

The Best of

BEVERLY BECKHAM

I was the sun, the kids were my planets,
and other reflections from the Globe columnist.



The Boston Globe

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Introduction

Every Wednesday night, at 11 o'clock, sometimes a little after, in a little room in a little club on Columbus Avenue in Boston, pianist Michael Kreutz plays his closing number, "What I Did for Love," a song from the hit musical "A Chorus Line."

Wednesday is show-tune night at the Napoleon Room at Club Cafe, and for three hours Kreutz sings and plays and patrons get up and sing, too, many faces and voices familiar, but always some new ones, every week different.

But what never changes is the final number, which we sing all together. Sometimes the singing is raucous and sometimes it's tender. But no matter the mood, the song is always true.

*Kiss today goodbye,
The sweetness and the sorrow.
Wish me luck, the same to you.
But I can't regret
What I did for love, what I did for love.*

When I was a kid, I learned to write with a pen dipped in ink. There were inkwells built into our wooden desks and it was a big, big deal, graduating from pencil, which you could erase, to pen, which was indelible.

Dipping the tip of a pen and getting just enough ink so that it didn't spatter or smear or leave a big black spot was an art. Making cursive letters was an art, too. But blotting the carefully drawn words, taking rough absorbent paper and pressing firmly on the still wet vowels and consonants,

pressing and pausing was most important because it was this that preserved the art.

Singing “What I Did for Love” every Wednesday night is like blotting ink. It preserves a moment. It’s a slowing down and a taking notice, too, of all us, all together, up too late, a workday looming, but singing away and smiling at this crazy thing and all the crazy things we all do for love.

Writing preserves moments, too. You have to slow down to write. You have to ponder. This takes time, noticing life, all of us in our separate worlds, but sharing so many of the same moments - births, weddings, epiphanies, friends lost and found, disappointments, celebrations, all the hellos and goodbyes that fill us and deplete us.

We don’t dip pens in inkwells anymore, and most of us don’t get to sing on Wednesday nights.

But we all live lives full of sweetness and sorrow.

This is our connection, what we do for love. These are my stories, but they are your stories, too.

Beverly Beckham

July, 2013



I

Beginnings

A Gift of Inspiration

February 12, 2012

I never met her, and yet she changed my life. I wrote to tell her, but this was back in 1978, and what I said then was only that her words had propelled me to change. Or at least to try.

I was 31. I had a husband, three kids, a very sick mother.

I was busy.

Too busy to pick up a dream I'd put on a back shelf years before.

But Dorothy Gilman's words, which I read in McCall's Magazine while waiting at a doctor's office, compelled me to do this.

If the doctor had been on time?

If I'd picked up Newsweek instead?

Would I have tried so hard? Would I have ever even dared to try?

The magazine had printed an excerpt from Gilman's newest book, "A New Kind of Country." And though the story was about her, a much older woman than I was back then (she had raised her children and was now taking time for herself), I felt a connection. And in a conversation she imagined she might have with God, I felt something more.

The imaginary conversation went something like this:

It is Judgment Day and God says to Dorothy, "So what did you do with the talents I gave you?"

And Dorothy hems and haws and says, "Well, um, I was busy with my kids, taking them to hockey practice and baseball and busy with my husband having dinner parties and

well, you know. I didn't have time to use what you gave me."

And God looks at Dorothy and says not with anger, but with great love, "But when I gave you those talents, you didn't have a husband and kids. It was just you. So what did you do with your gifts?"

It was a lightbulb moment right there in the doctor's office. What were my gifts and what had I done with them?

Every nun I ever had said I could write. They all gave me As. They called me a writer.

But when I went to a public college and my English teacher said I couldn't write, I believed her. And I stopped writing, though I never stopped wanting to write.

Now here I was 31, with three little kids, thinking, yes, I would write. I would try. But where to start? What to do? How to begin?

I went to the library and read books about writing. I bought writing magazines. I filled notebooks full of other people's writings, copying words and phrases and whole paragraphs that I loved. And then I read them out loud. I imitated. I experimented. I practiced.

My father said, "I paid for you to go to school to be a teacher."

My husband said, "You don't get worse at something you do every day. Just keep trying."

The first thing I had published was an anti-nuclear power letter to the editor. Three sentences in the Stoughton Chronicle. I bought 10 copies.



What followed was two years and one wall of my sewing-room-turned-office-pasted-with-rejections-slips, some with encouraging notes scribbled at the bottom, my favorite from "Playboy" ("Dear Mrs. Beckham, Thanks for sending 'Thy Neighbor's Cheesecake.' I thought it was funny and clever, but I think we've invested enough space on Talese lately. I'd better pass, but I wish you well in placing it elsewhere. . .").

Then I wrote a column that The Boston Globe published on the front page.

I wrote to Dorothy Gilman again, thanking her, telling her what her words had done for me.

And again she answered. Ten years later, when I wrote and told her I was having a book published, she offered to write a blurb.

When I read that she died at the age of 88 of complications due to Alzheimer's disease, I thought once again, how different my life would be if I had never read her.

Listed among her many accomplishments were the children's books she wrote and the novels for young adults and her 14-book Mrs. Pollifax series.

But there was no mention of "A New Kind of Country."

It was never a big seller. It never won an award.

But it made me something I always wanted to be.

Dorothy Gilman used her gifts and because of her I have used mine.

I bet in their real conversation, God is pleased.

The hands that tell of life and love



June 17, 2007

I am my father's daughter. I have his hands, old hands, worker's hands, calloused and sun damaged. And I have his ways.

His ways I accept. The hands stun me.

I look at them and they are his, only smaller; the fingers short, the knuckles creased, the veins like tree roots too close to the surface.

How and when did this happen?

My father's hands fixed things. They were exact, like tweezers, plucking tubes from the back of our TV, testing them,

until the one that was making the picture arc was found.

They built things. Drawers in my room. A trellis for the front walk. A patio where we wrote our names in cement.

They scraped and painted my first two-wheeler - a used, rusty old bike that they scoured and shined. And they steadied me as I rode it up and down the street, until I said to let go.

My father's hands gave me the keys to my first car, a relic that they buffed to the max. And they held my hands on my wedding day and they let go of my hands forever almost two years ago.

When I was young and my father was young, too, the hair that sprang up between his knuckles and nails was thick and dark. I used to ask him why he had hair on his fingers when no one else I knew did. When he was old, this hair was still thick but white. It identified him. I have these hairs, too, only they're so light people don't see.

But I see. I see more of my father in me every day.

When he was 77, he got a phone call one January night from a man who said, "Is this Larry Curtin? Well, I'm your brother."

We flew to Florida to meet this brother. My father didn't want to go. He didn't want to believe that his mother and father had given away their first child.

And he may never have believed, if he hadn't met this brother who had his eyes, his wit and his hands.

My father kept journals. Not conventional ones; he didn't write down his thoughts. But he wrote down the temperature. And weather conditions. And what he ate. And if he got a haircut. And when the Red Sox won. And what he bought at Home Depot. And if I called him.

He put silver stars on the days I called, and at the end of every month he counted them, then graded me. I got mostly Bs, never an A+, as he frequently reminded me. But on days

when I called twice, he gave me a gold star.

My father kept track of some strange things. I do, too. Not the same strange things. But I have a journal, in which I sometimes record the weather. And I have a journal of favorite quotes. And a dead book, which is really a journal that memorializes dead people. And since last year I've been keeping a gardening journal, too.

It's the gardening journal that got me staring at my hands and thinking about my father. It was early morning, a time he loved, quiet and cool, and I was cutting and taping - something he did, too, and writing about how the Miss Kim didn't bloom this year, and how the rabbits have eaten every one of the clematis, and where I bought the Mohican Viburnum - when I saw my hand. And it was his hand. And his Scotch tape and his coffee cup and his soul inside of me.

And I remembered my father unscrewing the cardboard backing on our old TV, painting my "new" old bike and writing our names in cement, his hands always doing, helping me.

In the weeks before he died, I sat by his side and tried to picture him as his mother's son - fat fingers, rosy cheeks, dark curls - fresh from a bath, life pulsing through him. But I never knew him this way.

He told me he was lucky, that he'd survived five years as a soldier and more than 20 as a police officer. That he'd loved watching his grandchildren enter the world.

And I held his hands - pale now, the skin paper thin, but big still, bigger than mine - and told him that I was lucky, too. My father kept journals. Not conventional ones; he didn't write down his thoughts. But he wrote down the temperature. And weather conditions. And what he ate. And if he got a haircut. And when the Red Sox won. And what he bought at Home Depot. And if I called him.

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Transported through time by a pretty frock

July 15, 2012

The dress looks like one my mother wore when I was a child — crisp, white cotton festooned with big red flowers, a cinch waist, sleeveless, summery, pretty. I found it on a sale rack, held it up to me then tried it on.

It was a time machine.

I have a Kodachrome slide of my mother wearing a similar dress. She is standing under a rose-covered trellis in front of the house I lived in until I left home to get married, squinting because the sun is in her eyes. “Smile, Dot. Smile!” I hear my father shouting. He took the picture. He bought and painted the trellis. He planted the roses.

Only the picture remains.

We lived, before this, until I was 7, in a three-decker in Somerville on the second floor above the landlord. Sometimes my mother and I would take a bus to Central Square to shop. We’d visit the florist first and smell all the flow-



ers, then thumb through magazines and comic books at the newsstand, then head for the five-and-ten, where we'd spend an hour poking around.

My favorite part of the day was sitting on the swirly stools at the soda fountain. I'd get a vanilla milkshake, and my mother would sip coffee and smoke a cigarette. And then we'd head for home.

Once in a while we would we make one more stop at a shop that sold ladies' skirts and blouses and dresses. My mother would always gaze in that store's window and point out all the pretty things, but only rarely would we go in. This was one of those times.

My mother had no reason for pretty things. She took care of me, and she worked part time at Howard Johnson's. It was only later when she worked in retail, selling hats, that clothes were important, that she had an excuse to buy them.

But this was before then.

A bell tinkled when you opened the door of the small dress shop. Inside smelled as sweet as the florist's. I saw the flowery dress first. It bedazzled.

I sat on the floor of the changing room and watched it transform my mother. She didn't look the way she had sitting at the five-and-ten drinking coffee just a few minutes before.

She bedazzled.

She was 29. Of course she bedazzled. Of course she longed for pretty things. I told her she looked beautiful. I begged her to buy the dress, but she put it back on the hanger, thanked the salesladies for their help, and we walked across the street and rode the bus home.

I told my father about the dress. He always asked me, "What did you do today?" Maybe he drove to Central Square and bought it for her. Maybe she went back and bought it herself. I don't know.

But she wore it for years. It moved to Randolph with us. She wore it to church on Sundays. She wore it to Storyland one August. She wore it posing on a sunny day under our trellis.

I am too old to be wearing a dress festooned with roses. I am not tall. I am not my mother. I am old enough now to be her mother.

But I am all that remains of her.

And so I bought the dress and brought it home and put it on and stood before the mirror and squinted the way she did when she was looking into the sun, hoping to see her and not me.

And I did. I saw her the way I remember her, not in the mirror but in my head and in my heart, where I always see her. I saw her under the trellis, swirling and smiling. I saw her young and pretty and happy.

I like to think she saw me, too, remembering her and missing her. The dress brought her back. The dress brought me back, too.

A grandmother whose deeds spoke of her love



January 14, 2007

I thought she was doing me a favor. All the times I would call her on the phone and ask, “Will you watch Robbie this afternoon?” or “Can the kids spend the night?” And when she said yes, which she always did, I thought my mother-in-law was sacrificing her plans and her energy to watch my children.

Now I know better. Now I know that my children were her plan. They filled her heart. They made her happy.

She wasn’t verbal with her emotions., my mother-in-law. Scottish born, she kept things inside. She was 7 when her father went off to war, 9 when he came home and 10 when

he died. She had him back for 10 precious months and then she lost him again.

And lost something of herself, too.

She spoke the King's English with a Scottish lilt. She wore suits and, on Sunday mornings, gloves. But she scrubbed her own floors and washed her own windows and, in the parlance of the time, was a lady. I never saw her act up or out, or kick up her heels, or laugh so hard that she cried. I never saw her lose control.

Not when her husband died. Not when she lost one leg, and then another. Not even when she lost her only daughter.

She bore her pain like a Marine. She dried her eyes. She sat up straighter. And she carried on.

She loved my children. I understood this. But I didn't how much she loved them. How could I? I was a mother, then, not a grandmother, and I believed that her love was less than mine.

If she were here now I would be sitting at her kitchen table drinking tea and eating the Pepperidge Farm chocolate chip cookies she always bought for me, asking her why.

Why didn't you tell me that being a grandmother isn't love one step removed but a grand love, a huge, twinkle in your eyes, lilt in your steps love that you don't expect? A Valentine in August. A night sky full of moons.

Why didn't you tell me that you never tired of my children? That you loved when they ran to you, when they hollered, "Grandma! Grandma!" even in church, when they begged to sleep over yet AGAIN?

That you were never just visiting me. That you were stopping by to see them, to get a hug when they were little and a "Hi, Grandma!" when they were older. That being with them was a reason for being.

And she would say, "I did tell you all these things, just not

in words. I showed you. Couldn't you see?"

I see now. I look back and see how she waited at her door exclaiming over each of them, at every age, and at whatever they had with them. A flower. A paper. A suitcase. A friend.

I see matching wool coats that she bought for them in Scotland, and navy blue sweaters that took her months to knit.

I see how she always had time to sit down and listen. Time to let them rummage through her desk, her photos, her jewelry, even her clothes. "Grandma, do you have?" "Grandma, may I borrow?"

"A dime?" "A dollar?"

"A scarf?" "Your car?"

She gave them what they asked for. And she gave them what they didn't ask for - her heart.

I know this now because my grandchildren have my heart. I wait at the door and greet them with hugs and smiles. I give them M&Ms. I march with them around the house. We sing. We play records. We play pretend tea. We have picnics in a little tent. And we read "Bear Snores On."

And when their parents ask, "Can you watch Lucy Wednesday?" or "Can Adam sleep over?" I think that there is nothing in the world that I would rather do.

"Mimi" my grandchildren call me. It is my favorite name.

A friend e-mailed me last week, a woman I met 39 years ago. She's a grandmother, too. "My husband and I used to travel the world," she wrote. "Now we ride up and down I-95."

She wasn't complaining. She was bragging. I-95 south takes her to one set of grandchildren and I-95 north takes her to the other.

I wait at the door. I hear a little voice. I hear two little voices. And I know that no sound on earth will ever be dearer.

Time doesn't heal, but it helps you cope

November 25, 2007

There's a Willie Nelson song that keeps playing in my head. "I've been feeling a little bad, 'cause I've been feeling a little better without you."

My aunt Lorraine died 10 years ago and the song, I suppose, is a reminder that not only have I survived, but that I have grown, too, and despaired and rejoiced and wept and failed and laughed and succeeded, all without this woman I was certain I could not live without.

I thought it would be impossible to feel joy without her. Or watch an old movie without having my heart hurt. Or drive past her house without aching to go inside and see her there, in her big chair in the family room, her glasses on, reading a book.

But I have done all these things. And each time was a little easier. Each month. Each year.

And this is good.

But this is bad, too, because how is it possible that life goes on with its celebrations and parties and children growing up and children being born when there are people you love missing, everywhere you look?

Mothers. Fathers. Friends. Children. They die. And we



weep and we stop sleeping and eating and smiling and listening.

Nothing engages us.

And then something does. Just for a second. And then more seconds.

Lorraine was 62, healthy one day, dead three weeks later.

“The doctor must be wrong,” I told her when she called, stunned and frightened and as disbelieving as I.

A mistake. That’s what it was.

But it wasn’t.

Her Snow White skin turned yellow. She took to her bed. She stopped reading. And eating. And still I said, no.

Even when she died, I said no. It can’t be. I won’t let it be.

Her brother flew from California to be with her, to be with us. But I didn’t want him. I wanted her.

Lorraine was my mother’s sister, 11 when I was born, more like a sister to me than an aunt. I can’t remember a time when I didn’t love her, not when I was 5 and she spanked me all the way up Prospect Street for running out in front of a car. Not when I was 10 and she and my mother weren’t talking and she sat in the passenger seat of her old green car in front of my house on Christmas Day, while her husband, Frank, came to the door with my presents. Not when I was 13 and begged her to convince my mother that I was old enough to wear lipstick and she said, “You’re not!” Not even when we were adults and argued about politics, a silly fight, and the loudest and longest we ever had.

Lorraine was a part of my life all of my life, and when she died, I wept the way people in movies weep, inconsolably.

She knew the family stories. She remembered all the names. She knew how to get crayon off wallpaper and gum out of hair and what works for colic and how to accessorize and how to disguise eggplant so that it actually tastes good.

I made her secret chocolate-fudge recipe after she died. But

I couldn't eat it. I couldn't read a book or watch TV or have a conversation or take a breath or close my eyes without thinking that I had to rewind, reframe, and somehow get back to before.

Time doesn't heal, but it changes things.

Ten years later, I come across Lorraine's signature on a card she sent and my heart doesn't flinch. I look at photos of her when she was young and I don't moan. I make her fudge and I eat it.

But I still can't drive by her house without wishing she were inside, or finish a book I love or a movie and not want to tell her about it. The other night, when "The Enchanted Cottage" was on TV, I thought, Lorraine would love this.

I wish she knew my grandchildren. I wish I could talk to her about my father's father. I wish I could just talk to her. But all this wishing isn't painful anymore.

It's manageable.

And this makes me happy.

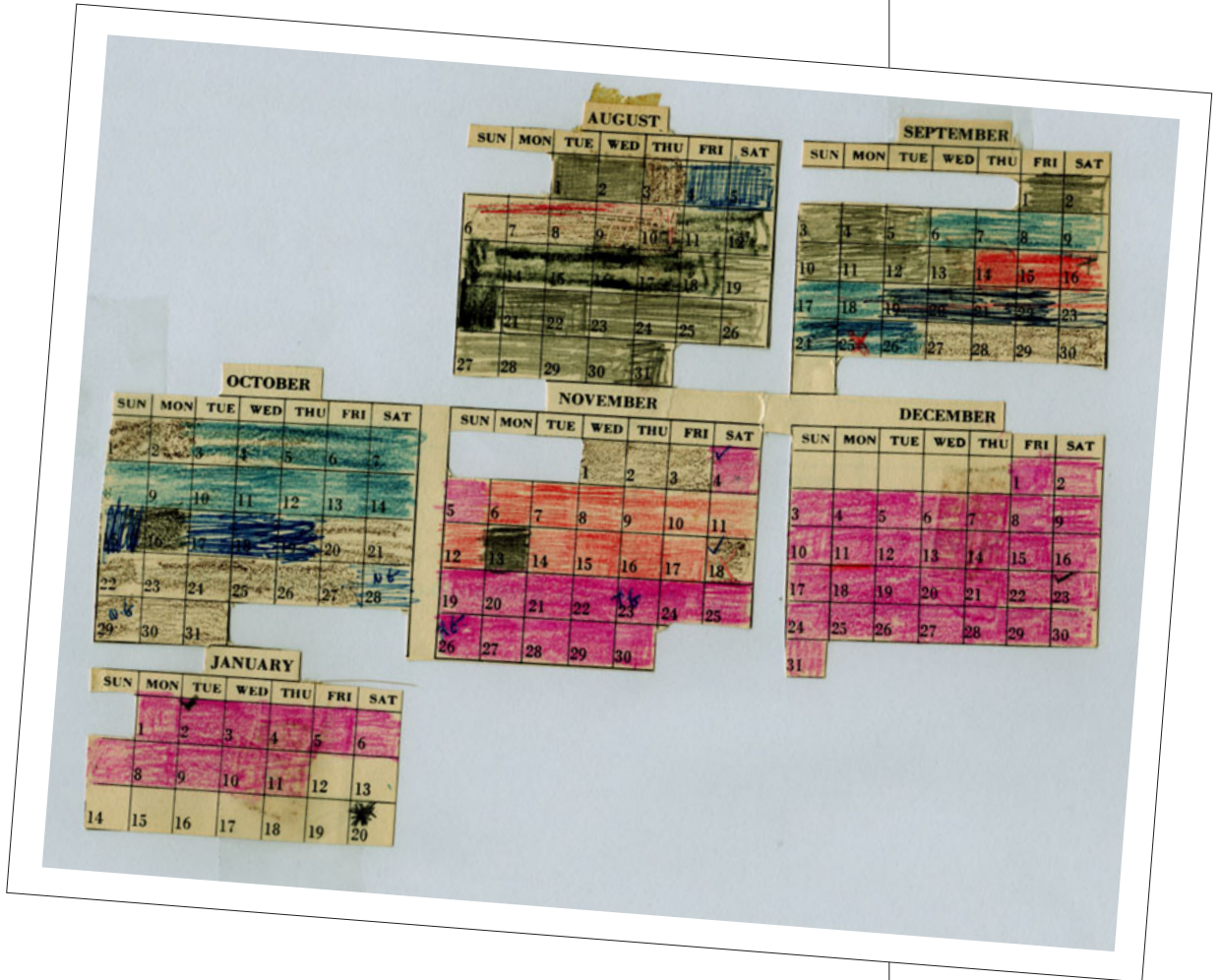
And sad.



II

Weddings
and
marriage

Good things happen while you're waiting



January 20, 2008

I still have it, I know, tucked into some scrapbook, a small calendar I cut and pasted into an oddly shaped personal calendar for me.

I taped it to my bedroom mirror, bottom right, where it was easy to reach, and every morning for six months, I would color in the day. No check marks. No X's. Just red or blue or black or gray on carefully tinted squares.

I was marking off time until my wedding day, from July

until January, a smile on my lips, the song in my head always the Beach Boys' "Wouldn't it be nice if we could wake up in the morning when the day is new? And after having spent the day together, hold each other close the whole night through." I was so eager to begin my new life that I didn't give much thought to the life I was leaving.

I was 20, then. I had a mother, a father, a second-hand car my father bought when I was a freshman in college and was still paying for when I was a senior so that I could get back and forth to school. I was the first in the family to go to college, but I lived at home. I had never been away from home.

What must my mother have thought when she looked at that calendar? When she saw all the eagerness and expectation in those squares?

In my mind I see her, not face-on, but in the mirror, smiling behind me. I see the stuffed animals on my bed, my old record player, the stack of 45s next to it, sweaters and skirts everywhere, and me, as I was then, little more than a child.

This is the gift of time - that you can look backward and see.

But as much as you think you can also see forward, it is impossible.

I thought I could. I was positive that when the last square on the calendar was covered and I walked down the aisle, life would go on just as it was except that I would be Mrs., waking up in a different house, eating breakfast at a different table, studying in a different chair, but that's all. Nothing else would change. Not the music I listened to. Not my friends. Not my clothes. Not my beliefs. Not my mother and father. Not the world.

I never once imagined 40 years later. Forty years was outer space, as far in the future as silent movies and the Great Depression were in the past. There was only today and next week and next year.

But here it is now my 40th wedding anniversary.

Benchmarks make you pause.

When we were married 25 years, my husband and I renewed our vows. They felt more solemn than the first time we said them. “In sickness and in health, until death do us part” weightier, no long an “if” but a “when.”

The first time we smiled for the cameras. The first time our parents sat misty-eyed in the pews behind us. The first time was before losses, and sorrows, and disappointments.

When I was young, I believed I would always be young. I believed that I could die at any moment, but that I would never be old.

“You’re not old,” my grown-up kids insist. “Sixty is the new 50.”

Perhaps. But there’s no denying that 40 years married is a long, long time.

Katherine, my neighbor across the street, insists that it is not. She calls us newlyweds. “Wait until you’re married almost 60 years.”

I hope that we will be married 60 years. But I’m in no hurry to get there. Because I know that so many good things happen while you’re wishing away time.

While I was waiting to be married, I had my mother beside me. While I was waiting for my husband to come home, I had his parents and my parents nearby. While I was waiting for a child to be born, I had that child within me and all to myself.

And so it is with waiting for wedding anniversaries, even when you’re not watching the calendar, even when you long ago stopped coloring in the days.

Six words tell you all you need to know



March 15, 2009

There's a little book that has been on my desk for months, "Six-Word Memoirs on Love & Heartbreak," inspired by Ernest Hemingway's contention that a story can be told in half a dozen words (His famous line? "For Sale: baby shoes, never worn.") The book is full of six-word tales, some good: "I thought we had more time"; "I have never been in love."

Some not so good: "I told you it affects me."

"He sold his boat for me." These are my six words. He sold his boat and it was a lifetime ago, ancient history now. And it was a little boat. But it was a big act of love that I didn't recognize for a long, long time.

For the boat was just a boat in my eyes. But in my husband's? He could tell you the horsepower and the color of the seats and how many people it held and how much he paid for it and how much he got for it - because it was his youth, his plumage, a speedboat that he hitched to the back of his shiny GTO. It turned heads. It made girls notice him. He was 19 and he liked that.

He took it to New Hampshire sometimes but mostly to a lake in Sharon, Massachusetts where he took me now and then. He tried to teach me to water-ski. His other girlfriends skied. But I continually failed.

We got married anyway.

He sold the boat a few years later in the middle of a summer in order to get the money we needed to turn our garage into a family room. He was 24 and I was 23 and we had an 8-month-old whose bedroom had been our family room. I said, "We need more space." And he said, "I'll sell my boat."

And that was that. He never moaned about giving up something he loved, and I never said, "Don't" or "Are you sure?" I called my uncle and asked if he'd help us build a room and he said OK, knowing full well that he'd be the one doing most of the building because my husband knew little about flooring and insulation, air ducts, and electrical work.

My husband gave up his boat and picked up a hammer to please me. My uncle had five kids and a house of his own, but there he was every weekend, at my door at the crack of dawn.

The things we give up and take on for the people we love. And then we forget.

I had a case of the flu the week before I got married. My father went out and bought me a coat. He'd never bought me an item of clothing in his life; that was my mother's job. The coat was wool, emerald-green, and beautiful. "I want you to be warm," he said. I thanked him for that coat. I loved him for that coat.

But it wasn't too long after that I forgot about the coat because I got annoyed with him about something he said or did or something he didn't do. And that something was all I could see.

This is what happens. You get a coat or a guy sells his beloved boat for you. But time goes by and life goes on and there are arguments over dirty dishes in the sink, laundry that needs to be folded, kids who need to be driven to the mall, and who is in charge of the remote.

It's as if the boat thing never happened.

But it did.

It happens for everyone. Everyone who is married or living together or just going together started off sweet-talking. What do you need? How can I help? I can do that. No problem! Flowers for no reason. Poems. Chicken soup when you're sick. Ice cream just because. Phone calls that are more than traffic reports.

It's all sunshine and roses. Until it isn't.

That's when it's important to remember the beginning.

"He sold his boat for me." This was my beginning.

A better way? Well, yes, it sure is!

January 13, 2013

I call him “Mr. I Have a Better Way.” It’s a term of endearment. Sometimes.

Sometimes my husband and I butt heads. I cut the lawn one way, up and down. He cuts it another, side to side.

When I’m not calling him “Mr. I Have a Better Way,” I call him “Mr. Joke for Every Occasion.” I say, “You should record



all the jokes you know,” because he knows a million and they’re funny. “Just record the jokes as you think of them. Use your phone,” I say, and He Who Has a Better Way, says, “I need to make a list. And do them by category.”

I object when he brings home a new step stool from Home Depot. We don’t need a new step stool, I say. But not too many days later, when I am trying to reach something way back on a high shelf, I go and get that new step stool, which has three steps, not two. And when Mr. I Have a Better Way comes home that night I tell him, “You know that step stool you bought? Well, you were right.”

It’s a dance we do.

One summer, years ago, when the dance was new, I ordered five yards of mulch from Polillio’s in Stoughton, Massachusetts. He said, “Have it spread. Don’t do it yourself.” I said, “I want to do it myself.”

A week later, I was still spreading mulch when he returned from a business trip. It was late afternoon, and it was hot and I was shoveling the mulch into a wheelbarrow, carting it to where it needed to be, then using a shovel to even it all out. He watched for a minute, then walked into the garage and got a pitchfork. “If you insist upon doing this yourself, you should be using this,” he said.

Mr. I Have a Better Way did have a better way.

Recently, I was in the kitchen cleaning the pantry. My husband couldn’t help suggesting how I might better organize the taco shells and boxes of pasta and countless cans of low-salt chicken broth that you can never have enough of, because this is what he automatically does.

“Have you thought that it might be better if you put the things you use most in the front where they are easily reached?” he asked diplomatically, having learned from experience that a question works much better than a “you should.”

“That way you won’t always be searching for things like ketchup,” he added.

For the record, I don’t search for ketchup because I don’t like ketchup. Also, the ketchup, which I buy at Costco, is huge like most everything you buy at Costco, so it lives in the back of the shelf because I organize my shelves by height, not frequency of use. Short things in the front. Tall things behind them. Simple.

I realize, of course, that most people keep ketchup in the refrigerator because they don’t want to die of botulism, but my Mr. I Have a Better Way says why would you put cold ketchup on hot eggs? Plus his mother did not refrigerate her ketchup, and she lived to be 87.

Anyway, I listened to all his shelving suggestions: Box this, Ziploc that without my usual I-don’t-want-to-hear-about-your-better-way-I-want-to-do-this-my-way attitude because, ketchup aside, he made sense. I liked his idea! So I put cocoa and Hershey’s Syrup and Marshmallow Fluff and shortbread cookies and chocolate covered raisins and nacho chips in the front, and it’s all been working for me. Which isn’t a surprise; it’s just Mr. I Have a Better Way having a better way.

Again.

Here's to love that lasts a lifetime



January 8, 2012

It's young love that songwriters go on about and that filmmakers explore, young love that propels poetry and novels and myths and fairy tales.

Romeo and Juliet. Antony and Cleopatra. Lancelot and Guinevere. Jack and Rose (Remember "Titanic"?). And, of course, today's most popular young couple, Twilight's Edward and Bella.

Young love, just out of the gate, with its longings and passions and ardent declarations, has been immortalized throughout time. It's understandable. Young love is magic,

two people under the same spell, on the same page, walking around with the same over-the-moon stars in their eyes. And young love is pretty, too. Bright eyes. Smooth skin. Of course it's the stuff of legend.

But old love, tried and true, 40, 50, 60 years of love that has endured not just life's many blessings, but its incessant challenges? Love with its sheen worn off. This is what dazzles me. Love that doesn't quit. Love that lasts a lifetime. Love like that of Al and Katherine DelCupolo.

I have a picture of them taken a long time ago, before I met them, before they were married, both of them dressed to the nines. She is drop-dead beautiful the way young girls were back when lipstick and pearls were their only adornments. A Donna Reed stand-in. And he is movie-star handsome, with his thick dark hair and perfect smile and his crisp white shirt and spiffy tux.

They were this fresh-faced and smiling on their wedding day, too, spry and young and confident.

Now, 60 years later, they are in their 80s and she has macular degeneration and is legally blind.

He can't hear very well. And his heart is a big, big concern.

He had a heart attack four and a half years ago, and it was major. Al is weak. He has been in a hospital since early December, critical at first, every breath a struggle, but a little better now.

Katherine visits him every day. She dresses up, puts on her pearls or some other necklace, a nice skirt, a pretty blouse, a little lipstick, and either her daughter drives her, or a friend, or she takes a cab. But she gets there and sits by his side.

When he wasn't eating, when his weight was plummeting, she brought him chicken soup that she made without salt, because he can't eat salt. So she added thyme and tarragon and parsley and a bay leaf and cut up the chicken into small pieces. And pulled up a chair next to his bed and fed him

the soup.

And he ate it slowly. Teaspoon by teaspoon. The first food he had eaten in days. And he smiled.

She brings him oranges and peels them for him. She makes him salads because Al loves salad. She brings him food she knows he will eat. He looks forward to this. He looks forward to seeing her.

A few days before Christmas, he said: “You look tired, Katherine. Go home. Get some rest.”

And she said, hands folded on her lap, “I think I’ll stay a little longer, Alfred.”

And that was that.

Christmas Eve. Christmas day. New Year’s Eve. New Year’s Day. The same thing.

“You don’t have to come. I’m fine,” he said.

She came anyway.

It’s not the dance of youth. It’s not lighthearted and fun, kicking up your heels and partying until dawn. It’s not hand-holding and long, meaningful glances.

It is not romantic.

But it’s a romance, nonetheless. And a dance, too. He leads and she follows. He says, “Katherine, go home,” and she stays because she knows both the dance and her partner well.

This is what love is. Knowing. Anticipating. Showing up. Being there.

“Go home, Katherine.”

And Katherine says, “I think I’ll stay a little longer, Alfred.”

And she does.

Advice for a godson, bride on their wedding day

July 22, 2012

Back in the spring, when my godson Connor knocked on my door and asked if I would officiate at his wedding, I said yes without trepidation.

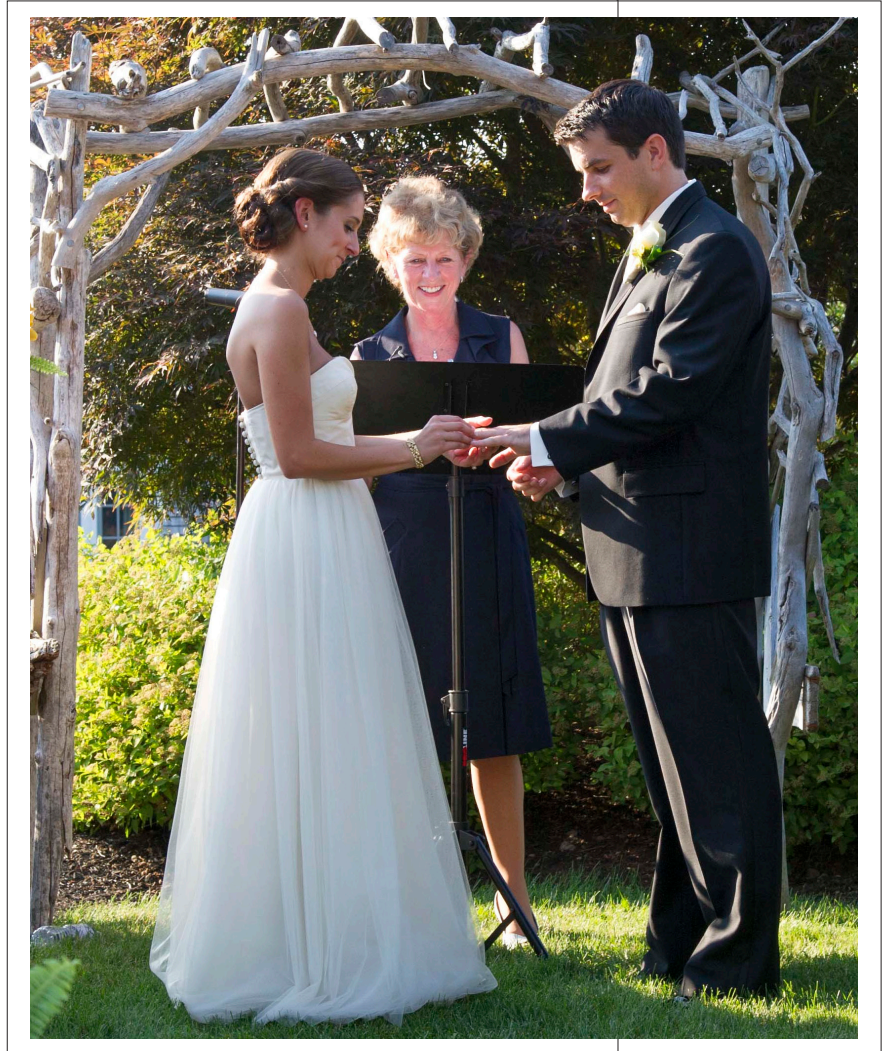
I was thrilled. Flattered. I would get a one-day license from the state. I would ask my friend Anne, who has married many couples, what I should say.

And I would buy a tailored, reverend-like dress.

I didn't panic until a few days before.

I thought I would simply stand before Connor and Jess and say, "Will you?" and "Do you?" and "I now pronounce you husband and wife." And then we'd break out the champagne.

I totally ignored the "celebrant talks about marriage and gives advice" part of the program until people started to ask



me, “So what are you going to say?”

I have been married for 44 years. In the world of academia, I’d have many doctorates.

I should have something to say.

But what?

I wound up stealing an idea from a good friend, the late Father Bill Coen.

He married a lot of couples.

Often he would take the first letters of their first names and use these to construct his talk.

The bride and groom liked this.

Most even remembered a little of what he said.

So I began with the bride, Jess.

J. Joke, I said. Laughter is the best medicine. Laugh together. Laugh at yourselves. Laugh after you have a total conniption fit because you realize that what you’re having a fit about doesn’t matter. Losing your keys. Even a missed plane. “Will this matter a year from now?” my father used to say. Most things don’t.

E. Embrace. It’s hard to believe when you’re standing at the altar, but people do stop kissing “hello” and “goodbye” and even “I love you.” Don’t stop. My son-in-law goes right to his wife when he comes home from work and kisses her every night. It’s the first thing he does. No matter who is around. No matter what is going on. Every day for 13 years.

S. Speak kindly to each other and about each other, You are going to argue. You have argued. That’s fine. But be careful with your words. Don’t demean each other. Don’t tell on each other to friends. It’s okay to talk to friends to get a different perspective, to seek advice. But not ammunition. Don’t use talk as fuel.

S. Surprise. It’s the small things that really are big things. “Connor, I got you these concert tickets.” “Jess, I saw this book and thought you’d like it.” My husband surprised me

with a self-starting lawnmower once. Out of the blue. So I wouldn't hurt my back. Surprise keeps romance alive.

Now Connor.

C. Comfort one another. The world can be tough. There's always work to be done, people to be dealt with. It's nice to come home to someone who understands.

O. Own up to your mistakes. "I'm sorry" is hard to say. It sticks in the throat. Say it anyway. Say it sometimes even if it's not your mistake. "I'm sorry you feel that way." "I'm sorry I made you feel that way." Being kind is always better than being right.

N. Notice each other. Notice what he's wearing. Say she looks nice. We tell strangers when they look nice. Sometimes we don't treat the people we love with the kindness that we treat strangers.

N. Nurture. Nurture the relationship. All the books tell you to put each other first, but sometimes this is impossible. Sometimes someone else will need you more. Sick kids, sick parents, a friend in trouble. But during those times, make time for one another. Help each other out.

O. "O" used to be the obey word. Not anymore. Overlook is my advice. Overlook the wet towel on the floor. The unmade bed. The take-out food that was yours but that he ate. Don't let little things become big things.

R. Remember today. Remember how you feel right now. Remember all that has led up to this moment. How sure you are. How right you are. How in love you are. Spend a moment every day for the rest of your life remembering why you chose each other. Make it a habit. Give thanks for it. Treasure it.



III

Kids
and
Grandkids

I was the sun, my kids the planets

August 27, 2006

I wasn't wrong about their leaving. My husband kept telling me I was. That it wasn't the end of the world when first one child, then another, and then the last packed their bags and left for college.

But it was the end of something. "Can you pick me up, Mom?" "What's for dinner?" "What do you think?"

I was the sun and they were the planets. And there was life on those planets, whirling, nonstop plans and parties and friends coming and going, and ideas and dreams and the phone ringing and doors slamming.

And I got to beam down on them. To watch. To glow.

And then they were gone, one after the other.

"They'll be back," my husband said. And he was right.

They came back. But he was wrong, too, because they came back for intervals not for always, not planets anymore, making their predictable orbits, but unpredictable, like shooting stars.

Always is what you miss. Always knowing where they are. At school. At play practice. At a ballgame. At a friend's. Always looking at the clock midday and anticipating the door opening, the sigh, the smile, the laugh, the shrug. "How was school?" answered for years in too much detail. "And then he said . . . and then I said to him. . . ." Then hardly answered at all.

Always, knowing his friends.

Her favorite show.

What he had for breakfast.



What she wore to school.

What he thinks.

How she feels.

My friend Beth's twin girls left for Roger Williams yesterday. They are her fourth and fifth children. She's been down this road three times before. You'd think it would get easier.

"I don't know what I'm going to do without them," she has said every day for months.

And I have said nothing, because, really, what is there to say?

A chapter ends. Another chapter begins. One door closes and another door opens. The best thing a parent can give their child is wings. I read all these things when my children left home and thought then what I think now: What do these words mean?

Eighteen years isn't a chapter in anyone's life. It's a whole book, and that book is ending and what comes next is connected to, but different from, everything that has gone before.

Before was an infant, a toddler, a child, a teenager. Before

was feeding and changing and teaching and comforting and guiding and disciplining, everything hands-on. Now?

Now the kids are young adults and on their own and the parents are on the periphery, and it's not just a chapter change. It's a sea change.

As for a door closing? Would that you could close a door and forget for even a minute your children and your love for them and your fear for them, too. And would that they occupied just a single room in your head. But they're in every room in your head and in your heart.

As for the wings analogy? It's sweet. But children are not birds. Parents don't let them go and build another nest and have all new offspring next year.

Saying goodbye to your children and their childhood is much harder than all the pithy sayings make it seem. Because that's what going to college is. It's goodbye.

It's not a death. And it's not a tragedy.

But it's not nothing, either.

To grow a child, a body changes. It needs more sleep. It rejects food it used to like. It expands and it adapts.

To let go of a child, a body changes, too. It sighs and it cries and it feels weightless and heavy at the same time.

The drive home alone without them is the worst. And the first few days. But then it gets better. The kids call, come home, bring their friends, and fill the house with their energy again.

Life does go on.

"Can you give me a ride to the mall?" "Mom, make him stop!" I don't miss this part of parenting, playing chauffeur and referee. But I miss them, still, all these years later, the children they were, at the dinner table, beside me on the couch, talking on the phone, sleeping in their rooms, safe, home, mine.

A wish come true, on God's time

September 5, 2010

This is what I prayed for, for as long as I can remember, before first grade all the way through third and fifth and eighth and even when I was in high school: a brother or a sister. I didn't care.

Please, God, please, I begged every Sunday in church and every time I made a novena. Please, God, please, I wished on every birthday candle, on every first star, and on every dandelion gone to seed.

I had faith. I had patience. Plus I knew all the tricks. The wishbone. The fortune cookie. Santa Claus. Please, Santa Claus, please won't you bring me a brother or a sister?

But years passed and there was still no baby. I thought that no one had listened to my prayers, that no one had heard.

But someone did. That's what I know now for certain. Not in my time, but "in God's time," my friend Father Coen used to say. I never believed in the truth of this phrase. Now I do. Now I get it.

Everything I prayed for? The baby in the crib sleeping next to me. The 3-year-old running down the beach, across a playground, through a sprinkler, swinging, climbing, laughing. The 6-year-old slamming into me on a bumper car ride, holding my hand as we cross a street, sitting on my lap, crawling into my bed?

Can you sing me a song? Can you read me a book? The brother or sister I begged for? I got them both. Plus more.

Technically, of course, my children's children are not my brothers and sisters. Technically, they are my grandchil-

dren. And yet, who can deny that they are the answer to my prayers?

I asked for someone to play Monopoly and War with. Someone who would take these games seriously. And I got Adam.

I asked for someone to take to a park, to go on rides with at Canobie Lake, someone who would like Shirley Temple movies as much as I do. And I got Lucy.

I wanted someone to prefer ice cream and candy over real food and to love riding with the car windows open. And I got Charlotte.

I wanted someone to pretend with, someone who would tell great stories. And I got Amy. I wanted someone who would ask me in the middle of the day to sing him to sleep at night. And I got Matty.

I wanted someone to play dress up with. And I got Megan.

And I wanted someone to hold and to rock and to push in a stroller all over town. And I got Luke.

All together and each alone, these children are my every childhood wish come true.

I was tucking five of them into bed the other one night

at a friend's house in New Hampshire, Santa's Village on tap for the next day. They were in



one big room, each in a separate cot. Their mothers had already read and sung to them and kissed them goodnight. Now it was my turn.

I was singing “Tammy,” because they like this song, because it’s slow and they fall asleep to it. I was singing it over and over - “Sing it again, Mimi. Sing it again” - studying them in the dim light, fresh from their baths, their hair shiny, their faces bronzed, thinking about how when I was a child I used to sing “Tammy” to myself.

And it struck me that this is how long I have dreamed them.

They love movies where the main characters sing, and they love farms (well, Charlotte’s afraid of pigs) and water parks and the ocean and pools and playgrounds and silly riddles. (“What did one potato chip say to the other?” “Shall we go for a dip?”)

I didn’t grow up with these children. But I am growing still and they are growing up with me.

Wrong planet, right child



April 10, 2011

Sometimes I think it's as simple as this: my granddaughter Lucy was born on the wrong planet. There was a mix-up in paradise and she got on the wrong shuttle and ended up here on earth instead of in some galaxy a trillion miles away where everyone is like her.

Because in the world she was meant for, Lucy is perfect. Perfect size. Perfect student. Perfect child. She lands in the middle of every performance chart that doctors and schools so revere. She reaches all her milestones exactly when her peers do. She smiles and rolls over and crawls and talks and walks right on schedule.

In the world she was meant for she climbs as high as everyone else on the jungle gym, runs as fast, plays as hard. In class she knows as much as the boy in front of her and is a little bit better at sequencing than the girl beside her.

At lunch, she talks to the kids across the table and they talk back. She gets invited to play dates, has lots of friends, sings and dances and plays along with everyone else. And every afternoon when she comes home from school, her mother holds up her art work and spelling and arithmetic papers and smiles.

In the world she was meant for, even strangers look at Lucy and think, "I wish I had a little girl just like her," because she epitomizes childhood.

But by some geographical glitch, she landed on earth instead, in the hinterlands of evolution, where innocence is meant to be grown out of and where the tongue does all the talking, not the heart.

On the afternoons I pick up Lucy from first grade, I watch the children racing across the school yard, yelling and whooping and smiling, so many children, all the same. And then comes Lucy, holding her aide's hand, taking it slow, beaming when she sees me.

And I think, if we were the only family on earth, we wouldn't know that Lucy should be adding and subtracting and reading chapter books and running across a school yard eager to go home and play Wii. We wouldn't equate Down syndrome with limitations. We would instead think, isn't she amazing? Look at how she loves us. Look at how happy she is.

Lucy needs extra help with things. She depends on extra help because it takes her longer to learn what typical kids pick up easily. How to clap in rhythm. How to pump on a swing. How to say a whole sentence. How to add and subtract. How to write her name.

But she tries and tries and tries and tries. And when she gets it right, she is all joy.

Here on earth, we all depend on wheels. We don't have wings - we can't fly. This is our disability.

We accommodate this disability by using bicycles, cars, trains, and planes and, yes, these are clumsy, cumbersome things and, yes, we'd get places a lot faster if we could just spread our wings and fly.

But we don't beat ourselves up over this. We don't think of ourselves as imperfect because we can't take flight.

But we would if everyone else could fly.

Lucy cries when someone else cries. A child she doesn't know starts bawling on the playground and Lucy's lips quiver and the next thing you know she is crying, too. But soundlessly. This is Lucy's heart talking.

Was she sent here by mistake? Is she on the wrong planet? Or did she one day gaze out at the universe and see us here, on this flawed, messed up earth, and think: That's where I want to be. That's where I choose to be, with that family. With this mother and that father. In that little room with the tilted ceiling. Because that's where I am wanted. Because that's where I'll be loved.

Little one has bought into the program

March 5, 2006

We called him Mr. Skeptical when he was born because he came into the world scowling and it wasn't just your typical infant "I'm hungry. I'm wet. Feed me! Change me now!" scowl.

It was an old man's reproving look. It was as if Adam had



been sitting in a Chippendale wing chair, sipping brandy and smoking a cigar in front of a fire somewhere in posh London, when, puff, he blinked and found himself in an infant's body in the neonatal unit of a New York City hospital.

It was an outrage and a mistake. That's what he told us with his eyes and his frown. "Who took my Schopenhauer and what am I doing here?"

We rocked him. We sang him lullabies. We kissed his fuzzy little head and his soft baby cheeks and we tickled his toes and placed him on a blanket on the floor next to his little-bit-older cousin and said: "See. She likes it here. So will you."

But my grandson was not buying any of this.

We bundled him up and took him outside at night and showed him the moon and the stars. In the daytime, we pointed out the trees and said, "Listen to the birds." We bought him soft teddy bears he could feel and rattles he could clutch and a pacifier he could suck on. And we wrapped him in receiving blankets for at least three months.

Still he frowned.

One day, when he was still new, his mother, aunt, cousin, and I went to a Mexican restaurant and he was in his baby seat, looking around, clearly disapproving. And there sat his cousin in her baby seat beside him, enchanted by the lights, the music, the world.

And I thought: He doesn't trust the world.

Now he does. Little by little, all of us who love him loved away his resistance. His scowl, his misgivings, his reluctance to give himself over to this world, they're gone, along with the old man. The child is fully present now. "Mine." "Play!" "Lulu!" "Mimi!" "Auntie!"

Joy and wonder spill out of him.

Sometimes I think we sold him a bill of goods.

He is 23 months old now and his world is "Sesame Street" and "Signing Time," "Barney" and "Caillou," books, songs, his train set, and people who love him.

He knows that cows moo, horses neigh, ducks quack, and kittens meow, and he believes that there really is an Old MacDonald who sings "E-I-E-I-O" and a rosy-cheeked old woman who swallowed a fly.

No news. No reality shows. No reality beyond what he sees.

We play with zoo animals. We live in a Fisher-Price world. He walks up to strangers expecting them to like him. And they do because he's little and he's cute.

But he won't always be little and cute and everyone he meets won't always like him, or be good to him. And this is just the easy stuff.

I raised three children. None of this is new. I know that life isn't fair or safe or easy or even consistent.

But I look at Adam and it feels new.

"Trust us," we said to him. And he did.

When he was 8 months old, the tsunami struck Southeast Asia. We'd won him over by then. He was playing in my family room when the waves came and swallowed other people's children, thousands of them.

He doesn't know these things happen.

He loves Mexican restaurants now. He loves the music and he loves to dip. He points to the sky and says "moon," and when he can't find it, he says, "It's hiding." He hears the train whistle and says "choo-choo." He loves to go to the grocery store because the man at the deli gives him cheese.

Children make you want to build walls to protect them. But all you can do is what you can do: buckle their seat belts, hold their hands, teach them to be good, pray for them. And love them.

He comes to visit. He sits on my lap and we read "Barnyard Dance."

"With a BAA and MOOO and COCK-A-DOODLE-DOO," and Adam bobs his head and sings along.

And he is so happy it hurts my heart.

"More, Mimi?" he says. And we begin again. "Bow to the horse, bow to the cow. Twirl with the pig if you know how."

And right now, life is good.

A memory she never knew she had

May 23, 2010

She was silent as I was putting on makeup, standing on a stool, all 2 1/2 feet of her stretching and straining to see my every move.

My granddaughter Charlotte is newly 3 and is never silent, not even when she sleeps. But last Friday morning she stood in my bedroom miraculously mute and mesmerized. Moisturizer, foundation, blush, mascara, and lipstick. They had cast a spell.

“First a little of this. Then a little of this,” I said as I applied each. I turned and smiled at Charlotte. But she was like Snow White before a basket full of shiny, red apples, preoccupied, intrigued, and enchanted.

I had a flashback then, one of those moments where you think, afterward, where did that come from? Why this memory? And can I get it back? Can I press rewind, please?

Think Saran Wrap. Think about the thin, clear, stretchy plastic that sticks to itself - sticking just for an instant to the wrong place before someone yanks it back and sets it right and gets it rolling again. Time is like this. It's going along, unfurling at its usual pace, and then suddenly it snags on a scent, a place, a look in a child's eyes.

Last week, while I was watching Charlotte and she was watching me, it got caught on a memory I never knew I had, of my Aunt Lorraine in her house in Stoughton, putting on makeup. And for an instant it was her face in the mirror while I was the child who watched.



She was my mother's baby sister, but like a big sister to me, 11 when I was born. She had dark, shiny hair and blue eyes and soft skin and red lips that always matched her fingernails, and when I was a child I knew for certain that she was the most beautiful girl in the world.

This moment, which appeared out of the blue, like a misplaced slide in a carousel projector, was as big and clear and real as a slide, too.

There was Lorraine in my mind's eye. She was wearing black pedal-pushers, and a white sleeveless blouse, which I'd seen her iron a dozen times, and white sneakers without socks. We were in her bathroom, which was small the way it was before her kids grew up and my uncle did it over. Her makeup sat in a dark flowered pouch on the sink's edge to her left. I stood beside her on her right. And, like Charlotte, I was mesmerized.

I watched her take something that looked like a push-

up frozen treat out of her bag. She twisted it and up came face makeup, which she dotted on her forehead, cheeks, and chin. I had never seen anything like this, makeup that pushed up like ice cream, that wasn't in a compact, like my mother's.

She rubbed and then she roughed and then she put on red lipstick and blotted it with a tissue. Then she combed her hair. And then she smiled at me.

How old was I? Not 3 because Lorraine didn't live in Stoughton when I was 3. I was a lot older, 11, maybe 12.

"So, how do I look? Better?" she asked, hugging me. And I said yes, but it was a lie because she could never look better, because she was always beautiful to me.

My aunt young. That little bathroom. A funny-looking tube of makeup. The bathroom shade down but the sun still brightening the room. All this in a blink.

And gone in a blink, too. Except not really. I put some Nivea cream on Charlotte's face and gave her some pink lip gloss, which she applied like a pro. I let her stick her fingers in a jar of body cream, which she smeared on her arms.

And then I brushed her hair.

"You look beautiful," I told her.

And then we went downstairs and had ice cream and blueberry muffins. And I told her about my Aunt Lorraine.

From the very young,
that old try, try again



August 7, 2011

Luke is 2 and sings all the time. “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star,” usually, but he knows Beatles tunes, too, “You Say Goodbye and I Say Hello,” “This Boy,” “From Me to You.”

Luke, my grandson, wakes up singing and he falls asleep singing, and all day long, as he’s up and down the steps and up and down the slide, as he’s stuffing a banana in his mouth, or pushing a baby carriage around in circles, or taking a bath or strapped in his car seat, he sings.

Last summer, he hummed. He didn’t have many words

then, but this didn't get in the way of his songs. What he lacked in vocabulary, he made up for in enthusiasm. He hummed constantly. We videotaped him playing with a deck of cards and humming, sitting in his high chair and humming, pulling a quacking plastic duck around the house and humming.

Now the boy is a pro, so familiar with "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" that he changes it up and sings "Bah Bah Black Sheep" sometimes, or "A B C D E F G," because the tunes are similar and he knows them and likes to surprise us and himself, choosing at random, then beaming at our applause.

"Sing for us, Luke," we say. And he does.

It's taken him a long time to learn what he knows. He's practiced. He sang when he thought no one was listening. He sang to videos on the computer and TV. He sang along with every singing bear and talking doll and every one of his musical toys. He sang with the radio. And he sang every time his father took out his guitar.

He still does.

Yet, despite all this practice, Luke misses words sometimes. He'll get stuck in mid-sentence or midsong. But he rolls with this. He grins and says, "No. No. No." And he starts over. He doesn't retreat when he falters. He doesn't lose confidence and say, "I can't do this." He doesn't make the part bigger than the whole and stamp his foot and moan, "Why can't I do anything right?" He makes a mistake, then continues to try.

So does my granddaughter Charlotte. She's 4 and determined to master the monkey bars this summer. So every chance she gets, she's outdoors climbing and hanging from swing sets.

She made it all the way across the monkey bars in my backyard last week. It was her first time. Her mother stood under her and supported her legs for a while. But then Char-

lotte said, "Let go," and suddenly there she was swinging from bar to bar, all by herself. Then she did it again. And again. And again. And again.

She was a smiling, flying Wallenda.

Until she fell.

She landed on grass so she didn't get hurt. But she lost her confidence.

("No. I lost my balance," is what she said.)

Now it's back to square one. "You can do it, Charlotte! Come on. Let go. You did it before. Swing those hips."

It's been more than a week since she breezed across those bars with a cheeky grin, but she's still at it, trying, climbing the ladder, reaching for the bars, jumping up and hanging down.

But then she gets scared.

"Hold me, Mom," she says. "Don't let go. Hold my legs."

She'll do it in time. She'll be flying across the monkey bars any day now. Because she'll stick to until she does it again.

Kids are like this. They don't expect to master things immediately. They're used to doing something over and over because that's how they've learned - to sit up, to crawl, to walk, to talk, to know all the words to "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," to make it across the monkey bars.

They're used to failing, too.

We grow up and forget all the time and effort that's necessary to do something well. And that even when you try and try, you sometimes fail. We want to be able to sit down and play the piano after a few lessons, hit a home run after a few times at bat, run a marathon, speak Spanish, master a computer after a few tries.

And when we don't, we say we can't. And we give up.

Luke and Charlotte, like most little kids, just keep on singing and keep on trying. It's a lesson they teach us every moment of every day, while we are teaching them.

A son gets his license

June, 1986

Dear Rob,

Today you are getting your driver's license, a benchmark for both you and me. Today is the beginning of the rest of your life, your first step into adulthood, your exit from childhood.

Having a license means that now you'll be able to get places without me. No wonder I'm sad. Sixteen-and-a-half years - practically all of my adult life - I have been responsible for you. I have taken you first where I wanted to go, later to where you chose to go.

Up until now you have been connected to me by need. You needed me when you were small for everything. In the beginning you needed me even for life. We were so close that if I died, you would have died too.

When you were born, you needed me to maintain that life, to feed you, to change you, to teach you and to comfort you. We grew apart, yes. You crawled, then walked, then ran away from me. But you always came back because you needed a kiss, a Band-Aid, a bologna sandwich, a ride to a friend's.

Now you don't need these things anymore and you don't really need me. You like having me around, and you love me, I know. But you don't need me. I'm no longer the center of your world. You don't live to please me. You haven't for a long, long time.

Yet today I can't stop thinking of the little boy who used

to believe I was his whole world, who used to write, “I love you, Mommy” in the margins of his coloring books, who used to come running into the house and onto my lap for a hug, who used to cry whenever I went away.

I remember the first time I had to leave you. You were three months old and already I’d forgotten what life was like without you. I couldn’t imagine what had made me happy, how I’d existed before you. “It’s just a few days,” your father said. “And

he’ll be with people who love him.” Still, I ached, your absence a physical hurt. I don’t remember much of that trip, but I can still see the bureau where I put your picture, kissing your image a dozen times a day, sleeping with your face tucked under my pillow. I was afraid you would change

while I was gone. I thought you might forget me. I thought I would be replaced.

Now you’re the one who’s leaving and though I knew all along this day would come, I am not prepared. The umbilical cord has been attached until now, stretched, but still connected. I could always tug and get you back. Now it’s about to break, and my heart a little along with it.

You see, I have this picture in my head. I see me in the kitchen at the sink, a permanent fixture like the lady in the General Electric exhibit at Disney World, always there.



Always nearby. And I see you, in memory, maybe even in imagination, at different stages of your life, in diapers, in short pants, wearing a baseball cap, carrying a ball and a bat, growing bigger, older, maturing, voice deepening, until it's now and you're striding through the kitchen with a set of keys in your hand.

How did this happen? Why didn't I notice the changes? Why is it I can look back and clearly see the different stages, yet while they were happening I wasn't aware? When did you stop wearing a baseball cap? When did your voice drop two octaves? When did your face lose its baby softness?

"He's not your baby anymore," my father tells me. "You have to let go." I know I do but it hurts.

The world doesn't care about you the way I do. The world doesn't care if you get hurt. When you were small, I child-proofed the house. I put bumper pads in your crib so you wouldn't bang your head or get your feet caught in the rungs. I put locks on all the cabinets so you wouldn't swallow Lysol. I covered the electric outlets so you wouldn't burn yourself. When you were learning to walk, I followed behind so that I could catch you when you fell.

I can't do these things anymore. I can't make the world safe. Maybe that's why I feel so useless right now, because I can't pad all the sharp edges. I can't put bumper pads on trees and telephone poles. I can't do anything to protect you.

And that makes me feel vulnerable and scared and helpless.

It's taken 16 1/2 years to get you to where you are, 16 1/2 years of 24-hour days full of love and worry. Now you are responsible for you.

So please be careful. And remember how much we love you.



IV

The
way
we
were

A final goodbye to a lifelong friend

December 2, 2010

I lost her long ago, first to a boy, then to geography, then to a disease that took her farther away than any airplane ever could.

I lost her before death finally took her.

But now she is really gone.

What remains for me is our childhood. Second grade. First Communion. Brownies. Talent shows. Horror movies. One, two, three, red light. Confession on Saturday afternoons. CYO. Driving around in search of some prize the radio station WMEX was giving away. Double dating. Falling in love with love at the very same time.

Our childhood lives in me in high definition.

Janet Butler and I met in second grade. It was February and my first day at my new school. My parents drove me and walked me to my classroom, and Miss Nagel introduced me and showed me to my desk. Then my parents left and Miss Nagel continued teaching and I had a wave of missing them and started to cry.

Janet sat in front of me, but somehow she saw what no one else did. "Miss Nagel! Miss Nagel!" she shouted. "The new girl is crying."



The next morning, she talked to me as we waited for the school bus. And then she sat next to me on our ride to Tower Hill School.

Six weeks later, we were playing outside, scaling the huge mounds of dirt that the builder left behind, our neighborhood still a work in progress. King of the Mountain was the game. She was king and then I was king, and on it went, both of us pounding our chests like King Kong every time we made it to the top. Until, as I was pounding and preening, Janet screamed: "Don't move! There are zillions of snakes in the dirt." And then she went racing home.

To get help I thought. But she didn't come back. She ate lunch. She watched a little TV. Only then did she finally saunter down the street.

The snakes were a joke. "You believed me?" she said, laughing a laugh that never changed, that never grew up or grew old, even though we did.

I stormed down the hill and pushed her and she pushed me back, and I fell in the mud and ruined my coat and I called her a meanie. And she called me a baby. And we both stomped home.

This was our biggest fight.

Mostly we played together and laughed together and sang songs and told stories and dreamed about who we'd be someday.

We loved the same boy once. George Falcone. We were in fifth grade. He gave us the same Valentine. We still loved him.

We loved horror movies, too. We watched them Saturday afternoons at her house, in black and white on a TV with a 12-inch screen. Scared, but safe, too - Janet's mother in the kitchen, my mother across the street, the monsters on the screen dispelled with the turn of a knob.

Janet gave me a scarf for my 14th birthday. I wore it ev-

ery winter for more than 25 years. Life had separated us by then. She lived on one coast and I lived on another. The scarf was like Frosty's hat. I put it on and the child within me always awoke. One day I hung it on a coat rack at a restaurant and when I returned to get it, it was gone.

We saw each other less than once a year as adults. But I always called her on her birthday and she always called me on mine. We never missed. Until one year she did. Until one year she forgot.

Alzheimer's did this. It was like the killer ants in a horror movie. It devoured her little by little. And there was no knob to end it, no mother to make it stop.

We used to sit on my front steps on hot summer nights, swatting mosquitoes, telling stories full of monsters and evil spells, trying to imagine what it would be like to die.

All these years later, it is still unimaginable.

Even when you expect it, you're stunned. Even when you're grateful, it hurts. Even when you believe that there is a better life, you wonder.

I lost her long ago. But this loss is final. She lives now in my memory and for always in my heart.

Longing for a trip back to childhood



July 12, 2009

My son called last week on what was finally, after weeks of rain, a perfect summer day.

It was also a workday.

“I was on the train this morning,” he said. “And all of a sudden I found myself singing in my head that song from ‘Peter Pan.’ You know the one?”

I know the one.

“I Won’t Grow Up” is part of our family lore. I made my son and seven other Cub Scouts perform it on stage at Canton High School when they were about 8. There was some regional Cub Scout thing that every troop was required to

do, and unfortunately for them, I was more familiar with Mary Martin and her high Cs than coin collecting and the more renowned high seas.

I'd been told to prepare the boys for a demonstration. I took this to mean a recital. I could have had my troop tie interesting knots on the stage or compare the length and girth of snakes. Instead, I had them dress in long T-shirts and green tights and dance and sing like lost boys in "Peter Pan."

My son actually forgave me for this.

"Do you remember the words to the song, Mom?" he asked.

As if I could forget. I sang them with gusto into the phone. "I won't grow up. I don't want to wear a tie. And a serious expression in the middle of July"

"Here's the thing," he said. "That's exactly what I was doing when I was remembering this. I was on a train in July looking serious and wearing a tie."

I said nothing because what was there to say? One day you're a kid with the whole summer to look forward to, and then one day you're not.

I told him, at least a million times, when he was itching to be big and make his own money and stay up as late as he wanted and drive his father's car, that being a grownup is overrated. I told him that some day he would miss all he had right then - no responsibilities, hours to play Wiffle ball in the backyard, strong legs that could take him anywhere, his own room free of charge, an allowance, every summer off, and a mother who made him roast beef and cheese sandwiches with potato chips on the side.

I said to him, just as my mother had said to me: "Don't be in such a hurry to grow up." But he was eager. Everyone is; the grass is always greener on the other side of childhood.

But then you grow up and realize that if the grass is greener, it's only because adults water it and feed it and cut it and

edge it and buy grub killer and weed killer or work extra hard to pay someone else to do these things.

What you want in the summer is a break from things. A vacation is nice, but the ideal is to be a child again. To sleep until you wake up, no alarms, no schedule. To eat Entenmann's Raspberry Danish Twist - never mind that it's bad for you. To watch a little TV - reruns and old movies. To read all day if you want. To go to the drive-in and fall asleep in the car and wake up in your bed. To not have to worry about bills and weeds and office politics and when was the last time the car oil was changed.

Once upon a time we had all this.

Childhood isn't as unstructured anymore. Most kids don't hang out and do nothing these days. They take classes, go to camp, play sports. But it's still childhood. Someone else buys the clothes, packs the lunch, and makes the money.

My son misses playing ball in the backyard with Mike Zogalis. I miss swings and hanging out with Rosemary.

But what we miss most every summer is what most adults miss: a trip back to childhood, three long months of being carefree.

Memo to the kids: Call home

November 7, 2010

It was magical, the old telephone. It rang and you raced to it and picked it up and said “hello?” and someone - a friend, a neighbor, sometimes someone far away in another state - said “hello” back. And you got excited, hearing a certain voice, thrilled and surprised when it was your best friend calling, or a boy you just met, because the phone ringing was like a knock on a door or a gift-wrapped present. Always a mystery.

It was practical, too. “I lost my homework page. Can you read me the questions?” “Want to go to the movies on Saturday?” “My mother said she’d pick us up after play practice tomorrow.” And bingo, just like that, schedules were confirmed and problems solved.

Adults used the phone sporadically, to call their mothers, to make appointments, to check their work schedules. Teens used the phone incessantly, to gab to friends. They’d come home from school, shut themselves in their rooms, and talk and talk about music and books and school and kids they liked and kids they didn’t like, to one friend right after another. Until a parent would knock on their



door and say “Who are you talking to now?” and “Didn’t you just see her?” and “It’s time to hang up.” And a teen would just roll her eyes and sigh.

The phone rings now and no one moves. “Let the machine get it.” “I don’t feel like talking.” “Who the !@\$% is calling?” The phone rings and there’s a collective groan.

When did this magnificent invention that can carry a human voice all over the world fall so completely out of grace?

When my son texted me last year to announce the birth of his son, I thought this was a singular aberration.

“I didn’t want to wake you,” is what he said, when I phoned him in the morning.

“You texted me this wonderful news?” I said. “Next time, please call.”

“There will be no next time,” my daughter-in-law said, which put an end to that conversation.*

This week my daughter, who lives down the street, texted and e-mailed from 6 until 7:45 a.m. that she had thrown out her back, was stuck in bed, and couldn’t move.

“Does anyone have any drugs?” she wrote, not wailed.

Finally, at 7:50 she picked up the phone and dialed.

“Why haven’t you answered me?” she kind of yelled.

And I said, “Huh? Did you call?”

“No. I texted and e-mailed,” she groaned.

And I said, “Would you text 911 if your house were on fire? Would you text and e-mail if someone were breaking into the house?”

“I didn’t want to wake you, Mom.”

The truth is, if I slept with my cellphone next to the bed, texts and e-mails would wake me. They ping. They buzz. They annoy. Plus they have to be downloaded. And a person needs to find her glasses to read them.

A regular old telephone is far more efficient.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Mom. I hurt my back and I can’t move and I’m stuck in bed. Do you have any muscle relaxers and can you come over?”

“I’ll be right there.”

Problem dealt with in less than a minute.

Texts get lost. E-mails get blocked. You can talk faster than you can type. And you don’t have to smiley face your emotions. You can hear fear and joy and laughter and pain and doubt and excitement and worry and sarcasm and tears.

You’d think we’d be talking to each other all day. But instead we’re texting, which is fine for things like “Game over” and “Almost home.”

But when we really have something to say, like “You have a new grandson, Mom!” or “Can you come over right now!” the old-fashioned phone is the only way to go. November 7, 2010

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Bathed in light, let us reflect

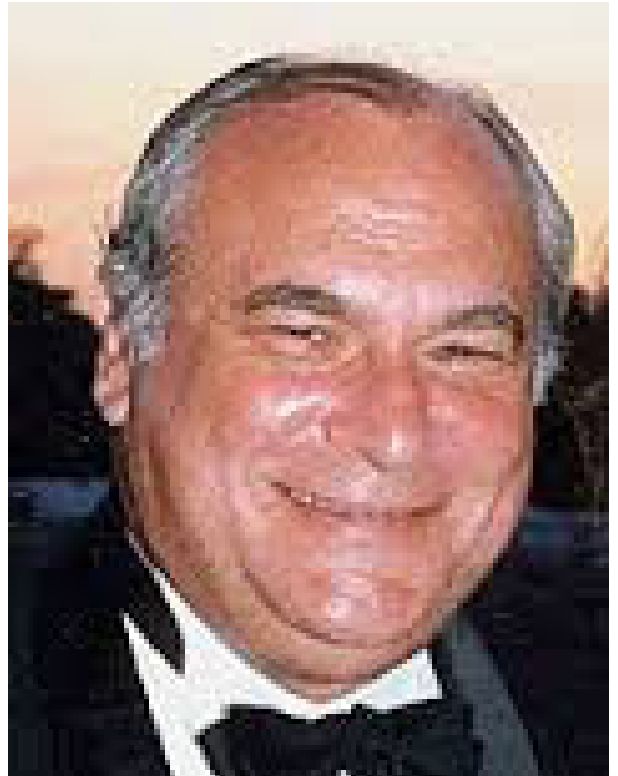
September 12, 2010

His name was Richard Ross and I knew him for a long time but I did not know him well.

He was the other travel agent in town. His mother owned a travel agency and my husband's parents owned a travel agency and both Richard and my husband were boys when they went into the family business. One married an artist. One married a writer. Both had sisters who went into the business. Both had three kids, two girls and a boy. And both eventually left the family business.

They were alike, my husband and Richard Ross. They were like trains on parallel tracks.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, both were at Logan Airport sitting on planes. My husband and I were in an exit row on Continental Airlines Flight 847 to Newark. Richard was in first class on American Airlines Flight 11 to Los Angeles. Our flight was delayed because of a mechanical problem, something about a flap on the door. Richard's flight took off on time and was hijacked and crashed into the World Trade Center at 8:46 am. We watched the second plane crash into the south tower of the World Trade Center and explode while in Continental's lounge waiting to learn



the status of our flight.

“Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum

Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come,” the poet W.H. Auden wrote some 60 years before the horror of September 11th.

But it was just like this. Time stopped and the mourners came. Everyone mourned. On TV, the two planes kept crashing into the towers again and again and people kept saying “How can this be? How can this be?” Phone lines were jammed. Air traffic was grounded. People huddled and gathered, lit candles and prayed. Many wept.

Thousands attended Richard Ross’ remembrance service. The temple was packed and hundreds had to stand in the foyer. All three of his children spoke, the youngest, Alison, straight from the airport, just back from Europe where she’d been when she learned that her father had been killed. Stuck in another country for days after the attack, away from her family and her support, in shock, frightened for sure, she had to board one of the first planes to fly again in order to get home in time for his memorial.

She must have been so scared.

My youngest daughter was stuck in L.A waiting for the domestic flights to resume and I knew how frightened she was to fly. I know how frightened I was for her to fly. And here was this other young girl, who had lost her father in an unimaginable way, composed and eloquent while speaking to thousands.

Her sister, Abigail, was eloquent, too. “Daddy, You are my long drive, my slow dance, my summer wind and my starry sky, “ she said. “We share eyes and hands and now my heartbeat. So long as I live, so will your many memories and the stories I tell. Edith Wharton wrote, “There are two ways

of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror which reflects it.” Daddy, you are my light and I am your mirror.”

There isn't a day that goes by that I don't think of Richard Ross and the light his family spread and that postcard perfect September morning that exploded and burned and changed our world and our lives forever.

Life goes on. A family copes, thousands of families cope, but only because we are all mirrors, only because as long as we live, all the people we've loved and lost live, too.

They live in our words. We talk about them. We tell their stories. They live on our walls. We hang their pictures. We keep them on our computer screens. We think about them. They live in our heads and in our hearts.

His name was Richard Ross. He lived for 58 years. He had a wife, Judi, and two daughters, Abigail and Alison and a son, Franklin, and sister, Irene. He had hundreds of friends. And he had even more people he hardly knew who remember him.

Cherished memories, unwrapped each year

December 4, 2005

They are just things and things shouldn't mean so much.
But they do.

Most are old and many are broken. A musical clock, a plastic reindeer, a dime store manger, Santa at his desk, a faded ornament they all tug at me.

They are my relics and my genies, too, not trapped in bottles and dependent upon magic, but stored in boxes and wrapped up in newspaper. Unwrap them and people and moments from long ago are here again. No wishes necessary.

I know this just as Aladdin knew exactly what he'd get when he rubbed the lamp. And so I anticipate every Christmas as I lug up decorations from the cellar. I know that treasures await.

I unwrap a blue ornament that in its day was as shiny as sapphire, that used to hang on the Christmas trees my father brought home. It caught the light back then, reflecting the big, bright bulbs that everyone used red and orange and blue and green. And it caught my eye, too.

I look at it now and, along with the dust motes that flit in the sunlight (fairy dust, I told my kids, when they were young and we unwrapped these things together). I see my father busy, my mother happy, a wiry tree that smelled like the whole outdoors, and my old house, where music was always playing and the long days of winter were cozy and

warm and safe.

A single ornament does all this.

I find a snowman in a globe at the bottom of a box and he's gray, not white, and the world he sits in is gray and the snow that falls around him clouds the glass. And when I wind him up "Frosty the Snowman" plays, but the notes are thin and slow.

Anyone would say, "That thing is old and broken. Throw it away." But the broken notes transport me back to the house where my mother lived after her accident. I see her sitting in the kitchen in her chair. I hear my father humming down the hall. I smell the coffee on the stove. And on the shelf between the kitchen and the dining room, I see this snowman new and perky and gleaming.

And for a moment I have a mother and father again.

More things, more memories.

A Woolworth's manger, two pieces of wood that barely fit together. It was my mother's, the only part left of her creche, the figures long gone. "Can I put Jesus in the cradle?"

"Yes, Baybo."

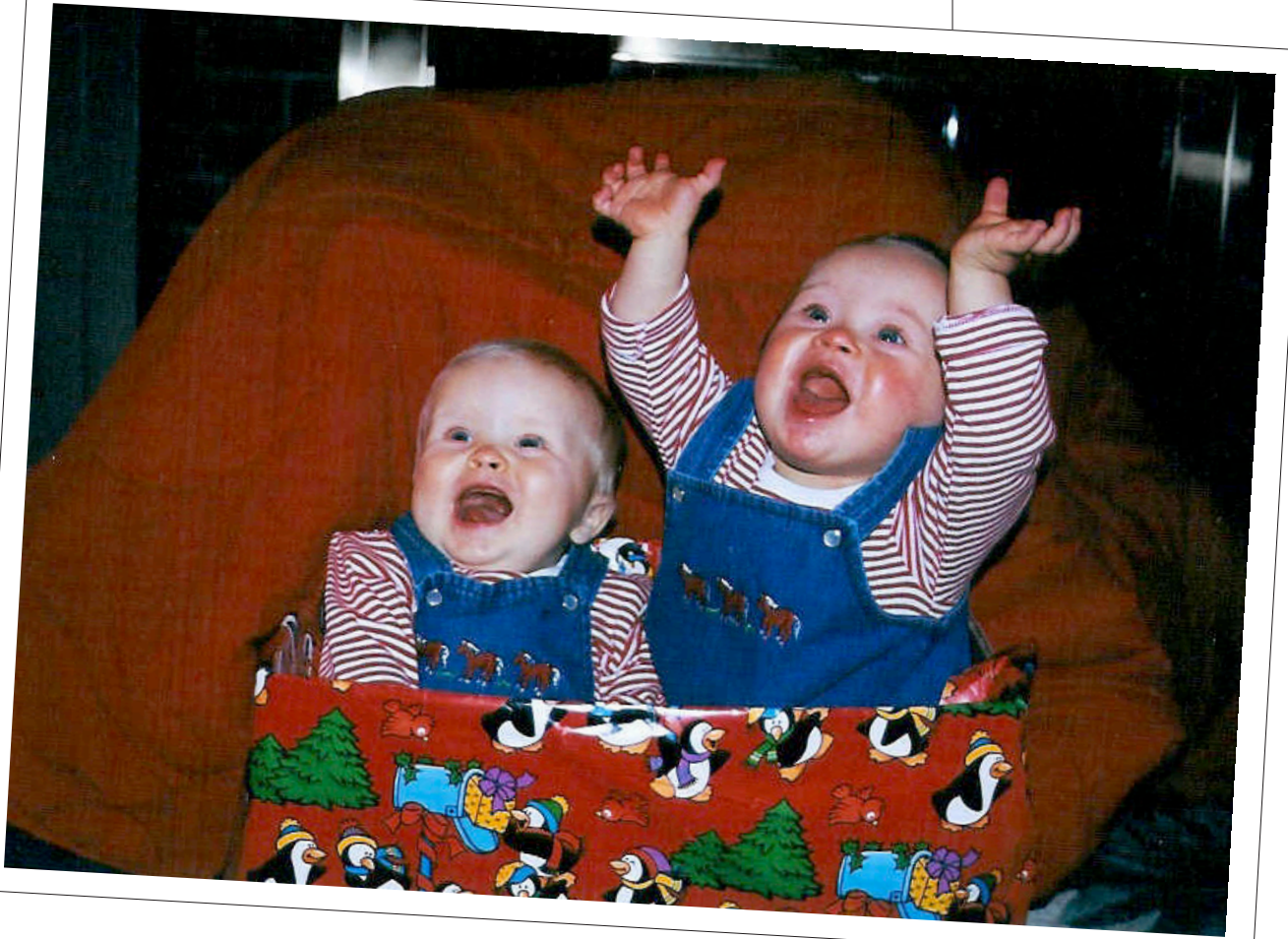
A Mr. & Mrs. Claus from Mammoth Mart, tree ornaments, small and made of wood. "Can I put them on the tree?" each of my children begged.

And they would place them, just so, and stand back and study them and smile.

An angel my husband brought from Nashville is at least 25. She's crushed and wobbly and not up to angel standards. But I dust her off and put her on the mantel anyway.

Christmas books with my children's names written in big print; Christmas books with my name written in big print. Photos of me with Santa and of my children with Santa and of their children with Santa. I unearth all these things. And they unearth something in me.

It's eternity that the genies bring. My father setting a tree



in a stand. My husband setting a tree in a stand.

My childhood. My children's childhood. And now their children's childhood.

I unpack a ceramic Christmas clock that Father Coen gave me a few years before he died. It's a regift, he said, explaining. It drove him and everyone in the rectory crazy because it played a carol every hour on the hour, day and night. And it was loud. It never drove me crazy. I loved it from the start. I unwrap it, unscrew the back, insert a fresh battery, set the time, and wait for it to play.

And when it does, I sit and smile because I am certain, at least for now, that time and death really don't separate us from the people we love. That the old words are true: that somewhere in the next room, around a corner, they are there watching and smiling and thinking of us, too.