came out as if someone was talking for me.

"Jonathan," I began, "Granny has gone to live in Heaven." With me knowing the special care and tidiness she took with her home, I added, "She is dusting the clouds and keeping them shiny white."

After a brief thought, Jonathan smiled as if he could imagine his Granny working hard in Heaven and kissed me goodnight. Relieved I had satisfied his curiosity, I let out a breath of relief. I too missed her and was happy I had moved through the interrogation of questions about Granny without tears. Jonathan then fell asleep, happily as always.

The next morning he ran through the house and jumped into bed with me. "Mom," he said, "please come and look out your window!" I half opened my eyes and

glared at the sun beaming into my bedroom. “Yes Jonathan, it is going to be a beautiful day.”

Jonathan beaming, he looked at me with his wide-open eyes and said, “Granny is doing a good job up there in Heaven. Just look at those white fluffy clouds!” His face glowed like a shaft of light and pride as he glared out the window as the sun came shining in.

I sat up in bed, lovingly pulling my baby into my arms and hugged him tightly. I swallowed the lump in my throat and searched for a response to his announcement.

“Yes, son, Granny is doing a great job.” I replied. “The 'Heavens' must be proud she came.”

Every so often, I catch Jonathan gazing at the fluffy white clouds with a smile on his face. I am sure Granny is smiling down at us while she dusts her heavenly white clouds.

Denise Peebles

Perseverance Pays

Do not hire a man who does your work for money,

but him who does it for the love of it.

—Henry David Thoreau

Whenever I need an emotional boost Daddy tells me a story my Grandpa told him.

"He was a hard worker," says Daddy. He owned a small iron fence making business, and built everything in his small garage. His six sons worked every spare moment during the day and well into the wee night hours constructing fences with the highest caliber of excellence and perfection.

Grandpa was an artist in his trade and a skillful teacher. His only flaw, he was not a very good businessperson. Though he spent long hours fabricating his art, rarely was he paid adequately for his hard and tedious work. He was not a wealthy man; in fact, he barely qualified as middle class. Yet, he set high standards for himself, and the quality of work his six sons produced.

They were obligated to work for him before and after school, plus on the weekends. When Grandpa was not making any money, neither did the boys.

"Pa," Daddy often asked, "How much do you get paid for the work?" Every time Daddy got the same response. "It's none of your business," Grandpa replied with his thick Italian accent. "What do you mean," Daddy persisted. "This is a school," Grandpa said, "When you learn everything you need to run the business you can charge whatever you want."

Grandpa was a stern teacher and none of the boys ever argued or second-guessed his knowledge. They all treated him with respect, joined him in his labors and were expert students at his school. They even worked without pay. Secretly though, they talked amongst themselves, hoping for a big order that would put more than a few hundred dollars in Grandpa's pocket.

That day never seemed to arrive. They persevered, working, gaining knowledge and developing new and faster techniques to build better quality iron fences than ever before. Still, there were weeks Grandpa went without a paycheck.

Until one unforgettable day when a top executive of a local construction company called, "We're building 100 homes, and need 200 staircases built. They are all the same style and size." Daddy, then only twenty-years old, but bright-eyed with enthusiasm, and had officially graduated from Grandpa's school, was now doing the bidding for the business. He anxiously dashed over to meet the executive. "We need the best quality railings. We need two hundred, and we need them finished by next week. We'll give you \$20,000 for the job!" "It's a done deal!" Daddy exclaimed, wondering how the boys working in their father's garage were ever going to produce that quantity or quality of staircases in such a short time.

The worker bees began what was about to be the biggest test so far in Grandpa's little garage. They spent sleepless nights sawing and shaping the staircases. Grandpa looked over them with a watchful eye as he had done hundreds of times before. The boys hurried in a race with time like little elves before Christmas Day.

However, the boys had one final test before getting their biggest check ever. On deadline day in which they had to install the staircases, snow began falling and quickly

turned into a blizzard. Nevertheless, the family was on a mission and refused to give in to the relentless storm. Nothing would stop them from installing the 200 staircases. They went to the construction site with all 200 staircases in tow. It was a freezing, 30 degrees outside. They bundled themselves in their warmest winter clothes, working with unprotected and near frostbitten hands, they drilled, nailed, and set all the staircases in place perfectly.

After hours of hard work in the frigid cold, for what seemed like a never-ending project, they never gave up and finished the job. Daddy went to meet with the top executive to collect his paycheck and boss greeted him with another surprise.

"I'm so impressed by your work!" the executive gushed, "It was timely, well done, and the finest quality!" Daddy, in his humbleness gave the man a smile, only anticipating his first big check. "We want to give you another big job," the executive said, "We need 200 more staircases and we want you and your brothers to have the job!"

That was the beginning of something extraordinary. After that, new work rolled in so consistently Daddy and the brothers had to hire people to work for them to keep up with all the orders. They have since turned Grandpa's little business into a multi-million dollar company that specializes in distributing doors and hardware. The demand is so high they have since decided to concentrate on large commercial contracts.

Today, Daddy wears a business suit to work, but he still has the heart of a boy who began his career in a garage with torn shoes and jeans. Thanks to Grandpa, Daddy passed on to me the most important lesson—that perseverance and love for what you do, does pay off.

If you keep trying, it is only a matter of time before your big break comes. It begins in your heart with a dream, hard work and perfecting your craft. Even a small beat up garage is not necessary to begin a dream, you just need passion and determination, and that comes from our heart.

Lisa Costantino Palmer

Courage to Love

*"Healing is a matter of time,
but it is sometimes also a matter of opportunity."*

—Hippocrates

It began one warm August day. I called my sister from a pay phone in a motor home park near Ashland, Ore. to get the latest health bulletin on our cancer stricken sister. "Oh Chuckie," she said, "The news is not good; its oat cell carcinoma of the lungs. With aggressive treatment, she'll live a year and without, only months." She barely paused for a raspy breath before declaring her own news, "And you know my damn cold that's hung on so long? The doc's trying to pin a cancer rap on me too." That was the beginning of a very sad ending.

My two sisters died within six months of each other. It was one of the hardest times of my life.

As I sat helplessly watching each sister receive chemo, we shared memories, cherishing each moment. We recalled our early days, our loving parents, and tripartite trips to Wilmette beach, sunburns slathered with vinegar, wartime romances and motherhood.

Somewhere between the laughter and tears, each revealed the truth. I learned that behind their picture-perfect lives was profound unhappiness. Ironically, my sisters shared similar loneliness and disappointing marriages. Each said, "If I only had the courage to leave, perhaps I would have found the love I always longed for."

My sisters quickly deteriorated, and as each day went by, I knew the love they

yearned for would never happen. After they died, I dreamt of them often, strewing flowers ahead of me as I walked down a pathway. Though they were gone, I just could not let go of their spirit and message.

I realized that I had to find happiness and love before it was too late. I too settled for less in my relationship, never found the extraordinary love I craved, and never found the courage to leave. I made a conscious choice to take back my life. I left my loveless yet stable marriage of twenty-eight years determined to pursue a greater love.

There were many surprises along the way, and I knew my choices would bring risks. My daughter, then 31, was so angry she decided not to talk to me. Eventually she had a breakthrough of her own, telling me that my courage to reclaim my life gave her courage to forsake her high-powered career path, return to complete her college degree, and change her life. Now she devotes herself full-time to gardening, rewarding work and novel writing.

Later, my ex-husband also had a breakthrough. He called to thank me, saying that because of my courage he found the love he was looking for in life. He called himself a changed man.

For me, ultimately, the love I found was not what I expected. I spent several hilarious years being single again, reveling in the joy that came with the freedom I had so desired.

I learned to build furniture bought in a box, to manage a power drill, and in due course to put a condom on a 50-year old hippie. I also learned to buy and pay for a new car, and to purchase property-all on my own. I learned to say "no" to what did not feel right and say "yes" to what nurtures and sustains me.

More than that, I learned to love. It was a deeper love than I could have dreamed. It was not a love I found in someone else, but the kind that came from deep within me.

At 58, I lost my sisters and left my longtime loveless marriage. Yet, for the first time, I realized that living extraordinarily happens from the inside out.

Now I embrace courage each day, and I share that courage with others, as I am right now, hoping you too will dare to follow your dreams.

For my next breakthrough, I hope to become an old, still very happy woman.

Charlene Baldrige

Closer and Closure

The difficulties of life are intended to make us better, not bitter.

—Unknown

Hardware and replacement parts are a man's domain of shiny knobs, hinges, and screws. I eased uncomfortably around the display in the aisle.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" Brushing a hand over his fringe of cotton-wool hair, the clerk looked up. "Say, aren't you one of Mac's daughters?"

I nodded.

"Sorry I couldn't make it to his funeral, sure will miss him. He liked to stop in each time he drove your mom to her volunteer shift at the hospital; just to shoot the breeze. You know."

I knew.

Daddy loved people, sharing with them, helping them.

"Say, don't think I'm weird or anything, but Mac came to me in a dream the other night."

I lowered my eyes.

"Yeh, we'll all sure miss him." He cleared his throat and glanced away.

Hours later as I drove home I wondered why the hardware store people would miss him so much and questioned why I visited the hardware store too? Possibly, I searched for "closure," or was the better word "closer?" Maybe it was to feel near Daddy just once more by prowling one of his old haunts.

His unexpected death left me reeling, feeling fragmented, incomplete. Now I

recognized a new emotion creeping in: jealousy. Envy that a near stranger had dreamed about my daddy, and felt close to him. "Why not me God," I thought. I feel cheated. I just need-something, anything, a second chance to say goodbye.

Blinking away a constant stream of tears, I steadied the steering wheel and turned on the car radio, searching for music to keep me alert on the long and lonely highway home. An "oldies" station played "Goodnight Sweetheart" and I sang along.

"... although I'm not beside you ... still my love will guide you" I choked out the words.

My inner-voice repeatedly whispers, "I want him back, God. I need him to be part of my life."

After six weeks, I tried piecing together my old routine. Eagerly, I reclaimed my long-time volunteer work at a local nursing home. It was a safe and gratifying place to give and receive love. Although I had not inherited Daddy's talent, I certainly had acquired his love of music, and the powerful desire to share it.

Playing the piano and leading the music mid-week in a casual sing-a-long never failed to lift my spirits. A genuine love for each of the elderly residents radiated joy in my life.

However, I avoided some songs. Especially the ones that felt imprinted in both my mind and my heart. Songs like "Green Grow the Lilacs," "Now Is the Hour," or "Moon River." Of course, there was Daddy's all-time favorite-the hauntingly tender "Oh, Danny Boy." Songs that reminded me of him serenade us during the lazy Sunday afternoon car rides of my youth. Those beautiful old songs painted an everlasting and a powerful portrait of Daddy with his harmonica.

The memories were tender and precious.

I surprised myself one day at the nursing home when I pulled out the dog-eared sheet music for one of Daddy's rollicking songs, "Shoo-fly Pie." My fingers gracefully flicked out the light melody.

"Do any of you recognize this one?" I began to sing. "Shoo-fly pie and apple pan dowdy, makes your eyes light up..."

Falteringly, by ones and by twos, age-rusted voices joined mine. Their words rattled like a collection of corroded screws in a battered cigar box. Still, as creaking memories hinged open, the song gained strength.

Then I heard it: Daddy accompanying me on his harmonica. The lively strains, the breathy notes, even his upper and lower dentures clacking a syncopated rhythm all their own against the shiny metal of his best "mouth organ."

His presence was real and tangible.

I could feel him standing right behind me. He was with me. He was part of me.

Eyes swimming, voice cracking, I sung haltingly to the song's end. My wrists limp and tired from playing, I paused to let the merry music wash over me, to save and savor the last lingering notes, to preserve the sacredness of both the moment and the memory.

Then I swiveled around on the walnut piano bench and ... came face-to-harmonica with matted haired, pajama-clad Paul.

The snaggle-toothed new resident grinned and wheeled closer. Broad fingers fumbled with an over-sized red harmonica. A trembling hand tapped out the spit against his thigh.

"How's about we try another?" Paul cackled and lifted the harmonica.

Swiping at my damp cheeks, I took a deep breath, closed the sheet music, and put it beside me on the bench.

"Huh, so much for a touching, spiritual moment," I thought.

Then, I glanced around the wheelchair-lined room where aged human beings, dented and scarred-were parked bumper-to-knee like tired taxicabs waiting at a busy airport. There was blind Alma, well-groomed Irene and Eleanor-in-pain. As well as Jim, Hazel, and Florence, plus row after row of the people I loved. Each and every one of them waited patiently, expectantly for me to lift their spirits with another song.

I smiled-inside and out-right into Paul's grizzled, grinning face. We made music together: Paul with his harmonica; me with my piano; and all of us singing and winging our way through the sunny autumn afternoon. I realized then I didn't need a momentary sign or vision. Daddy was as much a part of each note as he was a part of me. That was better than a final good-bye.

For the last song that day, I chose the melancholic and gently lilting strains of --
"Oh, Danny Boy."

My daddy's favorite.

Carol McAdoo Rehme

Nameless Friend

The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched.

They must be felt with the heart.

—Helen Keller

I have visited many funeral homes over the past three decades but when I was there to view my only son for the final time, it was as if I'd never been before. There were no rules of etiquette and acting naturally was impossible.

I could not sit still because when I did, my mind felt bombarded with thoughts that I could not handle. Thinking brought grief, pain, disbelief, anxiety, and suffering. Dealing with the reality of Jason's death was something my psyche and my heart were not prepared for. The more I thought about things, the more unanswered question I had.

Jason had been on his way to compete in the Western Canadian finals in Track and Field on a lovely Sunday morning. Two Americans who traveled behind him said he was driving fine, and then suddenly the car went out of control. The men applied CPR and contacted an emergency Medical team, but their help was futile, Jason was dead. He would never run on this earth again. We had all lost, not just a superb athlete, but also a human being who cared about others, a young man who would have made a significant difference. I had lost my youngest child, my friend, my reason for laughter.

Why did the car go out of control? I had just recently had the car in the repair shop. In trying to save money, did I select a mechanic who was unskilled? Why was he traveling alone? Perhaps if I had gone with him he would still be alive. What happened that day? Jason's doctor suspected an aneurysm. I could not face reading the medical

examiner's report. There were too many thoughts, too many questions, and no acceptable answers.

Keeping busy helped push away the thoughts. That hurt less. I stood up and walked over to the casket, huge sprays of flowers banking either side. I looked down on my son and ached to lift him up and hold him. What would happen if I did that? Was the back of his head so damaged I would discover some of the injuries he had sustained? Again, at this moment, there were painful realities I wanted to avoid! I touched him and could not feel his presence. I moved away and let the flowers hold my attention.

I wondered who had sent all these flowers and began reading the cards, then a second time out loud, to tell my daughters and their dad who had sent what. I choked up from all the kind sentiments, the outpouring of love and positive thoughts. Still feeling that need to be busy I moved toward the back of the funeral parlor. That was when I noticed the feet.

I could see that at the very back and to the right of the main entrance someone sat out of sight. Only the shoes and bit of trouser leg indicated somebody was present. Curiously, I wondered who it was and why they were hiding. I continued past the entrance until a boy came into view.

I was seeing a distressed young man, about seventeen years old. Jason was seventeen. Perhaps this was someone from the high school or a team mate from the Titan's Athletic Track Club. I was puzzled. I thought I knew all of Jason's friends and his teammates. I had never seen this young person.

I spoke to him, "Excuse me, I don't know you."

He looked so shy and vulnerable and seemed somewhat uncomfortable as he

stood. He replied, "I'm sorry. I do not belong here but your son was always kind to me. He would take time to talk to me at school. I know I don't belong, but I had to come."

Grateful tears burned in my eyes. He was allowing me to see my son through his eyes and as he spoke to me, I pictured Jason in my mind's eye, laughing, caring about others, interested in those around him. I could picture the two of them talking, Jason with his tall lanky frame and his melt-your-heart smile. I could see him listening to this young man, caring about what he had to say, taking time for others! This youth was confirming that Jason was a good person, a caring person. My emotions overcame me, and I found it difficult to continue to express myself.

I reached out for his hand in gratitude, really wanting to hug him, and said, "Yes, you do belong here. Thank you for coming. Thank you for telling me about my son."

I did not see the young man again until the following day at the cemetery while sitting at Jason's graveside. Many family and friends surrounded me, yet I felt so alone.

How could I go on without Jason? We had lived alone, our bedrooms side by side. We had chatted and laughed even as we lay in our beds at night. We had shopped at strange hours and were sometimes up and down at work as early as 6 a.m. Jason, not wanting to catch a bus to school, would travel down with me to the Y.M.C.A where I worked as a director. If I had an early class to teach, he would sleep in the Health Club until it was time to go to class. He shared my life. I shared his. How could he be dead? This was not real. Please give me back my son. I needed his comfort. I needed someone to hold me and take away the pain. I reached out to whoever stood behind me. Tears poured down my face, blurring my vision. I did not know whose hand held mine, but he held tightly as if feeling my pain. The tight grasp telegraphed caring and understanding

and I cried even more. When the tears stopped, I looked up into the warm caring face of that same youth from the funeral home. For the second time in two days, he was comforting me. No words could fill the void now; he was just there for me.

Later Jason's close friends spoke with me. They told me that at school, the young fellow had few friends and most students considered him a geek. I did not see him that way and would be proud to call him a friend, as my son had done.

Like a friend, he was at my side and understood my need for human touch. Like a friend, he gave me treasured good news about my son. I am grateful this young man was there for me. I never saw him again. I wish I knew his name.

Ellie Braun-Haley

Diapers, Dandelions, and Dirt

Enjoy each step on the ladder; the view differs from each rung.

—*Unknown*

Dear Son,

You cost me a fortune in diapers and blocks, tee shirts and shoes, baseballs...and broken windows. In fact, you shattered nearly everything in your path: my heirloom lamp, my full night's sleep, and even—at times—my motherly heart.

You even hoarded stuff. Baseball cards, odd-shaped stones, dryer lint, Halloween candy and bottle caps. You kept them all in your pockets or under your bed, on the top of your dresser, in the corners of your closet and on the windowsills.

You were stubborn; sometimes you were downright mulish.

You were loud and rude.

You were messy and lazy.

You disobeyed your father, fought with your sister, and argued with me. You ignored curfews, homework, and your little brother. You listened to the wrong music, watched the wrong movies and read the wrong books. Your dirty handprints smudged the walls, growing higher and higher and higher towards the ceiling until—quite suddenly—they were gone.

Regrettably, so were you.

Only now—with the distance of time and the wisdom of middle age have I really counted the cost of knowing how much you were worth.

Now I see that you gave me a fortune in treasures: a fistful of wilted dandelions and a heart full of unconditional love. Although you interrupted my sleep, you managed

to mend my days with your boundless curiosity, sticky kisses, senseless riddles, and silly songs.

Oh, yes, you collected stuff. Your most prized collection was your exuberant friends and you filled our home with them. Their shouts of laughter echoed from every corner of the house. Could it be that they were attracted to your quirky humor, your vitality, your sensitivity, your obvious joy in life?

You formed opinions, lots of them, and you learned to defend them. Eventually, you even discarded some in favor of ours. You did your chores and—with some prodding—discovered how to organize your time, your possessions, your thoughts ... as well as your bedroom, somewhat anyway.

Among the safety of loved ones, you learned to compromise, to set standards, to value family above all others. Most of all, you taught me priceless lessons about friendship, persistence, accountability ... and patience. You taught me that value rates higher than cost.

Oh, I still do not endorse your taste in music and movies, and I always hope to see improvements in that regard, after all, you are not perfect, yet!

Then, who ever said sons needed to be perfect?

Love,

Mother

Carol McAdoo Rehme

Embraced by the Beach

It's not too late...

Sunrise...Beach...Blue-black curtains circle the horizon. The morning sun silvers the sea in a single molten ribbon of light.

I stand face into the wind. Into the crashing white caps.

Rain.

I stand face into the rain. Tingling darts wash away the salt on my skin. I rinse my hair in the rain.

The white sea foam brushes a long, single neon line 'tween the brown sand and the ever darkening sea and sky. Deserted, the beach is left to its permanent residents, gulls and terns diving like thoughts into the waves, pelicans skimming the surf reminding us of their dinosaur beginnings, and one everyday visitor, me.

I stand, face to the clouds, mouth open and drink.

My salt-thirst is quenched with a cool silkiness. I stand arms open wide. I grin.

"...Come, my friends, 'T is not too late to seek a newer world..."

How long has it been since we've done this? Since we were kids? Why have we waited this long to be completely aware of every second, every sensation, and every thought?

"...Push off, and sitting well in order smite. The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds. To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths; of all the western stars, until I die..."

I was at the beach working on my monologue for my next audition: Tennyson's 'Ulysses'. It was not until I was howling my lines into the storm, running down into the surf, into my images, defying the pounding waves, squinting and guarding my eyes

against the pelting rain, that I saw the image that I needed to connect to my words.

Sailing silently, inevitably, in and out of the rebel-gray mist, a man-made leviathan, a blue bottomed-white topped yacht, a hundred feet long and more, moved across the horizon, the Flying Dutchman, that spectral ship of legend bringing images and meaning to words far beyond my first conception, to this day, this place, my own Cape of Good Hope.

"...It may be that the gulfs will wash us down: It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles; and see the great Achilles, whom we knew..."

The words disappeared from my mind and vibrated in my arms, my lungs, and my heart. Beyond the use of them as an acting tool, the words had made their way into self-awareness, into recognition. They were now my mantra, incantation, hymn for my work, my life, and or the times in which we now live...

*"...Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."*

Marc Durso