

Common Threads:



Stories of Culture and Healing

Edited by Mary Abrums and Janet Thorson-Mador

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Foreword

The stories and the quilt on the cover of this anthology, *Common Threads: Stories of Culture and Healing*, were created at the University of Washington, Bothell, during Spring quarter 2007 in BHLTH 455: Women, Culture and Healing. In this course students “explore the inter-connectedness of identity, culture, and healing” by addressing how women both shape and are shaped by the influence of culture in the world. As learners deconstruct many of the societal messages that define women, they simultaneously explore, create, or often remember, the multiple ways of understanding the meaning of “woman” or “women.” In doing so, they craft a space for the creativity, the resilience, the strength, and the power of community found in the generosity and the caring of women.

One of the central themes of this course is that all people have stories to tell, and that these stories have the power to shape inner healing. These stories tell us about “roots and routes”-- where the storytellers have been and where they are going. Through these stories, students honor their own histories, particular women, everyday lives, and uniquely powerful moments that reflect the experiences of women everywhere.

The stories in this anthology are both fiction and nonfiction. Some are autobiographical and some tell the stories of beloved family members. The storytellers are from a wide variety of backgrounds, cultures and countries; but all are now attending University of Washington, Bothell to earn their Baccalaureate Degrees in Nursing. All of the women and men who have written these stories will touch many lives through their nursing care. These stories offer gifts from their community—gifts of reflection, strength and understanding to help all of us as we care for our patients and for one another. We are grateful for these stories from the women and men who are our healers.

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The quilt on the cover of this anthology was made by the students in this course. Using this form of traditional women’s art, each student crafted a quilting square within the classroom community, telling a part of her/his story. All the squares were patched together—symbolizing both the community of learners and the stories they share.

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Letting Go

Sherry L. Anderson

It had been five years since the green plastic container had been opened. Five years since my mother's death at age 73 from lung cancer. Five years since I had filled it with some of my mother's things that I couldn't bear to part with. Even now I can feel my chest tighten when I think about her death. I need to learn to let go. Maybe this year I can.

Mommy hadn't just been my mother. She had been my best friend, my travel companion, my jigsaw puzzle partner. She was always considered "disabled." While she had many health problems, her main trouble was fear born of a hard life of abuse, poverty and trying to raise three children on her own. We had lived together my entire life. I had never married because, as the eldest, it was my place to take care of her.

We could talk about anything and everything, and did. Even though she had been raised in a different time and found it very uncomfortable, we could even talk about sex. Not just my experiences, but hers! She was always the very first person I called whenever anything interesting happened to me. She was my biggest supporter, always in my corner, even when I was wrong.

When she was 70 years old, I surprised her by taking her white water rafting in North Carolina, something she had always wanted to do. This was a pretty major event, as she was terrified of water, having almost drowned as a child. Because of that, she had made sure each of her children could swim like fishes. I had to keep silent about the real reason for our trip to the Carolinas, because I knew she would get herself worked up and refuse to go. But she did it, and had a blast. A picture taken by the rafting company as our raft went over a 7-foot waterfall showed Mommy grinning from ear to ear. That picture was displayed at her memorial service, and it now sits next to the blue flowered urn that holds her ashes.

In the wintertime, in the years before her eyesight got too bad, one of us would make a big pot of potato soup and homemade bread, and we would put together 1000-piece jigsaw puzzles and eat soup. We could go for hours without saying a word, but it was a companionable silence. We simply loved being with each other. Talk wasn't required.

As I open the plastic Rubbermaid box, I'm struck with how cold it feels. The first thing I come to is her "hippie" jeans: faded blue, covered with fringed patches. I find myself smiling as I remember how self-conscious she was about being an "old woman" wearing jeans. But make no mistake, she looked great in them. Always slender with a tiny waist, she could wear clothes well. She owned very little that was not bought at thrift stores. It seemed that no matter how hard I worked, the money just didn't stretch far enough to buy everything we needed. And if it came to a choice between herself and her children, her children came first.

Underneath the jeans there is white tissue paper. As I carefully unwrap what is inside, I see the midnight blue Mandarin-collared dress I had bought her. It is floor-length, and has a bamboo pattern woven into it in a blue glittery material. I had bought it for her to wear when she won the Florida lottery. She always tried to come up with a dollar or two each week to buy lottery tickets. She just knew she would win eventually, if she played faithfully. And when she

did win, she was going to buy each of her children their own house, and I would never have to work again, and we would go to Hawaii. She had visited the islands before I was born, when she took a Navy transport ship to join my father in the Philippines, and had fallen in love with the place. From the time I was little, she always spoke of taking me to Hawaii.

As I lay the dress carefully to the side, I see the red plaid flannel nightgown Mommy loved to wear in the wintertime. It is a very old-fashioned pattern, with white lace at the cuffs and neckline. Mommy was only 5'3 so she looked almost like a little girl in that nightgown. I always thought flannel was a weird thing to wear in Florida, but Mommy was always cold. I bring the gown to my face, remembering her wearing it, and I can still smell Mommy's perfume on it. Chantilly. It was her favorite fragrance for as long as I can remember.

There are several other odds and ends of clothes, each of them things that she would wear often, things that bought up memories of seeing her in them. An elephant seems to be sitting on my chest. They say that when someone dies, part of the grieving process, part of letting go, demands that you put away their belongings and get on with your life. But I couldn't quite do that after Mommy died. While I did send some things to her sister in St. Louis, this plastic coffin holds the memories of her that are so much stronger than the ones I deal with daily.

As I reach the white tissue paper that covers the last item in the bottom of the container, I remember what I will find underneath. My hands start to shake. As I peel back the paper, I see the sparkle of sequins. Memories flood back to the day I bought the dress for Mommy. It was for my younger brother's engagement party. He was marrying a physician's daughter, the country club, boarding school type. He was definitely marrying above his station. He told Mommy she had to wear a really fancy dress, as his fiancée's family would expect it.

We went to Burdines at the Melbourne Square Mall. All the local well-to-do people shopped there. Certainly not poor people like us. But I had worked some overtime and I wanted Mommy to look fantastic. She had such low self-confidence that I felt only the best would do. And we found it. The skirt was a black voile material, full, and floor length. But it was the top that really made the dress special. Form fitted, covered with bright blue and green sequins, Mommy didn't just look great in it, she looked like the Irish queen she was. When she put it on, she seemed not to walk, but to glide.

But she would never wear it to the party. She was diagnosed with lung cancer a few weeks later, and deteriorated rapidly. The doctors said she was too ill to make the trip from Florida to West Virginia where the engagement party would be held. The dress hung in Mommy's closet, covered in the thick, white plastic dress bag the store had placed it in to protect it.

When Mommy died in September of 2002, I knew there was a certain dress I wanted her to be cremated in. But since I had been running on autopilot for weeks as she got worse, I couldn't remember what dress it was. The one I selected for her was nice, but something kept nagging at me saying that this wasn't the right one. It was those damned plastic bags that Mommy kept her "nice" things in. They hid what was inside, and by the time I found that party dress, it was too late. Even now I feel so guilty, that I failed her somehow. She should have been wearing that sparkly dress so that God couldn't miss her when she got to heaven.

Looking into the now bare green container, I feel just as empty. Numb, actually. I thought I was ready for this, but obviously I was not. The pain is there, just under the surface, threatening to overwhelm me. I've got to force it back down again. I can't let it get hold of me, or I will sink back down into a severe depression like the one I dealt with for months after Mommy died. I could barely get out of bed back then. I can't let that happen again. That would negatively affect my son. Just like Mommy, I would do anything to protect my child.

I carefully repack the clothes, place some cedar into the container to protect the items within, and replace the lid. Back into the closet it goes. It has been five years since I first filled that box of memories. I know that it's time for me to let go and try to get on with my own life without clinging to past. But I know I'm just not ready. Not yet. Maybe in another five years.

Iraq and Back

Diane Barmore

I was at a bar with friends when President Bush appeared on the TV. He looked us all in the eye and said the United States was at war with Iraq. My friend Kim asked us to hold hands. She said a prayer and stressed the importance of sharing this moment in history together. I didn't know what to think. I hadn't paid that much attention to the Gulf War. I had no idea this one would be a totally different experience for me.

This war was like a motion picture unfolding on the news. Intellectually I knew it was real, but on another level it was anything but real. That changed very quickly when Franc, my boyfriend of almost two years, was called to active duty in the Army. [Sigh] Okay, he was in a soldier training unit based locally and has never deployed. "Don't worry, we don't deploy," he would say. [Another sigh of relief, right? No!] He soon informed me that they were in fact going to Iraq. My biggest fear had come true. He had time to prepare and I was fine, taking each day as it came. He hadn't left yet so there was nothing to worry about.

In the weeks before leaving, he would call me and tell me about the equipment his unit needed that the Army wasn't able to provide. In my inimitable resourceful spirit I would spring into action as soon as we'd gotten off the phone. I would start my search by Googling on the Internet, looking for the items. I'd call shops around the country trying to locate what was needed. I would call Franc back and give him the information on what was available, what was on back order, and what was on hold, etc. He met with the guys in the team to give them the news. They all expressed relief that something was being initiated on their behalf. The guys in his team would walk out of the meeting and start making calls to order the supplies. Items they needed were in high demand, and they appreciated every advantage to be able to supply the equipment for their team.

One essential piece of equipment was a certain type of gun scope that would enable them to defend themselves — keep them safe. I was so grateful to be able to help. It made me feel empowered and in control of what was coming. Plus, I wanted my guy to have whatever he needed that would make him safe in Iraq. He needed a special scope for his rifle and by God, I was determined to find it for him!

The day came. Franc and the fellow soldiers in his team were waiting at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. Franc called to tell me there was time to come down and see him one last time to say goodbye. A friend came with me. The guys were all in uniform and looking bigger than life. At first glance, they appeared strong, in control and ready to go. However, the closer I looked the less in control they appeared. In fact, they seemed to not really know what they were doing. Some guys were hovering over crates marking them. A lot of the guys were just standing around talking. If there was a leader of the group, it was hard to tell who it might have been. Franc came over and as we stood there, he pointed out a few people we had talked about. There was the guy who had the weird bump on his head that would be hidden from view had it not been for having had his head shaved for the Army. There was the 37-year old guy who still lived with his mom, etc. It was comforting to put a face to the members of his team. It didn't feel real standing there talking with Franc. I was following his lead, laughing and making jokes, even though my throat felt thick with emotion. I figured I was being supportive by appearing calm, but my heart ached.

Then they had to go to their gate. I was strong. Having my friend there helped. I hugged Franc and he walked away with his team. "They look so cute," I thought, "all in the same

uniform,” standing out from all the other people who milled about in the huge airport corridors that day. My friend and I turned to leave. I felt the tears coming. He was gone. I didn’t want him to see me cry. We got to the car and Franc called me on my cell. He had come back out to see me again. Their flight wasn’t leaving just yet. I didn’t want to say goodbye again and I didn’t want him to see me upset. How selfish was I? What if he had never come back after that day? I would’ve missed a few more precious minutes with him.

We kept in contact by email, and I wrote him a small letter everyday. I wanted him to have something he could hold in his hands, even though the pace was slow compared to email. We called it “snail mail.” He told me he was becoming famous for the amount of mail he got. It made me happy knowing that everyone knew Franc had someone who loved him. I sent care packages too. There is no alcohol in Iraq, so I bought the biggest bottle of Baileys Irish Crème I could get. I wrapped it and packed it well. I put in other things he wanted and took the package to the post office. I filled out the form asking to declare what was being shipped. I wrote, “Listerine, toothbrushes, candy, etc. . . .”

When I took the package to the counter, the postal clerk said “Listerine? Can’t he get that over there?”

I was taken aback by the question. I had never thought that in war one could go shopping, or that there would even be stores like that in Iraq. I responded with, “Not *this* flavor.” She seemed skeptical but proceeded to process the package. Phew!

Franc was so excited when he got the package. He and his captain would make coffee at the end of the day, sneaking some baileys in it while sitting in the office discussing the day and the plans for the next mission. Again, I felt really good that I was supporting my guy and the people who supported him at war.

I regularly mailed items to Franc’s team, “Task Force Olympia.” It was tattooed on my brain, TASK FORCE OLYMPIA. One day I was reading the news online and came across the headline, “SOLDIER FROM WASHINGTON KILLED IN IRAQ.” I clicked on everything I could find to see if there was an age or anything identifying the soldier to let me know it wasn’t Franc. In his last email he mentioned going to Mosul for dental care. He talked about breaking his tooth on English toffee. He laughed saying, “My big war injury was caused by the English!”

I kept scouring the news for anything I could find about the soldier. Finally more information came and I discovered that he was killed in Mosul. My heart skipped a beat . . . and it made me look even harder. Franc’s team was in Tal’Afar, but he was in Mosul for his tooth. Click Click Click...! WASHINGTON SOLDIER, FROM TASK FORCE OLYMPIA, IN HIS LATE 30’S WAS KILLED IN MOSUL. I was stunned. I remember feeling this rush run through my body, like lightening. Tears skewed my vision. I raised myself from my desk at work and silently walked out the door. I got in my car and started driving. I didn’t want to go home. I don’t recall how long I drove. I ended up on the street where I live. I crept around the corner in my car leaning way forward to see if there were any official-looking cars at my place. I parked down the street and walked home. I kept the lights off. I put the shades down. I can’t remember if I slept, or if I stared at the wall.

At 11:00 that night, I turned on the TV to watch the news. I went back and forth between the channels looking for anything. Finally they mentioned the soldier who was killed. He was in Mosul, late 30's, in Task Force Olympia and lived in Olympia and was married. Oh my God! That meant it couldn't be Franc! I was still confused how his team "Task Force Olympia" could be in Tal'Afar with Franc being the *only* one in Mosul from that team. How could someone from Task Force Olympia other than Franc have been in Mosul? To this day I have not been able to figure that out. The wife of the fallen soldier gave a statement. I felt relief along with sadness for the soldier's family. Although I was happy it wasn't Franc, I knew that someone was actually living the nightmare I had only begun to feel that afternoon.

When a soldier is killed, the army turns off all communication so the family can be notified properly. I was still not able to contact Franc. I still had questions and doubts until I got something from him. Finally, we were able to talk to each other on Instant Messenger. His tooth was fixed, and he was heading back to his team.

He came home okay. It wasn't the Hollywood version of a homecoming. He was on the phone with his cell phone provider so I could only get a half hug out of him. I thought once he got home I would feel relief, but there were a whole range of emotions that came over me. I heard my reaction was typical, but no one prepared me for it. When soldiers return from Iraq, they are placed in what is called "lockdown" for ten days to "process" them. The army found that there were so many domestic incidents involving soldiers returning directly home from this war, that they created the "lockdown" period to allow returning soldiers to prepare themselves for a healthy return to day-to-day living.

It took Franc over two years before he told me about Mosul. It seems he was under attack when he was there. He had to set up a perimeter and his gun was drawn. The enemy had broken the base's perimeter and was inside. The enemy tried to run across the airfield and Franc had them in his sights, but they were cut down before Franc and the people with him had time to get a shot off. I asked him if he was scared, and he said, "Yes." In Mosul he was thrown in with a bunch of people he had never trained with; he didn't know their skill level. He said it was "very disconcerting."

Franc is currently in the reserves, but there is always the threat that he could go back to Iraq. I don't know if I can go through that again.

The Monster

Blossom

I am sitting in the darkness of my home wondering when and if the child I used to be will ever come back home. I am scared because all that is around me is darkness. I am wondering if someone will save me from this lonely place. I live here and there is no other place for me to go. I am stuck in this world of emptiness. I want to cry out so bad for somebody to help me, but I am afraid that I will not be taken seriously as I am a child and I am not suppose to have fear or shame. I am supposed to be well taken care of and nobody is to know that I am not. Nobody knows that the life I live is dysfunctional. Nobody knows that the life I live is not comfortable. People come over and they see two parents and three children that are supposedly well taken care of on the outside, but on the inside of this tall skinny girl there is a world tumbling down around her.

I get up in the morning walking around in a fog of despair. I don't say good morning to anybody, and no one says good morning to me. I have just gotten up and the tension is already in the air. I am afraid to go any further because the man I call daddy will be there to torment me. I cannot stand him. He makes me sick. These are the things that I say as I am fearful that he will turn the corner and be there to make me angry or sad.

I have to get ready for school, and so I slowly come out of my room and enter the bathroom to get ready for school. I made it, I am dressed and now I can go in my room and watch a little T.V. before school. The only problem is that he has to take me to school and this is terrible, because he will make me cry this day too. I have to wonder if he enjoys making me cry. Is this the best way for him to get his day started? Why me? Why does he pick on me all the time? I have not done anything wrong. I have not done anything to him that I know of. I did not ask to be born into this world. If he did not want any kids he should not have had any. I am the youngest, he surely could have stopped after he and my mom had my older sister and brother. I think he had me to torment me.

Oh no, here he comes. I can hear his footsteps as he walks around the corner. He stands at the door of my room and asks, "What time is it?"

"It's 7:45" I say.

He looks at me with this grim smirk on his face and says with a low and chilling voice, "What do you mean its 7:45?"

I then get nervous and lower my voice and say, "I don't know, it's 7:45." He turns and slowly walks away. Whew! I made it; I think he will leave me alone this morning. Maybe I can go to school in a happy mood. He did not make me cry this morning. I am safe.

I can continue to watch cartoons until it's time for me to go to school. Oh no, here he comes again. It is not time for us to leave yet, why is he coming back? He stands at my doorway and says, "Do you know how to tell time?"

I look up at him from my bed where I am sitting and I say irritably "Yea."

He looks down at me and says, "Well, tell me again, what time did you say it was?"

I look up at him and hesitatingly say, "I said it was 7:45."

He looks down upon me and in a cold and unfeeling voice says, "Why did you lie?"

I look up at him in a confused manner and say, "What are you talking about? I did not lie, lie about what?"

He says in a roaring voice, "Lie about knowing how to tell time!"

"I did not lie," I say trying now to hold back the tears, because I know this is only the beginning of the torment and torture. How will I get out of this? I think it is too late. I am in too deep now. I just want to go to school to get away from him. Why does my mother have to go to work so early? Why does she leave me here with this monster? I cannot stand him. I wish my school was not so far away. I could walk to school myself. After all I am 12 years old. I can do it, I know everybody in the neighborhood, and I know how to get there. But my mother will not let me walk that far. I need to get away from him as soon as possible.

Suddenly he roars again, "It's a quarter 'til eight, that's how you tell time."

I cannot hold it anymore. I yell out with tears streaming down my face, "I thought I was saying it right, I thought I was supposed to say 7:45."

"Well then you lied, you don't know how to tell time." He looks around to see if anybody is thinking about saying something to him about yelling at me so hard and loud. He looks back at me and says it again, "It's a quarter 'til eight, if you did not know how to tell time you should have said so, don't sit there and lie about it." This is just one example of how the monster can get out of hand.

My cousin is over, and she will stay a week with me. I am so glad to have somebody my age to play with. My sister is eight years older than me and my brother is nine years older than me, and my relationship with them is almost non-existent.

Well the monster is in a good mood today. I do not have to worry about him getting on me today. All I have to do is answer all of his questions right, and stay away from him and I don't have to worry about him yelling at me.

The monster has offered to take my cousin and me to the store for some ice cream. I won't pass on this, because this is rare behavior coming from the monster. We get home from getting ice cream and I see my mother has made it home from work, because her car is in the driveway. My cousin and I run out of the car and play around outside for a little bit, because it is still warm from the hot day we had. We are still able to see what we are doing in the dark because the streetlight is on our side of the street. We do cartwheels on the grass. We turn the water hose on to play jump rope with the water to pass some time away before we have to go inside. My mom yells outside, "O.K. you two; it's time to come inside now."

My cousin and I go inside and watch T.V. in my room. We love to watch Laverne and Shirley.

"What? I don't believe it!" I hear the monster say in a loud voice. All of a sudden I hear heavy footsteps coming from the living room towards my room. He stands at the door of my room and in a very loud voice the monster says, "What is wrong with you? You left out of the house with the door wide open, you never pay attention to anything!"

I look up in such surprise, and my feelings are really hurt. I begin to cry uncontrollably, and looked up to my mother for help. She turns to the monster with a frown and very calmly says, "I wish I did not tell you that when I came home the door was left open." That's it! That is all you have to say. You are here, and have witnessed the abuse of this person and all you have to say is that you wish you had not told him about the door being left open. How about saying you are the adult, you should have made sure the door was locked before you left the house. How about, "She is a child and you do not yell at her like that"? How about saying, "I want a divorce!" Any one of those would do. All along she knew of my suffering and never came to my aid. I am truly all alone in this world. If I do not have my mother to help me, who do I have?

The reality of this is that I have to get away. I will run away and be free of all the pain and suffering that I am feeling. What will I do? Where will I go? I think I am stuck, because at 12 years old you do not have many choices. I know what I will do, I will go to my mother and explain to her that it is O.K. to divorce him and that I won't be sad, because I know it is not my fault. I see on T.V. that kids think the divorce is their fault, but in my case I am asking that she get the divorce. This will be my only way out from under the torment of this man that I hate to call daddy.

I am 13 years old now, and things are getting better because I have learned how to avoid him. I am a little more independent now, and I can make some of my own choices now. I will ask my mother to take me to school in the morning on her way to work. I do not care if I get there early or not. I will tell my dad that I will catch the bus home from school. This will limit the time I have to spend with him.

My dad and I do not talk anymore, and this is good for me. I'd rather not talk to a man that is going to be mean and unfeeling towards me. I can talk to myself or the dog

and have much better conversation. My sister and brother continue to do their own thing, and I am left to my own thing.

I am so lucky this weekend, because I can go and spend the night over to my cousin's house. My aunt lives in a two-bedroom apartment which always smells of scented candles. I walk into the living room which is furnished with burgundy crushed velvet sofas, a reclining chair, and lots of art on the wall that I can never seem to make out what it is. Her kitchen walls are white and not very decorated, and rightfully so, because she does not cook much either. The apartment seems cold and everybody seems distant in the house. Not much conversation goes on between her and her husband and my younger cousin seem to get away with whatever he wants. I do not like it here much, but it is one way to get away from the monster. I guess there is some dysfunction in every household.

My aunt is so nice. My weekend is up, and she is aware that I am not ready to go home yet, and she offered to pick me up tomorrow to go grocery shopping with her the next day, and I excitedly said yes.

I went to school today, and instead of having my dad pick me up I decided to walk, because I did not want to be in the same car as him. That was the longest walk ever. It was smoldering hot this day, and in fact the weatherman suggested that everybody stay as cool as possible, because there was a heat wave. I walked at least 5 miles home, and I thought I was going to pass out. I did not know that the temperatures were that high. I was so tired that when I got home I just lay down and went to sleep. My aunt came by and I did not even know it. My dad sent her away. He told her I was asleep, and did not wake me because he did not want me to go. He had no reason, only to hurt my feelings yet again. She informed me that she told him of her promise to me, and that we would not be out late, but he refused to wake me and let me go. This is just another one of his hateful ways. This should not be surprising; because with the heat the way it was he did not even come to my rescue despite my request.

I have finally made it to eighteen, and I am so happy. I will move out one day and make the promise to myself to never treat my children this way. I will not allow anybody to treat my children this way.

Seasons of Life

Veronica Calayan

My grandparents planted a Bigleaf Maple tree on the day of their marriage. They wrote in their shared journal that this signified their union. To most people, the analogy between a tree and a sacramental union may not appear to be related to one another, but for my grandparents and our family, the tree had an unimaginable significance.

The sapling maple tree was centered in the middle of a two-acre property inherited by my grandparents. They took a wedding picture in front of it as if the tree was a fancy backdrop to a glamorous outdoor esplanade. There they stood: my grandmother in her snow-white lace veil and my grandfather in his crisp bow tie, smiling as if someone handed them a guarantee for a long, happy, and fruitful life. The most interesting thing about the photo was the fact that it was taken in early January in one of the coldest winters in history. Despite the desolate and bleak surroundings of this photo, the promise of a bright future radiated from the couple standing in its foresight. The picture stood on top of the fireplace mantel in the family home, which was built about 40 yards away from the maple tree.

My grandmother once told me the tree was the foundation of our family, and that it showed the growth of all we believed in. Of course, I was only four years old at the time and still blind to what life had in store for me. I remember looking up at the twenty-foot maple tree and wondering if it was cold in the winter air. The tree's branches reached for the sky, still bare and naked. I wanted to ask it: "Don't you want to just clasp your arms close to your trunk to try to warm your extremities?" But the tree did not answer. It remained quiet and lifeless in its winter state, looking empty in its solitude.

When I was ten years old, we visited the family home on a cool and cloudy April morning. I walked up to the tree hand in hand with my grandparents. The growth and proliferation was evident since the meager beginning it had years ago in the wedding day picture. Now the tree stood in the field in all its magnificence. The leaves on the tree were still in its early stage of growth, like a butterfly coming out of its cocoon spreading its wings for the first time. Tiny and fragile, the leaves were clinging to the branches that gave them their life. I thought about how innocent and unknowing they seemed. My grandmother told me the leaves were budding and ready to dance into a sea of life. I thought it was just still too cold and rainy to be exposed to the elements. The freshness of the air kissed the edges of the leaves enough to open them up and welcome them to the world. Life was reborn. It was full of promise and beauty.

I looked at my grandfather, his face worn from years of hard labor. He stood there under the maple tree and I thought to myself how strong and masculine he seemed to me. He could throw me higher than any person could and when he did, I swear I was able to touch the tallest branches of that tree. My grandmother, on the other hand, was soft and gentle. She could cure bumps and bruises with a single hug and a kiss to the head. Her nature was warmhearted and sincere, and yet she seemed delicate and fragile.

My grandparents' individual characteristics blended well together, creating a wonderful harmony that sung like the wind blustering in the leaves.

While on summer break from college, I came back to the family home to visit my parents who were living there, providing support to my aging grandparents. The Bigleaf Maple tree stood there in its grandeur: towering, abundant, and full of life. Its leaves bloomed into an array of magical fans flapping like wings in the summer breeze. They were big, beautiful, and dazzling in lustrous shades of green. The branches spread out like arms waiting to embrace the wind. The shadows danced underneath as the sunlight beamed down onto its blanket of foliage.

I joined my grandparents who sat under the maple tree eating a late lunch. They were telling me stories from their past. My grandfather spoke of his time in the military and my grandmother told stories about antics with my mother and aunts while growing up. We spent all afternoon laughing and sharing special times. The ups and downs in their lives added to their personalities and created their characters. They told me that everyone experiences situations in life differently. Understanding these differences will make us more understanding to why people are the way they are. My grandparents mentioned that I should take time to appreciate each day with both a good sense of humor, and patience. They told me not to let the hassles of daily life get in the way of appreciating what life is really about.

Under that tree, my grandparents and I talked about life's dreams, reality, and expectations all the while engulfed in the shadows of a larger-than-life blanket. We stayed there until the sun went down and the sound of insects serenaded us. I could hear the leaves clapping above like unending applause to an encore presentation. The eyes of my grandparents beamed through the evening light, cheerful and full of life. While observing the interaction between my grandparents, I was provided with an insight to their interconnection. The presence as the cornerstones to our lives became evident. I didn't want to leave for school after the visit with my grandparents. The long August summer days with them seemed safe and secure. The daily business of life was obscure and distant.

Several years after college, with a family of my own, I went once again to the family home. It was a late October afternoon when we buried my grandmother in the family plot at the cemetery. She died two months after my grandfather passed away. My mother told me that when a loved one has departed, a part of those living dies along with them and yet their memory lives on. I believe that my grandmother surrendered her own life when she lost the relationship and bond she had with my grandfather. After the funeral, I went back home and walked up to the maple tree. I placed a bench under branches that held golden yellow leaves. Most of them had fallen, but the few left held on for dear life to the extended arms that nourished them. A handful of winged seeds spun down to the ground like helicopters, past my shoulders, to the awaiting autumn terrain.

I sat there contemplating the memory of my grandparents. Reflecting upon the compiled journal of gathered memories throughout the years, I began to discover the many adventures, emotional roller coasters, and unending happiness shared between the two of them. The seasons of their lives were in those pages as they chronicled their relationship and growth as individuals and as a couple. The fortitude of their relationship resonated in the memoirs.

The picture of my grandparents on their wedding day came to my mind, and it was then I realized what my grandparents were trying to tell me years ago: they were like that Bigleaf Maple tree. My grandparents were strong yet gentle. Their ethics and morals grew like roots, burrowing through the structure of our family lineage creating a strong framework for future generations. My grandparents were people full of life, took nothing for granted, and handled whatever nature or humanity placed upon them. They looked at life with a sense of humor and plenty of patience. Together, their life was an exploration assembled in a mixture of adventures they shared hand in hand.

The Bigleaf Maple tree, planted on their wedding day, symbolized the beginning of a life that would go far beyond anything my grandparents could have imagined. With over 50 years of marriage, the tree reflected a journey with all the seasons engraved in its trunk. Lifelong memories were kept sacred within its branches. Rebirth, growth, and demise circled its seasons of life. I will pass on to my children the legacy my grandparents have taught me: to be understanding, loving, and kind to those around me and to remember that life has its own beauty with the changing of the seasons. The foundation of our family was intertwined with the roots of the tree. The maple tree symbolized the family's strength and unity, providing support for weathering the seasons of life.

My Father's Hands

Nelly Deutsch

I pulled my car into the visitor parking lot outside the emergency department. Hospitals are familiar to me: I work at one. But now, I was a visitor. I asked for "Mr. de Putter." Oh, that was hard to say! Is my Dad really a patient? I was directed to cubicle 16. I looked up at the numbers on the curtain rails: 10, 11, 12 . . . What would I find?

I'd had a phone call that morning at 7:30. It was my brother.

"Dad's had a stroke."

"What?" I gasped.

"It doesn't seem too bad," my brother continued. "He was joking with the ambulance attendants." That would be my Dad, always trying to put others at ease. My brother said he'd call me back as soon as he heard from my Mom what the CT scan showed.

I wondered if I should jump in the car and make the three-hour drive north to the hospital or wait for my brother to call me back. "It must be a TIA," I thought, "Dad hasn't had any signs of a stroke before." After impatiently waiting for two hours, I called my brother back. I don't know when he was planning to call me or where I was on his phone list, but I was angry when he gave me the details of Dad's condition. Obviously I should have been the first one informed and I should have been told to come right away. After all, I'm a nurse; I know what's going on. Dad had a cerebral bleed, he was getting worse, he was paralyzed on the left side and his speech was slow. He was being transferred to a higher care hospital in case they had to do surgery to relieve the intracranial pressure. Now he was waiting in the emergency room for a repeat CT Scan.

13, 14, 15 . . . I'd put on a brave face. I looked around the curtain: there he was, reclined on a stretcher.

"Hi, Dad," I said. He smiled, but only half his face went up. He recognized me but he didn't say anything. "How are you?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders as if to say, OK, under the circumstances. I kissed him on the cheek and picked up his limp left hand. I was fighting back the tears. I've worked with too many stroke patients. I know the prognosis is poor, especially with a bleed. My head was swirling with images of everything from a coma to physiotherapy. I looked down at his hand. It was big and strong. The skin was rough, tanned just like his face, a farmer's tan. I could see bits of black grease under his chipped nails. He had two Band-Aids on his fingers. He probably just put them on yesterday. He was always cutting himself on tools and machinery. The hairs on his knuckles were singed from the fire of a welding torch. That's what he was: a farmer, a mechanic, a welder. You name it, he

could fix it. But mostly he was a father, a grandfather, a husband, and a friend. Those hands could wrap around you and embrace you like he understood all your frustrations and hurts. I wondered how I would cope without the Dad I knew and loved.

The CT Scan confirmed that the bleed had progressed, but it appeared to have stabilized. The doctor told us the bleed was in his frontal lobe and if he recovered, he would have trouble making decisions. He was transferred to the neuro intensive care unit.

My sister and her family were supposed to leave for Africa the next day for two years. Now that my Dad was ill, they were struggling to make new plans. My sister decided to stay behind with her youngest daughter. Her husband and the other 5 kids would go on ahead. She brought her family to my Dad's bedside to say good-bye. Her kids were shocked and some started crying right away. She asked each child to take their grandpa's hand and pray for him individually. "Please make Grandpa better so he can come back to the farm and be with Grandma." Her husband asked each one to share a memory of Grandpa. Throughout this emotional time, my Dad appeared to be in a deep sleep.

My sister took his hand and begged him. "Dad, please raise yourself out of the fog. Open your eyes and let the kids know that you hear them."

My Dad strained and opened his eyes. "Hi, Rebecca. Hi, Joshua. Hi, Daniel. Hi, Menwoh. Hi, Matthew," he said, as my sister brought each child before him. Then he released my sister's hand and placed it on Matthew's head and said, "The prayer of Isaac for Jacob," and rustled his hair. He then lifted his hand and placed it on each of the children's head one by one and blessed them. It was an amazing time.

As the children left, my sister said, "Thank you for blessing the children, Dad. It's really hard to see you like this. We really love you and are praying for you."

Then my Dad quoted one of his favorite Bible verses, "All things work together for good to those who love God."

I wish I could say my Dad steadily improved from that moment on, but each day brought new challenges. He went into heart failure and then got pneumonia. His blood sugar was hard to control and sometimes he was unresponsive. I spent 8-10 hours a day at his bedside, telling stories about my kids, what was going on at the farm, and reading the Bible. This relieved my Mom and siblings to keep shorter visits and tend to their families and share responsibilities at the farm. I got to know the nursing staff and through me, they got to know him. There was a steady stream of visitors. He touched so many people's lives. I waffled between accepting his decline and being hopeful of some sort of recovery. I accepted that his hands would never grip the steering wheel of his antique John Deere tractor, the one he had bought old and rusty, and had painstakingly taken apart to nuts and bolts and put back together again like new. Nor would I ever see the joy on his face as he drove that tractor pulling a wagon full of kids for a hayride. I

would never again see his delight in giving away pens of exotic woods he had made on his lathe. He was still there, but so much of him was gone.

After two weeks, he was stable enough to return to the hospital closer to his home and start physiotherapy. On his 78th birthday, my brother and I went to visit him. He was awake for the first time and responded with, "Hi Nel. Hi John." He reached up with his right hand and pulled me close and hugged me.

The next few weeks brought steady improvement. He followed instructions methodically but couldn't initiate any activity. He was able to eat when the tray was set up, and walked accompanied, with a walker. The care at this facility was minimal. He only received one hour of physiotherapy a day. So when I came to visit, I got him up again.

"OK, Dad, reach over to the rail with your good hand and pull yourself to the edge of the bed. Good. Now push yourself up to sit. I'll help you. Now reach over to your left hand and pick it up. Put it here on the walker." I stretched his fingers out and helped him grip the walker. "Grab here with your right hand and lean forward and stand up. Good. Let's go for a walk."

Down the hall we went. I walked close to his left side so he wouldn't veer off to the left or lose his balance. He had total left-side neglect.

The nurses said, "Hi, Mr. de Putter, good to see you up. Thanks for the corn." Every day my Mom picked fresh corn on the cob for the nurses. "What else do you grow on your farm besides corn?" they asked.

"Kids," my father responded with a half smile. We all laughed. After all, he had six kids and twenty-one grandchildren.

After a month of physiotherapy we talked about having him return home. He would need 24/7 supervision, and that would fall primarily on my mother. We knew he never wanted to be placed in a nursing home. Just at the time a decision needed to be made, he had a seizure and regressed. His left hand and arm became more contracted and useless. I would massage and stretch it every time I visited, hoping that he would use his walker again. But he never did. Soon it was too hard to even get him out of bed and into a chair. A few weeks later he aspirated and the nurse looking after him called a code. He came around with deep suctioning and high oxygen. He developed pneumonia and congestive heart failure which responded to medication. But his heart could no longer sustain adequate circulation and his hands became weak and pale. They were bruised from all the IV starts. He was aware of our presence but he never spoke. He wanted to go and meet his Heavenly Father. We asked him to hang on until my sister arrived from Africa. She had gone to be with her family a month earlier.

Soon after my sister arrived, we asked that all treatment be stopped. I couldn't bear to see him suffer and requested Morphine to be given regularly. My mother, all my

siblings and my four kids were present when he took his last breath. I placed his limp hands across his chest.

“You were the best father,” I said.

Dad always referred to the Psalmist, David: “The number of my days are in my Father’s hands.” Then he would add, “Where else would I want them to be?”

Reflections

Cyril Evangelista

In the early hours of the morning, I was barely awake. I dragged myself out of bed and planned to get myself to the gym. The fluorescent light in the bathroom woke me up a bit. As I stared in the mirror, I focused on my hair. My hair was black and wavy. Surely with conditioner, blow dryer, and a few strokes of the ceramic flat iron I would be able to make it soft and control the frizz.

Soon, I began to notice my skin. My skin was covered with noticeable blemishes. I could still recall when it all first started. It started when my family decided to drive down to California and Nevada. The number of hours on the road was long. The sun beats down on these two states like there's no tomorrow. We were blasting the van's air conditioner to keep cool. Although the windows were sealed shut, my face was still covered with dirt. The impurities were collecting on the Bioré facial wipes I had brought with me. Before we reached California, I had been constantly monitoring my irritated skin in the mirror and noticed that a pimple was already developing.

In high school, hair and skin control were not as complicated. For the hair, maintenance was simple: shampoo, conditioner, and frequent visits to the bathroom with a comb, regardless of gender. Of course, the girls had the advantage because they carried compacts, which allowed them to check their hair as well as powder their faces. It was a lot simpler for guys with their one comb, but some of them had decided to keep some powder in their handkerchiefs.

After getting ready, I was on my way to the gym. I liked driving before six in the morning because there were fewer vehicles on the road. That way, I could look at the mirror and not worry about another driver tailgating me. The tension among drivers after six in the morning was simply greater. It was difficult for me to understand the rationale for people's agitation when it came to driving. I cannot deny that I was sometimes as agitated as most people when I was a bit younger. Maybe it's simply one of those things that are hard to understand if anyone thinks about it.

As I approached the gym door, a man held the door open for me. That was nice of him, so I said thank-you. I guess it's just the culture here in the United States: it is polite to wait for people. I remember when I was growing up, giving up my seat to an elderly person when riding the bus to school. Often, the buses in the Philippines were crowded like cans of sardines during rush hour. It was difficult enough to find a place to hold on and stabilize myself during the trip. For the elderly, it was a lot more challenging. The passengers who were standing would sway in response to the current direction of the bus. So, people would swing away from the direction of the turn, slightly lean back during acceleration, or suddenly jolt forward during a stop. It was best to control your body's direction in order to avoid having the other passengers' sweat come in contact with your own.

Sweat in the gym was rampant. If only people would have figured out that they should do cardiovascular exercises last, or on another day, and not before going to the weight training room, then maybe it would not have been so bad. On the other hand, there were those who easily broke a sweat by lifting a ten-pound weight off the rack. As I looked at the bench in front of me, I thought to myself, “If only people would just remember to wipe the sweat off the bench they just used . . .” At the gym, I did not use my towel for myself, but for the bench before I used it. As I pushed and pulled on the weights before me, I was thinking about how I still needed to walk the dog, do laundry, cook, iron some uniforms for work, and do some homework. Then I realized that I had been so overloaded with thoughts about what I would be doing later on, that I had forgotten to check myself out in the mirror on the wall to see if my body was in the correct form for lifting weights. Maybe the amount of weight on the machine was actually too light.

After the first set, I increased the weights and took a minute and thirty second break to allow my blood to circulate. While resting, I glanced around and noticed that some guys were quietly concentrating on their efforts. Some even grunted as they pushed with their last amount of strength to lift the weight off its resting position. There was the clanging of metal left and right as some people attempted to resist the weight’s return to its resting position. Then I spotted this man walking around the gym floor. He had a Superman logo on his blue shirt and on his weight support belt, as well. There was something different about this person from the rest of the people in the room. He was walking around chatting with the other people who were resting for one minute and a half. He was not one of those preoccupied people trying to get to the next level. He was not enslaved by the mirror on the wall of the gym, hoping to lift more than the guy on the other bench or machine.

As I got on the machine, I looked at myself in the mirror and became aware that I was not here primarily for the workout. I came here to forget about the constant fast-paced life outside the gym. This was my downtime. So, I placed some more weights on the machine and looked straight toward the mirror. I was looking straight beyond my reflection. There was silence beyond the clanging of metal around me. I could feel my heartbeat. I became aware of my breathing, the extension of my arms, and the amount of noise the touching of the metal produced.

After leaving the gym, I had made arrangements with some of my close friends to meet me at my house, and I would cook dinner. I hurried and went through my recipes, wondering what I would cook. With regard to food, I was very conscious of what I put in my body, so I watched my cholesterol and salt intake. An increase in those two things could alter my weight, especially with regard to the season and course of the weather. Often, I would pick out a soup, an entrée, a vegetable, and sometimes a dessert.

On my way out of the house, I stopped by the washroom to see if my hairstyle was still intact. I got to the grocery store and headed to the produce department. Aside from the Sears & Roebuck and JC Penney, this was the best place to be for me. The vegetables around me were crisp and green. The peppers were colorful and fresh. And

the potatoes, well . . . they still looked dirty. With a simple glance at the parsley and cilantro, I could already hear the fast tapping of the blade on the cutting board, and decorative dishes similar to the chefs of the Food Network channel. My heart was pounding and I was aware of my excitement. So, I picked up my ingredients, went home, turned the television on to the Food Network, and prepared a meal.

Later, I met with the person I had been dating for awhile. The topic of having children and then getting married came up. All of a sudden, time slowed down on me. I was shocked, flattered, and did not know how to reply. My heart raced and it was pounding in my chest. I cared for this person, and in my mind, we were both not ready for a marriage relationship and raising children. I doubted my fast food salary would be enough even if combined with this person's retail salary.

Maybe I knew what to say, but I was not ready to decline. How could I decline the calm, sincere eyes, the warm lips, the cute, well-proportioned nose, the nice hair I could run my fingers through, and the huggable body? This was the same person who was devoted, strong-willed, decisive, smart, funny, fair, and who had always been there for me through difficult times. This person did not expect me to have two different personalities, switching off and on like a light bulb, depending on the situation. I appreciated that this person was not interested in relationship 'projects', did not attempt to change me, and loved me simply for who I was. How could I say no, and "perhaps maybe later"? It was like having to choose between my career and the perfect person to be with forever. Although it was difficult, I declined.

As I pressed my work clothes with the iron that night, I reflected back on everything from that day. When I saw my reflection in the mirror, my attention had been focused on superficial things, such as my body. There were a lot of things I could change or wish to change, yet there was only so much that could be done. I felt trapped within my own wishes for those things that I could physically see. However, my reflection on things *without* the mirror opened me up to passion and possibilities, such as creativity through cooking. I was able to make a decision beyond the physical aspect of the relationship and, I hope, make the right decision that would benefit my partner and me. Finally, I was able to see the other benefits of going to the gym, beyond the mirrors around the gym walls, and holistically in my life.

The Secret Art

Aila Gulaid

The old women sat by the side of the fire listening to the moaning coming from within the house. Utiya sat like a stone, deep in thought about her patient's needs. Deeka lay quietly now in the soft darkness of the birthing hut, which she herself had made. Both women knew that this night would be long, but they were ready to practice their secret art.

Deeka was a shy young bride of sixteen years, having her first child. Although she was suffering much pain, she did not want anybody to hear her voice. Utiya was the most kind, respectful and knowledgeable person skilled in the birthing process and midwifery in this village. She intended to make Deeka's birthing as safe as possible. Utiya believed that birth was the most simple but also the most complicated process on earth. Utiya had helped more than 50% of the village children be born safely. She coached every woman and told her that birth had not changed from the beginning, and babies had to come out.

Both Utiya and Deeka believed that natural birth was a mindset, and Deeka needed to realize that she had the power to flow with the event. Utiya and Deeka both believed that traditional midwifery was not just catching the babies, but was an ongoing process of all that nature had to offer. But Utiya's best knowledge came from just sitting in the stillness, watching and helping it happen.

Although Deeka was young and having her first child, Utiya encouraged her to realize that body still knows what it is supposed to do. Keeping a tradition alive means we (the midwife, grandmother, mother, sisters and female friends from the village) should make every effort to help the mother achieve something her body does naturally anyway. The thoughts and moral support of these people will empower the mother and lift her mentally, physically, and spiritually to alleviate the pain during the birth process. This is how the women of this village healed and dealt with their pain: with moral support and natural medicine.

Deeka was one of many young pregnant women in the village. During her pregnancy, many people surrounded and supported her who had known her throughout her life. The village traditional health system was full of behavior requirements, including dietary modifications, massages, and various prohibitions. All of these prohibitions and admonitions were intended to prevent complications for the young bride during and after the pregnancy.

Deeka kept biting a piece of her scarf and continued pushing this baby through her small pelvis. She gave birth to a baby boy without complication; the placenta came half an hour after the baby was born. While the baby was being taken care of, the mother was also being taken care of by different experts, who helped her go through the traditional postpartum care that included natural medicines for both baby and mother.

The baby's name was Rooble, which means rain, because it was raining so heavily that day. Loud sounds from a thunderstorm, accompanied by lightening, made it difficult for the mother and the rest of the group to hear each other's voices. The sky looked so dark and the clouds so engorged, it seemed the rain would never stop. All the reserve wells were full, and children splashed, kicked and played in the floodwaters outside the residential areas.

In Deeka's village, you see, child birthing is not a curse. It gives life not only to the baby, but also to the mother. Within Deeka's world, with its health and spiritual systems, she was unafraid to face childbirth's dangers and risks, even though she had no "scientific" assistance. Deeka had been birthing three to four sheep or goats almost daily since she was 5 years old. This made her brave, unafraid of her own labor and delivery process.

These children are born so healthy, with no deformities, no complications and zero mortality rates. According to this village, birth is so easy and women are so busy working (building their traditional huts or sewing or looking after their flock of sheep or goats) that giving birth is usually accomplished in an hour or two. These children are strong mentally and physically. By the time Rooble was four years old he was very mature, talking clearly and helping mom. Rooble was looking after the baby sheep and goats at a place that was over five miles from home. He worked twelve hours every day. When he got hungry he ate fresh fruits and vegetables growing everywhere. When he got thirsty, he punctured the clean area of the ground (aquifer) with his stick, like puncturing a watermelon with a straw. He drank this pure juicy water from deep inside the ground. Sometimes older boys gave him some camel's milk.

This village encouraged simple living. The children born in this village matured quickly and came into to the full power of adulthood smoothly. Villagers loved nature as much as themselves. Therefore, many females were named after nature: Sunshine, Star, Moon, Lily and Sunflower. However, male names were different: lion, wolf, river, mountain, and elephant.

It was an evergreen village during the rainy season. When villagers walk about two miles away from this village, all they can hear is the sound of frogs and birds happily singing interchangeably. These villagers feel the beauty of nature and have peace of mind. Deeka's heart and mind were drawn by nature, and she strongly believed that she was part of it.

The villagers built their own houses from natural resources, such as wood, grass, sand and stones. Their lives did not cost any money, but were free, with effort. Deeka enjoyed those kinds of houses, with their different smells. They were mountain fresh, like grass, and the smell of the young ladies with some kind of lily flowers, and the smell of young men like sour old milk because they wanted to stay natural and never used deodorant.

We Rode Our Bikes

Ivy Housden

We rode our bikes every chance we could get. Riding up the hill, standing on the pedals we slowly made it to the top, and then down again as fast as our child-size legs could carry us. I was nearly nine years old, the only girl in the house (besides my mom). I had long, straight, brown hair and big dark brown eyes, just like my dad's. My bike was one of my treasures, as bikes were for my brothers, ages six, ten and seventeen.

It was a baby-pink Schwinn 10-speed, as shiny as a new penny. Having a 10-speed meant that I was a grown up kid, on my way to becoming an adult. I felt extremely proud and would gladly show off my biking skills to those willing to watch.

This jewel of mine was also involved in some unforeseen scrapes, bruises, blood and tears. The first time I rode my bike down our steep hill, I lost control and took a tumble, scraping my forehead. My oldest brother walked me into the house to my sleeping mother, who comforted me the way a mother should.

Another unforgettable incident with my precious bike involved a mean boy and a rock. I was always picked on, being the only girl. This bully was a friend of my oldest brother. He was always harassing the younger kids in my neighborhood, chasing them, throwing things and even lighting and shooting candlestick fireworks at them.

This particular day, I was the target of his bullying. Riding my bike as I always did, I was having the best time of my life, the way a dog gets elated chasing after a tennis ball. All of a sudden, from the direction of my house, came a rock flying towards me, as fast as a major league pitcher's fastball sores toward a batter.

I peddled as quickly as I could, but there was not enough time to react. Unfortunately, my reflexes were not as fast as a cat's would have been. Before I knew it, time stopped as the rock hit me square on the nose. Blood immediately started gushing out of my nose, the way water rushes through a failing levee. I fell off my bike onto the hard concrete, not noticing anything else but the throbbing pain on my face.

Thump, thump. Thump, thump. I felt the blood rushing to and out of my nose. I had never felt such pain in my entire nine years of life. After the initial shock, tears started pouring out of my eyes, as I could not hold them in any longer.

The taste of salty tears and metallic blood overwhelmed me as I sat in the middle of the street. "I must be brave and strong," I said to myself. So I stood, walked my bike over to the lawn and wiped my blood and tears onto my bleached white shirt.

The bully did not get severely reprimanded, but was immediately sent home. I always hated when he came over. After many countless incidents, the bully was not

allowed over to our house any more. He came over anyway, when my parents were not home, which seemed like a lot.

I remember my mom working all the time. I have a hard time recalling what my dad did. He had *some* job at some point. He sure did sleep a lot, like a cat constantly napping during the day.

My dad worked at the Mormon Temple sometimes. My three brothers and I were riding our bikes out of our neighborhood and over close to where my dad was working one day. The sidewalk was steep; if it had been a grass hill and snowy, it would have been perfect for sledding. The hill was too much for my little brother, Matt, only six or seven at the time. His bike pedals were going faster than his toothpick legs could possibly ever go. He was losing control, straggling behind. Violently thrown off of his bike, he tumbled down the concrete sidewalk. There was blood everywhere. Matt's face was spotted, like a cheetah, and his moans like a dog in heat.

I remember thinking, "What do we do?" He was hurt bad. Our dad's work was really close. One of my brothers ran to the nearest pay phone to call him. Waiting for help, we were scared, not knowing what else to do. I held Matt's hand, telling him it was okay and that Dad would be there soon.

He came to the rescue fast. The sidewalk had a fence on one side and bushes on the other. Our white Ford Aerostar van was quickly driven onto the sidewalk like it was just another street. My dad stopped the van and came running toward us while ripping off his buttoned, white-collared shirt. He wrapped his shirt around Matt's wounds, immediately turning it into a red, polka-dotted mess.

The van was made into an ambulance as my dad rushed Matt away. All we needed were sirens. My dad was a hero in my mind. This is how I remember him. A heart attack is what took him from me when he was only 47 years old. I was 14, just about to enter into high school.

So squishy and warm like a huge pile of sand at the beach: this is how my dad felt as I hugged him. He was like a big teddy bear. That was a redeeming quality, but also contributed to his unfortunate demise. His life and death are part of what has shaped and defined the me of today. I remember and cherish him as a comforting father and hero. Today I am a strong, independent and caring human being.

My dad influenced me in many ways, including my decision to become a nurse. After learning of his heart attack and a long mourning period of adolescent rebellion, I wanted to know more. During high school, the days I went to my biology class, I really enjoyed it. I attended class more consistently when we were discussing human biology. I was very intrigued by human chromosomes and traits passed on to a child through their parent's DNA. I listened as attentively as a third grader discovering a baking soda and vinegar volcano eruption.

I was slowly becoming more health conscious as my high school years came to an end, not wanting to die at an early age. Helping people better themselves in some way was something I felt I had to do. At first, I thought I might want to be a counselor or psychologist of some kind. Then I wrestled with the idea of becoming a massage therapist or physical therapist. I eventually decided on nursing and began my anatomy and physiology class a couple of years after high school. I fell further in love with the body, the cardiovascular system in particular, and continued to focus on my education towards nursing.

I am a nurse and my father would have been extremely proud. As undesirable an experience as it is to lose a parent, it has helped me to develop coping skills and to be a more caring individual.

My dad has also had a great influence on my love of softball and the color pink. As a child, I wore mostly pink. It was my absolute favorite color. Because of this, my dad nicknamed me “Pinky,” a name that has stuck with me like super glue to a table. Although no one presently calls me Pinky, I always picture my dad’s round, scruffy face and his deep, humorous voice playfully calling me by my now favorite nickname.

I religiously play softball even today, and will continue to play until I am bedridden. Like an excited child waiting for the candy store to open, I would eagerly throw a baseball or softball around with my dad in whatever strip of grass we could find.

It seems that most things that were a part of my childhood and adolescence, good and bad, are still important to me today. I still love to ride my bike, although I no longer have a pink, Schwinn ten-speed. Pink is my favorite color. Softball is my favorite hobby, and nursing is my profession. These are all vital pieces that define me, fitting together neatly like a puzzle. This is who I am.

Dear Lars

Irina

Dear Lars,

After our telephone conversation today, I sat down and thought for a long time. April 13th, 1986, came to my mind. It was a bright sunny day, the day you were born. It was one of the happiest days of my life, and it changed my life forever. You were a seven pound 10 ounce bundle of energy from the time you opened your eyes. Blond, with bright blue eyes and an adorable smile, you loved action and attention. You wanted to be played with and carried around. Just a few months old, you decided that lying down for a nap was not your idea of fun and you let me know this loud and clear every time I dared to attempt it. You loved your baby jumper I had hung up in the doorframe for you and it kept you occupied for quite a while every day. It did not take you long to learn to sit and walk. You were on a mission to explore the world. Going to the beach was one of your favorite activities. You would run up to the waves and back trying not to get soaked until you were exhausted. I could hardly keep up with you. You must have baked thousands of sand cakes and built hundreds of sand castles during the first years of your life.

When you were five years old you decided you wanted to play soccer. I still smile when I think about your first couple of games. You were very polite at the time. You did not understand that the members of the other team did not want to share the soccer ball and even pushed you away to get to it. In fact you were outraged! It did not take long for you to catch on. I don't believe you ever shared a ball with members from the opposite team since!

The older you got the more determined you became. You loved to win and it showed. You practiced in rain and shine for many years. You held the record for most goals scored on your team several years in a row. You always loved to be outdoors. You did not mind playing in mud, slush or snow. Our washing machine ran many nights trying to keep up with all your dirty clothes.

One year after I had enrolled you in soccer, you discovered baseball. I did not know anything about baseball at the time. You were determined to teach me. You took me to the sports store and made me buy a glove for myself. The first few years I enjoyed playing catch with you and warming you up. Then you started throwing too hard. It hurt catching your balls and was not much fun for me anymore. I always feared getting hurt. When I finally backed out of playing catch with you, you talked me into throwing whiffle balls to you during batting practice. My reaction time improved quite a bit during those years. I learned how to duck and jump quickly to avoid the stinging balls. I am proud to say I got pretty good at it!

I fondly look back at all the years of watching you play select soccer and baseball. I did not even mind the long hours in the cars, driving to practices and to games all across the state. Your sister Annika was one of your biggest fans. She often cheered you on

loudly from the sidelines. We put a lot of miles on the car during those years. You loved to play and you gave it your all. Even when you were injured you hated to stay on the sidelines.

I still vividly remember the day you pitched in the semi-final game of a regional tournament at Peter Kirk Park. You had pitched a great game and you were tied 1:1 in the seventh inning. You threw another pitch. The ball was hit to the third baseman. The third baseman overthrew. The catcher raced and threw the pitch sideways to you. You could only catch it with your bare hand and had no time to switch the ball. You were so determined not to let the player score that you actually covered the plate with your ball in your ungloved hand. I will never forget the moment when the player slid into your hand with his spiked shoes. Your whole hand was bleeding profusely. I raced to the field with many of the other parents in tow. You were not even concerned about your fingers. You were so mad that you were injured and not able to finish the game. I had to take you to the hospital to get your fingers stitched. The minute we got to the ER you told them you wanted to get back to the game. They were surprised, but had the time to stitch you up quickly. We got back to the field in about one and a half hours. The last people were just leaving the stands. You found out that your team had just lost 3:1 in the 12th inning. You walked to the mound and stood there for the longest time. tears running down your face. I sat in the bleachers silently crying with you. I knew then that you had the determination to pursue your dream one day to become a professional player.

That year you made the decision to quit select soccer to concentrate on baseball. During high school you were quite “the star.” It was fun to see you play. You did not lose many games. I think you enjoyed being in the limelight too, and seeing your picture in the local newspapers several times.

Unfortunately, our lives changed a few months afterwards when dad left. I know that you were very angry and hurt. It was hard to see you lose your focus. You were so angry at the world and you did not want any help from anyone. I felt so helpless.

You eventually picked yourself up, got invited to play baseball at BCC, paid attention to school, and threw all of your energy into baseball again. I know you wanted me to come to all of the games you pitched in. I wish I would have had the time and energy to see all of them. The truth was that I was often too tired after nursing school and work – too tired to drive to away-games. You said you understood, but I know you were disappointed when you did not see me in the stands. Your sister Annika told me. I cried many times wishing I could have been there to support you, too exhausted to get up from the couch and go.

I was so proud when you graduated with me from BCC last June. June was a great month for you. One evening after graduation, while I was just preparing dinner, you came running into the house screaming, “Yes, yes, yes!” You gave me the hardest hug you had ever given me that night! I had blue arms to prove it! You had just talked to the baseball coach from the University of Hawaii and gotten the baseball scholarship you

had been hoping for. I was so happy; I knew how much it meant to you and how much you would enjoy playing college ball.

Today you were so excited when you called me and told me that the Twins” scout had called you again. I tried to talk to you about considering all the pros and cons about playing in the minors. I asked you if it would not be better to take full advantage of your scholarship and finish your degree first, especially if you do not get drafted in the first rounds. You got so upset; you did not even let me finish my sentence. You pointed out that you are 21 years old and able to make your own decisions. You told me that you would even play for a six-pack if they gave you the opportunity, and then hung up. I sat down with a big knot in my stomach and thought about our conversation for a long time. I looked back at your life. You have always been very determined and have shown a great work ethic when you have set your mind to it. I know now that you will never be happy if you do not try. I will support you wholeheartedly whatever you decide. Follow your dreams! I wish you the best luck in the world!

Love, Mom

A Village in the City

Kanna

“I cried because I had no shoes, until I met a man who had no feet.”

Unknown

In January of this year, we as a family went to Ethiopia to attend our big brother's wedding. For me, it was the third time to travel back since my first child, Bethel, was born. Ethiopia is located in East Africa. It is a landlocked country surrounded by neighboring Kenya, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan and Djibouti. The capital city is Addis Ababa, headquarters of the African Union (AU). It is an ancient country with ancient history and culture, a country that resisted colonization, and kept its Christianity. It is a country with its own unique alphabets, language and calendar. Ethiopia is also the only country in the world that uses the Gregorian calendar. Now, in Ethiopia it is the year 1999, and after 4 months it will be a millennium: an African millennium. In our visit to Ethiopia, we found that it was far behind from a millennium.

Since my last visit to Addis Ababa, I saw many changes, like many new big buildings, and roads that were built by the help of the Chinese government. For my daughter, Bethel, seeing unsupervised kids playing soccer on the streets was surprising enough to raise many questions. How could they play by themselves? What if a stranger took them away? Where were their dad and mom? How could they leave the children by themselves? Learning the freedom of kids playing without any fear of strangers in Ethiopia was surprising, and too much for her 3-and-a-half-year-old brain to comprehend. Like her, we also discovered a lot inside this city.

My family and I went to a place called Wolita Sefer, hoping to find local weavers who could make Ethiopian cultural clothes called Shemma in the Ethiopian language. It is a white cotton dress with a border of bright colors with sophisticated designs. The weaver of the shemma are usually men. We found not only a man who could make our clothes but also a village inside the capital city. You might ask how there could be a village in a capital city. When you hear the coming story, you will agree that it is real.

The place is called “Wolita Sefer,” meaning “Wolita Village,” and is in Addis Ababa region. It is an area in which the people live in the countryside and pay taxes as city-dwellers. There was no road that lead to this area. We all were scared to cross the bridge that was just a big metal sheet across the stream, narrow and shaky. After our car crossed the bridge the driver stopped and said, “We have to walk the rest.” Right after we parked our car, lots of kids wearing dirty, tattered clothing, some on donkeys and some running on bare feet, came to welcome us. They were really excited to see a car and new faces!

Then, an older guy came and introduced himself and invited us to his own house. On our way to his house, he told us how hectic life was getting, especially with kids. We went into a small hut with no windows and a broken door. We sat on the stone looking at

the bed and his workplace. This man worked from home, making shemma. It takes steady work day and night for a week or two to complete a shemma, but the price is cheap. I paid 150 birr, which is equivalent to \$16, for one beautiful completed shemma.

To support their husbands, wives, with their daughters age 7 and above, wake up early in the morning to go to the jungle to collect wood. They carry the wood, which weighs 30 to 50 pounds, on their backs. The women walk more than 37 miles to the city just to make 15 to 25 birr, the equivalent of \$1.50 to \$3, which helps bring home dinner for the day. Most kids cannot go to school because either they have to help the family at home, or their families do not have enough money to buy school supplies or pay tuition.

I was touched by their living conditions, and politely asked if I could see some more households. They pleasantly agreed, and allowed us to visit their houses. In most houses I visited, the story not only repeated itself but got worse, because they were taking care of sick family members, most of whom had tuberculosis. In most houses either the father or the mother was bedridden with this communicable disease. This made life hard for lots of families, leaving them nothing to eat.

I met a young man called Ketema, who was 22. He has seven siblings, and I asked him where his father and mother were. He replied, "My mom went to the city to sell wood." Pointing to a small dark room he said, "Father is sick in bed." I asked what kind of disease his father had. "TB," he replied. Looking at the kids playing around the sick father, with no ventilation in that small house, made me worry about the villagers' awareness about this disease, and about the health of those innocent kids. Ketema, taking his father's place weaving, and his mother selling firewood, support this family of ten. According to Ketema, he went to school until 3rd grade. He was unable to go to school further due to the economic and social problems he faced raising his siblings.

I learned from the villagers that an elder of the community, who had served in Korea during World War II, was able to get some help from the government and built a small elementary school five years ago. Because of his constant effort, the village at least now had electricity. But this village in the city still has no roads, no water, no high school or hospital. They also lose many kids from malnourishment, and from floods which come from the nearby mountain during the rainy season. Ketema and the villagers are lost, wondering how and when they are going to fit the city standard, confused about their destiny, and unsure about their future. Despite the many problems they face, the villagers have a culture that brings them very close to each other. Seeing villagers knocking and saying hello, asking how the sick father was doing, sharing by bringing food for him to eat, was very touching.

After we placed our order to have the shamma made and said good-bye, I looked back and gave one last glance. I saw a village that was forgotten by its own people, its government and the world. A village where kids did not have the necessary things in life, a village that dreamt of civilization but didn't get a chance, a village that was waiting for a millennium, but was far, far away from it.

This is my story in Ethiopia. This trip not only gave me a chance to reunite with my family, but also helped me to realize and appreciate how privileged we are. If we all open our eyes and look around us, I believe we will see many undiscovered villages in our world that are similar to or worse than Wolita Sefer. We as a civilized and privileged society have a responsibility to help the poor, near or far. Having this in mind, I came back to America planning three projects: 1) Helping the poor, by involving myself in the community and partaking in charity work; 2) Increasing awareness in our society, by voicing this and similar stories in detail; and 3) Involving my kids, teaching them the importance of giving, helping and sharing by adopting a child of their age. Together, we can have the privilege of saving the world by helping one person at a time.

Rip Tides

L.B.

Living with Dad was not easy. It was his way or the highway. He wasn't the type of Dad you could have a conversation with. You didn't ask him too many questions and you certainly didn't express your opinion. You just needed to know where the line was with him. If by accident you found yourself over the line, you had to retreat quickly.

When I was 11 years old, my mother received a large amount of money from her parents. My father bought himself a boat with it. That was the beginning of our "family vacations." From then on, every vacation and, for that matter, every weekend, was on the boat. My mother hated the boat. She didn't know how to swim and was afraid of the water. She wouldn't learn to drive the boat, read the maps or even enjoy the beauty of where we were. She just sat in the cabin, withdrawn into an imaginary shell, and waited for the boat to stop moving. Two weeks on the boat was roughing it: a tiny galley in which she had to cook three meals a day, no shower, and no privacy. Mom preferred the creature comforts of home.

I liked the boat. We went to remote islands, and I collected shells and rocks on the beaches. I loved eating salmon, crab and as many butter clams as I could fit into my stomach. I learned to row the dingy. I learned to drive the boat, read the maps and navigate through the islands, waterways and channels. Eventually, I knew them all by sight. I was sure that I could take the boat from Olympia to the north end of Vancouver Island without ever looking at a map.

The first few times we went to the San Juan Islands, we went with my Dad's new friends who knew the waterways and passages to take. We always had to wait for slack tide before going through Deception Pass. It didn't seem like a big deal going through that passage; the water was still and calm. When Dad felt comfortable navigating through the San Juan Islands by himself, we stopped traveling with other boaters. I found out why it was best to wait for slack tide. Without the peer pressure of his friends, he didn't have the patience to wait. The water was moving fast with huge, deep whirlpools. He would open another beer, and then go for it. Pushing the throttle all the way up, he would attempt to fly across the water, weaving around the biggest whirlpools. Sometimes the boat would be thrown sideways from the force of the water. I felt trapped and vulnerable.

Since I was deemed the navigator of the boat, sometimes I would suggest that we wait for slack tide. Dad never agreed. With the maps laid out at night, planning our next destination, I would carefully ask why we had to go through Deception Pass. It seemed to me that there was another route on the west side of Whidbey Island. Crossing the Strait of Juan de Fuca, we could arrive safely at the San Juan Islands. He always said "No, absolutely not," offering no explanation. I could tell by his tone that I was about to cross the line with him. I retreated quickly.

It didn't take long before my Dad bought a bigger boat. Life was a little easier on the new boat. The cabin and galley were more comfortable for my mother. It had "Captains quarters" which gave my mother privacy. I appreciated the shower and the electricity for my hairdryer. Bigger boats can handle bigger, rougher water. However, they don't go as fast, make quick turns, or plane across the water. Imagine, for a moment, driving a semi-truck through an obstacle course. Unfortunately, this didn't change my father's mind about waiting for slack tide or traveling across the Strait to the Islands.

Up in Canada, near a place called Big Bay, there is another narrow channel like Deception Pass, only worse. Everyone knows to wait for slack tide before traveling through it, except my Dad, who was too impatient to wait. He would plow through the water, swerving around the biggest whirlpools. I would look over the side of the boat, into ten-foot deep holes in the water, wood and seaweed twirling around inside them. I doubt my Dad ever looked down into one of those whirlpools. One summer, we were on our way to Big Bay and had to pass through that narrow channel. It just happened to be near slack tide; I was relieved. At the beginning of the channel, there were logs in the water, more than usual. As we continued, there were many logs mixed with broken-up pieces of painted wood lying up against the rocks. They were pieces of a boat. I had an eerie feeling.

When we got to the harbor, all the adults were on the docks talking about how a tugboat, with a six-man crew, was pulling a log boom through the channel and miscalculated the tide. They were almost out of the channel, when a whirlpool caught the corner of the log boom. The crew was not able to get the cable cut in time. The water had turned the entire log boom and tugboat into kindling. The men were never found. This made me more afraid than ever. When we were getting ready for bed, I shyly said to my father, "If the rip tide can take down a tugboat and all of those logs, then our boat could get pulled down too." My father's gruff response was "That won't happen to us." I went to sleep with a sick feeling in my stomach.

Many years have gone by. Dad has long since passed away, his ashes stored "safely" in a closet. Memories on my Dad's boat seem so distant and rarely come to mind. I currently live in a house with a view of Puget Sound. Day after day I watch the ferries go back and forth, the pleasure boats, the tugboats pulling log booms and ships passing in the distance. One morning, I sat in my rocking chair drinking my coffee. As I was looking out at the water, past Whidbey Island, two ships were passing by in the shipping lanes. A memory came to me of when I was driving the boat northward to the San Juan Islands. My mother was sitting below, as usual, wrapped up in her shell; my father was sleeping off his hangover. It was a perfect day. The sky was clear, warm air blowing through my long hair, and best of all the water was smooth as glass.

I was in command at the top of the bridge. Approaching the south tip of Whidbey Island, I made the bold decision to veer westward into the shipping lanes, cross the Strait of Juan de Fuca and safely arrive in the San Juan Islands, all to avoid Deception Pass. It wouldn't be bad. There wasn't any fog or wind or rough water. The conditions were just right. I don't know what woke my father up, but he just had to come up and check

on me. His words were loud. “What the hell are you doing?” I tried to explain my reasoning. He wouldn’t listen. He yanked my hands off of the helm and pushed me off of the seat. He turned the boat to the east and sure enough, once again he went charging through Deception Pass, at the height of rip tide. Typical of my dad’s “his way or the highway” attitude.

My recollection of that event lead me to the decision that it was time to spread Dad’s ashes. I made arrangements to take my family on a charter boat. We went to the west side of Whidbey Island. There I poured his ashes into the water. The current was just right. The ashes drifted northward. In my mind’s eye, I thought of those ashes drifting, swirling, traveling through the shipping lanes, reaching the Strait of Juan de Fuca, possibly, even arriving at the San Juan Islands. Finally, I got him to take not his way, not the highway, but my way.

Untitled

L.K.B.

This is a story about a little girl who lived in an orphanage. Her name is Kim. Kim is now an adult and often thinks about the beginning of her life. She was adopted from Korea when she was two years old by a very loving family. She did not have many memories from that young age. Now her memories are of the stories her parents would tell her about how her life was and what happened when she first arrived at her new home. Kim has two older brothers that were also adopted from different families. She has grown into a successful adult with a career to be proud of and lots of potential. She can remember reflecting on her past in the growing developmental stages in her life. There are similarities and there are changes with her thought process that happen with maturing. She can remember the daydreams she had as a small child, the questions as an adolescent and the insightfulness as a young adult.

Kim's parents would show her the very first photo of her in the orphanage. She has two scenarios in her imagination about her experience in the orphanage. She would daydream about that little girl in the photo and try to imagine what it was like for her. She could see that little girl with three pigtails, in layers of clothing and striped socks playing with toys and being a normal kid. Kim imagines herself as a toddler crawling around the floor finding toys to play with. She imagines herself as a little girl and thought of the way she probably moved. She pictures the little girl smiling when she finds her favorite toy. She hopes that the little girl had a caregiver to hold her and comfort her. She imagines that the caregiver lovingly looks after her and watches her play while keeping her safe. In these daydreams there are lots of toys that the children can play with. There are images of a toddler with a bib eating and having food all over a smiling face. Sometimes the daydreaming leads to wondering about the other children in the orphanage. There are images of children either physically or mentally disabled. Kim wonders if all the children would find homes. She wonders if there will be enough resources for those children to be properly cared for.

When Kim reflects on these milestones in her life she wonders if she as a toddler was excited or scared when making the travels to a new home. Kim's mother would share her experience with the adoption process as well when she was a young adult. These stories have elicited images of a mother and child in a rocking chair. The mother is holding a child that is scared and in unfamiliar territory. The mother is trying to bond with the child while the child is pushing away from the stranger who is holding her. The baby is confused about the affection. There is persistence from the mother's side as she continued to hold her tight even though there was whimpering of frustration and fear. Her mother told her this story as a description of love and the continuing effort to familiarize the child to her new surroundings.

The adolescent Kim often wondered about her beginnings as a mode of finding identity and learning about herself. She often thought of the pros and cons of her life in her current family and the family that had given her up. She wondered about the life she

could have had being a product of an orphanage existence. Would she have had as much potential in making her life successful if she had stayed in those circumstances? She also wondered about the difference in growing up with a family that physically looks different and how much of an impact does staying in one's culture make on her existence. As an adolescent she wondered about how her life would be different had she lived in a Korean culture. Even though information about her ancestry was readily available and her parents were encouraging of her learning more about her culture, there was a sense of it being generic. Learning of her culture from a book wasn't the same as living it from birth and in daily life.

Kim as an adult reflects on her past and the parts of her life that have shaped who she is today. Did her ethnic background being different from the rest of her family have an affect on her identity? How much of an impact did the first two years of life have on her relationships and emotional development? With those questions there is a sense of longing and wondering if it would be different being with a biological family. Logically she knows a family is a family no matter the specifics of their origin. On the other side how would she know any different? There is a running slideshow of images and moments in her life that pass through her mind. She has images of a happy smiling her as a baby and the sad images of the loneliness she must have felt without a family. She thinks of her family and the times that they've had, she thinks of the somber times when pondering her existence and place in the world. Thinking through these thoughts has helped her make more sense of her feelings and her past. Sometimes she finds it difficult to talk about with others and other times she freely answers questions about her experience.

There are a lot of children being adopted at different ages and stages of development. Each of them has a story of their experience to finding their own path in life and their identity. Through her years she has found empathy for others, situations. Not all stories have a happy ending like hers. Kim is thankful for the family she was placed in. She is thankful that her story has so far had a happy ending. She has a loving family, a good education and career and has lots of potential for more successes in life. She is glad for finding solace and peace with her life and its beginnings.

A Day of Healing

Carol Lund

Getting off the jam-packed mini-bus, my sandaled feet were quickly covered with sandy grit, as I walked along the main pathway of the remote refugee camp. The air was chilly but would soon be blistering hot with the sun peeking over the horizon. I was finding my work in Plan Tres Mil to be some of the most challenging in my new nursing career, but I instinctively knew it would be some of the most rewarding I would ever have. This day would be no exception, as I looked up to see Victor running toward me.

“Hermana, Hermana.” Sister, Sister. “I have been praying you’d come today.” The alarm on his face made my heart race. “It’s Maria, you’ve got to help her. I don’t know what to do.”

I had difficulty finding my voice, a lump in my throat blocking my breath. “Is it the baby?” I asked, picking up my pace to a near run to keep up with Victor as we headed toward their home. Their home was one of the best in the camp, pieced together with scraps of corrugated metal, scrounged from flood debris, protecting the couple from the harsh elements. Maria was six months pregnant and an early delivery in this setting would be disastrous. Fear and anxiety ran through my body. I was their medical care and the only medical supplies available were what I carried in my backpack.

I followed Victor through the doorway of their one room dwelling, when the feeling of gloom struck me full force. Waiting momentarily for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, I found Maria sitting in their rocking chair, wrapped tightly in a ragged blanket, her head down. The sight was alarming. I had always known Maria to greet people with a warm, inviting smile. The home of Victor and Maria had always been one that welcomed any visitor with immediate friendship and love. They readily shared what they had. I immediately went to Maria and knelt down in front of her on their cleanly swept dirt floor.

“What is it Maria?” She looked at me with a sad, blank gaze, saying nothing. “Is it the baby? Are you having any contractions?” I asked. Maria looked at me and shook her head no, her right hand going protectively to her stomach. “One year ago,” she whispered, tears starting to fill her eyes, “Hoy.” I looked back at Victor, his face suddenly registering, understanding. “Today, one year ago, the flood.”

I too suddenly understood. I had been to the flood site of the Pirai River. I had been overwhelmed by the force of nature that had cut through the settlements along the riverbank. The river was now a small trickle, but the evidence of destruction was everywhere. The riverbank was cut deeply, creating a canyon of sorts. I did not understand how the residents of this small community had survived. Every family in this refugee camp had lost family members and all of their belongings.

I turned back to Maria, as Victor went back out the door. I took her hands into mine, “Digame.” Tell me.

“I lost our baby girl. I had her, but I couldn’t hold on.” Tears were starting to seep from her eyes. “I lost her.” Maria’s face contorted, the grief of a mother racked with guilt and torment at the memory of her beloved daughter being ripped from her arms in the torrent of water. I recalled the cuts and bruises Maria had had on her body, the imprint of Victor’s vice grip on her arm among the wounds. It had only been Victor’s brute strength that had kept Maria from being swept up in the water and debris of the flash flood.

I nodded at Maria, knowing there were no words that would lessen her anguish. Tears ran down my own face, as I continued to hold Maria’s work-worn hands in my own. I was also aware that neither Maria nor Victor had grieved for this lost child. Grief that was now crushing down on Maria, like the torrent of water had exactly one year ago. Maria and Victor had been leaders in Plan Tres Mil, working day and night to re-build their lives and to help those around them do the same. It did not take long to feel the bond and love that Victor and Maria shared, which made them a magnet for others in desperate need of that strength. Maria was now the one in need, her spirit spent.

“I let Victor down,” Maria whimpered through her tears. “He saved so many that day and I lost our baby.”

“Victor doesn’t feel like you let him down,” I surmised in a whisper.

Maria nodded in agreement. We sat hand in hand for several minutes, crying for this lost child. When Maria had calmed, I said to her, “Tell me about her.”

Maria looked at me with a smile, and described how Victor had paced during her labor with Ana, how he had held her hand, and then had gently laid their daughter into her arms for the first time. Maria described Ana’s jet-black hair. “Victor always said she had my smile. She had his dimples,” Maria continued. “She had just started walking. She’d put her arms out,” Maria demonstrated, “to walk from me to her Papa and then back.” Maria smiled at the memory.

Maria sat quietly for a couple of minutes. I could tell from her face, she was again reflecting on the day the flood hit. She continued, “I was raining, Ana was with me. I heard the deafening noise, but I didn’t know what it was. The water hit before I knew what to do. I don’t know where Victor came from. He was just suddenly there.” Her face started to contort again. “I held her, and he held me. There was water everywhere. It was so hard. I thought we’d be crushed.” The tears were flowing again.

We sat in silence, our thoughts and emotions enveloping both of us.

“Where is Ana now?” I asked.

“We never found her body. We searched and searched.”

I nodded and asked again, “Where is she now?”

Maria looked at me, understanding the question. She had previously shared her deep faith in God and a better life to come. Maria smiled through her tears, “She’s fine. She’s in a good place with God. She’s in his arms. I know that.”

“You will always miss her. She’s a part of you.”

“We’ll be together one day.”

I nodded. Maria had her own answers. We sat quietly together, time seemingly standing still, until exhaustion finally overtook Maria. I helped her to bed, tucking her in. She soon drifted off to sleep. I left Maria and went out the front door to the yard. The bright light momentarily blinded me. Victor put down the water bucket he was carrying and came to my side. I noted that he was doing a chore that Maria would have normally taken care of. He was taking care of her in the only way he knew.

“She’s resting,” I said.

“You’ll check on her later?” he asked.

I nodded, “I’ll stop by before I leave today.” I tried to read how Victor was doing with this tragic anniversary. “She blames herself.”

“It wasn’t anyone’s fault.” Victor stated. “There wasn’t anything that any of us could have done.”

“It still hurts.”

Victor shrugged and then nodded in agreement. “We go on.”

“I’ll check back.”

“Gracias Hermana.”

I left Victor and Maria and went back to making my rounds for the day, checking on several other families. Angela’s baby was nursing well. The Gutierrez family still wasn’t sure about the idea of adding chlorine to their drinking water. Little Pedro still had a rounded stomach and was having diarrhea. His lab tests showed that he had several different intestinal bugs. I started his medications. Jose needed a dressing change. He had cut his hand and it was healing very slowly. Then there was Lucia, who had begged to learn how to read. We read together for about a half hour every afternoon. She was a quick study. As the day ended, I stopped by Victor and Maria’s home one more time. Things remained calm; they were sitting outside, enjoying the brilliant red sunset

together. I declined their invitation for dinner and started to leave, admonishing Maria to rest, saying, "Take care of the caregiver."

"Exactamente Hermanacita," Victor said, his dark eyes looking at me.

I returned to my room in the city that night and climbed into bed, skipping dinner, too exhausted to bother. I closed my eyes, only to feel Victor's eyes and words penetrating my soul, "Exactamente Hermanacita." I smiled. He always called me his little Sister. It was more than a compliment. They were my home away from home. We would always have a connection. "Exactamente Hermanacita." My eyes suddenly burned with tears, as Victor's meaning hit home. I had told Maria to take care of the caregiver and he had agreed saying, "Exactly." He wanted me to take my own advice. I like Maria had never paused from the work to grieve for the many lost, some who I knew, many whom I didn't. I buried my head into my pillow, tears and grief spilling forth. I have no idea how long the storm lasted, when Elena, my landlady, came to my bedside, mothering me with a hug and a bowl of potato soup.

"You must rest, my child," she whispered.

Immigrants

Nataliya Mikhaylik

“They want us to bring what?” I stared at my mom with disbelief, almost choking on my meal.

“A tent,” repeated my mom with an unchanged tone of voice, as she hung up the phone.

“Are they crazy, or having a heat stroke or something?” I couldn’t believe my ears. People we’ve never met, who got our phone number from who-knows-where, want us to drag a tent, “the biggest tent we could find,” thousands of miles across the ocean and almost two continents, all the way to Israel. My vacation had not even started and already I knew that it would be a vacation that I would never forget. My mom, who can always see beyond the visible sphere, knows how stubborn I can get, so she had to play with my sensibility:

“She’s got thirteen kids!”

“Yea, so? What does that have to do with a tent?”

“Seven of the kids are boys, and they love to go camping.”

“But we don’t even know these people.”

Well, I think I know whom I get my stubbornness from, because in three days, my mom had persuaded me to go to Wal-Mart and pick out “the biggest tent I could find.” At least it had handles and we were finally on our way.

I never knew before that there are other parts of our bodies besides hands and legs that may have an inclination to falling asleep. Well, after 16 hours of flight, my whole body felt like it would never come out of the sitting position. I was squished between my mom on one side and a lightly “tipsy” man on the other side. My mother never has a problem with finding someone to converse; I was left to myself, trying to ignore my malfunctioning body parts by sleeping. It felt good to wake up in Tel-Aviv.

We were finally in Israel! I caught myself staring at the cab driver for a second, as he was carelessly throwing our luggage on top of his car. He was tall, muscular, dark-complexioned immigrant possibly from Ethiopia, and seemed to be in his late twenties. The cab slowly maneuvered its way through the airport busy traffic. The air conditioner turned on full blast never felt as good as on that hot and sweaty afternoon. The road noise and being jet-legged were putting me in a comfortable dreamy mood. Waves of thoughts flowed through my head as I stared out on the scenery behind the window: palm trees, white-flat-roofed houses, desert bushes, and mountains in all the earth tones, covered with olive trees. So this is what Israel looks like!

The scenery changed as if I was flipping through a stack of postcards: Bedouins walking by their donkeys which are most likely carrying the man's whole life savings on their backs; children running, holding hands; orthodox Jewish man walking in long black coat and black hat, striding along like he is always on a mission, late somewhere, with his upper body tilted in front of his lower body; and armed soldiers everywhere my head turned. This little country in the middle of the world, with a stormy history, fought over for many years by so many countries, Israel became a bridge between Africa, Asia, and Europe. Jerusalem has united three religions: Judaic, Muslim, and Christian, in quest for a place to worship. I was in the center of the world, about to meet people just like me: the immigrants.

Chaim's family.

A few days later, when we got off the bus at our destination, we realized that it would take more than two women with strong wills to lift up our entire luggage. That hot, 110-degree afternoon, as we stood at an empty bus station, I finally learned the lesson that my mom has been trying to teach me all my teenage years, to never pack my whole closet for a vacation. As my mom searched through her address book for her friends' phone numbers in Tiberius, I sat on that tent, sweating and dying of thirst, wishing that I could be back on the Mediterranean Sea beach. I was about to forget all those stories I had been told about religious men spilling acid on improperly dressed women, and, to my mom's horror, started shedding off some layers of my clothing when I saw a tall, slim boy about fifteen years old approaching us. He stopped a few steps away deciding what to do next. Then his gaze fell on the tag of the tent depicting a happy family with a few trees in the background gathering around the tent. A huge grin covered his face and he ran up, trying to grab the two suitcases at once, and making us chase him to the other side of the bus station. We got a taxi and in about ten minutes we met the whole family of Chaim, the boy who met us at the bus station.

Robekka is in her late forties. Hidden behind a robust body that birthed thirteen children is an enthusiastic woman who seems to be in a constant motion, trying to achieve the never-ending caring tasks for a large family. Only the eyes give out the deep, monolithic tiredness of this incredible woman. She immigrated with her husband and, at that time, nine children, to Israel from the former USSR in search of freedom of religion and a better future for her children. The government of her new country embraced this family with support, both financial and spiritual.

It took Robekka several months to master the simple phrases, be able to shop for her family without help of caring sponsors, and learn how to bargain and figure out the system of numerous bills. Finding the proper medical care was a priority. Her husband suffers from prostate problems, two daughters have type I diabetes, and another is deaf-mute. Her own health was always the last concern on the list until one day after cleaning another mansion for a paltry salary, she collapsed on the doorsteps of her apartment. Her husband called an ambulance, got the children together and crawled on his knees begging God to spare his wife's life for the children.

We met Robekka in her twelfth year in this country she now calls home. Both of her older sons and two older daughters have served in the Israeli army, got jobs, and moved out to live on their own. At home, Robekka has nine children ages 16 down to 3, each child with their own unique character, each with their own problems only mom could solve and secrets only mom could hear. Robekka's friendliness and hospitality is known in her community. I could only wonder how she finds time to keep her four-bedroom apartment on the second story of a five story complex spotlessly clean; children dressed in clean, but worn out clothing; she, serving her great middle-eastern specialties to the multitudes of guests who somehow find their way to this open family, and like me, observe in awe this extraordinary woman who finds time to sit down for a few minutes and share a moment of her life.

The kids were jumping almost to the ceiling when they saw the tent. Their little three-year-old brother came up and touched my hand, reaching his little fingers for me to pick him up. I held my head up high, trying to keep the tears in, and hoping that my mother would not start saying something like: "See, and you never wanted to bring that tent!" The week that we stayed with Chaim's family flew by faster than I ever expected. When we had to leave, the bus station observed many hugs, kisses, and tears, as if the life-long friends were being separated forever.

I was not sure what woke me up that last night in Israel. It was so hot that the sheet I was covering myself with somehow ended up on the floor. The window was open and the breeze was barely starting to cool down the air. Somewhere far away I could hear the sounds of Tel-Aviv. Even at night it was full of busy overpopulated-city sounds. I could not fall asleep no matter how hard I tried. The memories of the past month kept me awake. I had only a few more hours until our flight back home. I thought about all the new friends I had made and whether or not I would ever see them again.

Then I heard something beautiful that I will never forget. A man was singing a song somewhere across the street. There were no musical instruments playing, just a simple, clear voice floating through the Middle-Eastern air like a heat wave. I don't know what the song was about, whether it was a love song, religious song, or maybe even a prayer, but it sounded like it came from an Arabian Nights fairy tale. The feeling of comfort and contentment alleviated me. I think I did fall asleep for a few hours.

As our plane took off the runway, accompanied by police cars, the memories began slowly slipping by. The Holy Land was becoming smaller as the clouds were becoming denser, and I was overwhelmed by a euphoric valediction: "Someday, I will be back...."

The beauty of the country is its people. Just like in America, immigrants are the building blocks of Israel, constantly reshaping its culture. Aliya, the multi-colored faces, each with their unique cultures, so distant and not comprehensible to others, are united in one country with many differences and things in common, yet one definite synonym that unites them all-- a name that sticks with them for a lifetime, an immigrant, enduring daily

the struggles and happy moments of life in a new country with old memories and a new life.

A Dad's Blessing

Neema

I am writing this as a tribute to my father who has greatly impacted my life. My Dad came from a humble beginning. He grew up without a father because he died when my Dad was little. My Dad has no recollection of what his father looked like, other than what his mother told him. He used to tell my siblings and me how his mother took them to her birthplace so that her brothers could help her with the children.

My Dad did not come from a wealthy family. He had to work hard to feed his family, take his children to school and buy land to build the family home. In my opinion his hard work paid off in the long run. He turned out to be more successful than his siblings.

My father brought up his children in words and deeds that his children really needed from him. He inspired his children to never give up on whatever they had set out to do. He made sure we could help in the farm, in the house and also compete to outdo other children in the neighborhood in whatever we did. He always praised us if we made the accomplishments. He could tell us “my girls work hard in school and at home because this is what brings food to the table. Laziness can never be harvested and cooked for a meal.” His emphasis on hard work and determination has been the light in my life. This is also an element you see on his other children.

Hearing words of encouragement from my father was a privilege that I never wanted to miss. If I looked like I was accepting defeat when doing something, he would say, “A girl never gives up, she holds on until the end.” Every morning my dad's way of waking us up to get ready for school was by singing, “Early to bed and early to rise makes someone healthy, and wealthy, and wise.” If the children were awake we would sing with him the last part of the song. He encouraged us to work hard in school and at home. At home we helped with house chores and outside the house we helped with planting, weeding and harvesting.

At the time I was growing up, most parents, including educated ones, did not encourage their daughters to go to school. If there was a point where the school fee was becoming unaffordable, the boys of the family got the priority to go to school. My dad thought that it was not fair and he used to advocate that the girls go to school. I remember, when we were little my three cousins, two males and a female, were being assisted with their school fee equally by my father. He never wanted the girl to be left out. The good news is the girl has been more successful than even her brothers.

Many parents in those days thought that taking a girl to school was a waste of money. The girl was viewed as an “outsider” who would grow up and get married and not “need” an education. Some parents argued that the girl will carry the knowledge to

her new family. Other parents just dismissed the girl as a source of income when she gets married because her husband would bring home bride price.

My dad putting his children first and letting them pursue their dreams is one of the reasons he is so significant in my life. He was always encouraging to his daughters and believed that we were just as capable as the boys. He had a different school of thought as opposed to the parents of his age then.

Sometimes looking back, I think his contemporaries are very jealous that his daughters are successful. Some people who were family friends in the early years of my life no longer visit or even want to see my family. Initially they thought that he was crazy and wasting money taking girls to school. Today, they really wish they had invested in their daughters just as much.

My father never hid his support for his girls. He taught us to be God-fearing and respectful to other people around us. He was having a full-time job but he had time every evening to instill values that he believed would help us live. He taught us to sing, perform and recite memory verses. During the weekend if he was around we worked in the field together. He demonstrated how to plant, weed and harvest.

I learned from my dad by the example he showed us daily. He was kind to the neighbors. I remember how there was a man who used to come to our home drunk and dirty from falling in mud. My dad would never send him away. He would come into the house and sit on the chair with all the mud. He would talk to him and when the drunk was ready to go, he would see him off at the gate. Many times the neighbor had dinners at our house. This is so significant in that it taught us not to discriminate against people who do not meet our expectations but accept them with their weakness.

The fact that my dad used to let this drunk come to our home opened my eyes into how people can waste their life through irresponsible drinking. The lesson I learned from observing these two men communicate is how respect people and value them as humans even if they look like they are on the path to destruction. Even though I was little at the time, I was already learning that alcohol was not a good thing. This was demonstrated through this man's behavior after his beer spree. To me I think my dad was accommodative and sent clear message to his children that this man is a good man except for his drinking problem. In a way I feel I learned about the terrible side of drinking from this neighbor who came to our house. Probably I would never have experienced this if my dad was repulsive to him. From that early age I knew I would never touch alcohol if it would make me behave stupidly and fall in mud.

This is significant because even when I dated as a young adult I was careful not to date a drunk. It really did not matter the degree but so long as a man drank, his fate was sealed. I am not discriminating, but the lessons I learned from observing this drunk stuck with me all my life. I would still talk to them and have them as friends, but not viewed as intimate or marriage material.

If I had not had that experience, I would probably not be able to make a choice from the past. The poor drunk died years later when I left home and was working in a different town. I remember my sister calling me to tell me about his death. We felt so sorry but also remembered the jokes we made when we were kids whenever he came to our house.

Another aspect of kindness my dad demonstrated that I always remember is he used to give nearly the whole neighborhood a ride. Any time his car pulled out of the gate there was someone waiting to get a ride to town with us. Sometimes there was no space but we had to carry my sister on my lap so that this person got a seat. This just puzzles me now that I am grown up. I cannot comprehend what a man of kindness my dad is.

My dad introduced us to singing and performance, which enhanced my life, especially in teen years. I used to be shy and sometimes rather intimidated by large crowds. I learned to be brave and courageous whenever I stood up before a crowd to sing or recite a poem. My dad would be sitting in the crowd looking at me with an encouraging smile. He would be the first to clap his hands when I finished the performance. After any performance, be it in church or school, he would walk up to me and acknowledge that I was the best. I think this was just to boost myself confidence as a child who was developing her skills. Moreover, this has worked because he brought up girls who were not afraid or shy to perform for an audience.

Helping his daughters to develop their skills and to compete in a gender-biased community of the 70's was not easy, but he must have been so determined to prove that children of any gender are all important. I think this was due to his love for his children no matter what the society thought.

My father's contemporaries felt he was wasting money and time on future prostitutes. Some believed an educated girl will not marry but become a prostitute, or no man would want to marry them because they were competing with men. Now I realize how these men felt inadequate about themselves. I feel like even a little girl going to school was a threat to their ego.

Today they are jealous and do not want to hear from my family. I think they are ashamed of their wild notion that did not bear fruits. My father always advocated that all children should be treated equally regardless of the circumstances or gender. My father believed all should be given equal opportunities and an environment to grow and express that freedom to achieve the goals they want in life. To me, I think observing my dad gave me the core values of life such as respecting other people and sharing any resources that I have with others.

The community around me did not want to invest in their daughters as much as in the boys. Despite this, my parents gave me a different life, short of the expectation of the society. My father made sure I went to school; he paid special attention to my needs as a

girl child. He did not follow the community's philosophy and belief that regarded girls as "wild cats" who will leave the family when they are of age.

The personal choices I have made in my adult life have been greatly influenced by my father's faith in me. He placed a high value on me as child, and I think he has successfully achieved a lot to prove his age mates wrong. The upbringing I had, valued every child regardless of gender. This taught me to live to the fullest and meet my potential at the highest level possible. I always remind my self the old saying "*pole, pole ndiyo mwendo.*" This is interpreted as taking one step at a time is the way to get there. That is the exact thing I have been doing as I navigate life.

The Bouquet

P.L. Perry

She sits in front of the old Underwood typewriter, wondering what words will surprise her this time and flow out onto the paper. At the window, a recently delivered bouquet of flowers drops a white petal onto the table; she stares at it and contemplates her next words. *Ahhh, the flowers, the simple fact that they have managed to sidetrack me from assignment could be the plot of my next story. No... I don't think so. That would just be more rambling from my pre-menopausal, lesbian mind...* The flowers sit there, silent and still, no more dropping petals, just a simple spring assortment of the northwest type, purples, pinks, yellows and brilliant blues and whites, reflecting back their colors to her eyes.

Time has a funny way of passing when there is just silence and thought. She noted that no matter how long she waited, the typewriter was not giving up its hold on any of the ideas that had poured out of it yesterday. Yesterday's experience had seemed as if time had shifted. An incredible energy had taken her thoughts back through a passageway of time, to a period long since past. The woman that had come to life on the paper before her had been a woman of incredible strength, a leader, warrioress and mother of a tribe long passed.

The warrioress was a major piece of the fabric that made up her community. The men had no fear of her intuition, leadership or nurturing power, they did not fear her or the other women; they only knew women as their equals. They worked together as a family and a team, women being respected for their knowledge of things unseen and inner knowings of nature's cycles, and men for their warmth, strength and kindness. They had chosen to celebrate the passing of the moon by sharing the bounty of their harvest with a less fortunate tribe that was thought to live over the hills. It was rumored that an existence of inequality patterned the lives there. The concept was unfamiliar and foreign to the warrioress's own tribe.

The woman looked up from the typewriter recalling the story from yesterday. She was curious now about the tribe over the hill and how that story would play out. The day was growing longer and she felt a trickle of anxiety enter her mind. *Dang, are the words going to start flowing again? I'm wondering if there is any story left in this trusty old Underwood. I've got to get this done!* She closed her eyes, and as she closed them, sleep gently took hold of her and almost as if by magic, the missing words began filling themselves in.

She was back in the world with the warrioress. The tribe was getting supplies ready for the long journey across the hills to meet the tribe of inequality. The day was turning to shadows, and the air was taking on the damp cool chill of the night sky. Underwood turned and spoke to the waiting tribe members.

“We have a long journey ahead of us. The tribe of inequality needs our assistance. I fear that time grows short to help them with their rumored state. We must hurry, this cannot be put off ‘til tomorrow!” A murmur ran over the gathered assembly. “Tonight we strike out to share with them our harvest, and Spirit willing, we will be able to share with them the wisdom of our own tribe’s knowledge of equality.” The tribe’s members sensed the urgency of the situation, and together as a team they worked quickly to prepare for the journey.

The tribe set out, knowing they would be warmed under their group’s hand-made blankets and nourished by the food that had been harvested by men and women together. After only an hour of travel, Underwood again called the group’s attention.

“My intuition is speaking to me; I am being told that before we go further, we need to build a fire so that we can all call upon a vision of the future.”

No decision was ever made without first being reviewed by the group, and tonight was no different. They quickly decided to stop and build the fire.

At the typewriter, she stirred. More petals dropped from the bouquet and landed unto the table. She did not awaken, and the words continued, taking her to another place, another time, to the other side of the hills.

“What’ll yah have sweetie?”

The young girl, practicing to be a woman, leaned out of the espresso stand towards the customer’s car window. The occupant in the driver seat was taken back for a moment. In her vision, Underwood had crossed the time barrier through the hills, and was now having difficulty adjusting to this new world. It was not the technology that was difficult. No, that was just the inevitable advancement of science. It was this society’s evolution, or devolution that greatly confused and concerned her. Underwood looked up at the girl and smiled.

“An Americano please.”

The young woman was clad in an outfit that had probably been bought at a brothel. It was black, laced and see-through. The skin-tight black top went down to the top of the girl’s thighs where a garter belt complete with black stockings ran suggestively down her legs. Underwood was, for the first time, embarrassed at the sight of another woman’s body: it was similar to a sex object on display. The girl wore a big smile, completely oblivious to Underwood’s discomfort.

“So, just one Americano, Sweetie?”

“Yes,” said Underwood. “That’s it.”

Her gaze drifted over to the sign out on the side of the busy road, “Come See the Moo-Delicious girls, XOXOXO.” *Moo-delicious girls? Why would “moo” and “delicious” be paired with girls, Xs and Os? Advertising that way seems more like someone selling objects. It’s clear that the objects being sold are the girls, instead of the coffee the stand was originally intended to market.* Underwood was totally confused. She didn’t see the girl necessarily as delicious, and she really didn’t get what Xs and Os had to do with selling coffee. The girl’s attire suggested that perhaps Underwood was to consider buying more than coffee, and that maybe, she should buy some Xs and Os too. On the back of the sign another sign boasted, “The only thing better than our coffee is our girls.” Underwood flinched inside; the epitome of oppression was right in front of her. The girls were demeaned to being mere objects, touted as eye candy to go along with coffee, and what was sadder was, they didn’t even seem to care or to be aware of it.

While waiting at the booth for her coffee, Underwood noticed a trend: the trucks and cars that lined up at the stand were all driven by men. Well that’s a good sign, at least. The men, which she had experienced in her own tribe as being kind and wise, would help the moo-delicious girl get her self esteem back. However, as the cars and trucks pulled up, she watched the men’s eyes as they slowly moved up and over the moo-delicious girl’s body. The line of cars moved through. At the end of the line, a man of about 50, unshaven, carrying a rough demeanor, stopped at the stand window and turned his truck off. He looked at the moo-delicious girl.

“I’m just going to park my truck right here and take in the sights.”

“Okay” the moo-delicious girl said with raised eyebrows and a tight smile.

“Yah know, I go to lots of different coffee stands and I see all different kind of girls working in them” he licked his lips and went on, “but what I really like is coming here, the girls at the other stands wear them falsies, yah know. Falsies! I don’t like ‘em, I like the real things,” he smirked, lit a cigarette and fixed his eyes on the moo-delicious girl.

Underwood felt herself getting very angry inside. Instead of this older man coming to the aid of the girl, to help her to see past her role as an object, the man was intimidating her and reinforcing the inequality that women obviously had in this tribe’s culture.

He continued, “You’re shaking.”

“No I’m not,” the moo-delicious girl said, her hands trembling slightly.

“Yah you are, you’re nervous aren’t cha? Now there, you don’t have nothing to be nervous about.”

Underwood watched all this as she waited for her drink at the opposite end of the booth. Feeling rather protective she asked the young woman, “Hey, are you all right?”

“Yes” the girl replied, looking at Underwood oddly, “of course I am!”

Underwood sighed and took her drink. The moo-delicious girl was obviously desensitized and oblivious to the misogynistic treatment she was receiving from this man. Underwood was beginning to believe that her own tribe might be too late to help this unfortunate tribe of inequality. *Is this the path that my own tribe will take, women and men not as equals? This tribe with its inequality has sacrificed its women in the name of patriarchy and oppression. I'm afraid we're too late to help.* Greatly saddened, Underwood closed her eyes to call upon her own inner intuitive guidance.

She shifted at the typewriter, a frown stood out on her sleeping face; more petals had fallen around her as she lay caught in her sleep. The words continued on, painting more of the picture of what Underwood was going to choose to do next.

“Damn it! What sort of curse was placed on that tribe? What kind of wayward spirit would create such inequality and disparity among its women and men?”

She had seen the vision and now wondered what she was going to do about it. Underwood got up from the fire; its warmth no longer penetrating the cold she felt. She turned to address the gathered tribe.

“It cannot wait; we need to seal the passageway through the hill, tonight! It only leads to times of fear and offers nothing but inequality, sadness and oppression.”

Underwood and the tribe of men and women agreed and began to work together in unison. They had all seen the vision and now they wanted to stop it from becoming a reality. Together, they gathered heavy rocks and stones and proceeded to wedge the passageway tight with them. Each person placed their own seal of magic around the passageway so as to keep the emptiness of fear, forever held in a safe place away from the future tribes that might attempt to cross through. They intended to save the tribe of inequality, which they had seen to exist, from ever being.

The sound of the rain hitting against her window, woke her. She slowly opened her eyes absorbing the meaning of the words that had appeared on the pages. *Was there really a time when women and men had lived free of fear of each other? What had caused men to become so entrenched in their fear of women, so much that they found it necessary to create patriarchal societies that controlled and dehumanized women, their body's, mind's and spirit's? Maybe a solution to creating equality could be as simple as addressing the fear that holds men captive. Yet perhaps, male and female consciousness is so embedded with fear, that change will be impossible. No, she thought social consciousness has taken many interesting turns in the past; with faith it's still possible for change to happen. Perhaps, we could consider starting the change, moving forward as equals, women and men, fully armed with a vision of what is possible in a place without fear.*

God, enough for now! I'm being foolish, it's just a story out of my imagination. Life will go on as it always has and tomorrow will be no different.

She got up to leave her place from in front of the old Underwood typewriter. The table was covered with petals now, the bouquet that had once been brilliant and alive, now looked tired and barren. I should do something to help those flowers and soon, she thought. Ah, tomorrow, there's always tomorrow, I'll water them then and maybe they'll reclaim that brilliance that had once so intensely reflected back to my eyes. In the meanwhile, it can wait until tomorrow.

Deep inside, Underwood, let out a heavy sigh.

A note from the Author

This story is fictitious except for the distressing fact about the coffee stand. The coffee stand with the cow theme actually does exist, it is one of many in south Seattle and the events described there by Underwood have actually happened. The moo-delicious girls seem oblivious to the marketing of their own bodies as objects, that their manager and coffee stand owner, a woman, endorses.

Be Different

R.M.

The suitcases were full and stood before me, seeming eager to be on their way. I checked my possessions, my flight ticket, one way to London, some money, and all the documents that I would need to be on my way. Tomorrow I would be on the other side of the world. I clutched the ticket tightly. It was like the greatest prize that I had ever desired.

Eagerness and excitement suddenly mixed with a strange feeling of sadness and emptiness. The eagerly awaited day when I would leave was almost here, but, now that it was finally real, I realized that grim reality was setting in. I had never been away from my family. Despite being seventeen years old, I was their youngest, and still their baby.

I peeked into my mother's room, and my heart broke. She was looking at old photographs and sobbing. Pictures of me as a baby, taking my first steps, my first day at school. We didn't have many, but what we had were lovingly kept. After tomorrow, it would all change. The pictures caused images to flood into my head, like a movie played too fast. Many moments, precious moments that formed me, made me who I was. Treasured memories of my siblings and I, the good times, and even the times when we fought, but always ended up with laughter. The moments where I was the center of attention in my parent's arms, much to the chagrin of my siblings. They called me a spoiled brat, but they loved me in their own way. Suddenly a sense of shame came upon me. My family was *good* people. Yet I had spent so many years being so ashamed of them, and my moment of realization, my moment of admiration was coming too late, today, on the eve of my departure.

I had grown up in the seventies, and remembered the thrust towards building a modern society in Asia. The economy was booming, and high-rise apartments and office buildings were sprouting faster than bamboo trees. While all my friends lived in these apartments with parents that commuted in nice white collared shirts, shiny black shoes and leather briefcases, mine were farmers, dressing in the dirty unkempt manner of those that labor in the hot sun.

As a ten-year-old girl, in a society where status was extremely important, growing up in such a different family meant constant embarrassment and shame. I wanted to fit in, be accepted, and be just like all the others.

There weren't many farming families left as the country grew, and the suburban villages shrank. To my child's eyes, farming was something that belonged in the last century along with other primitive traditions like bound feet, where girls' feet were broken and bound at a young age, so that they could have the tiny feet that pleased the village men. As a child whose destiny belonged in the future, and not the past, my parent's occupation did not fit my world. I desperately wanted them to work in an office, filed neatly away in a cubicle, living neatly in an apartment, but instead they worked

bending their backs planting seeds, sweat dripping down their necks in the blazing heat and humidity.

They worked so hard for the family, rising early to harvest fresh vegetables for the market, spending the afternoons watering and tending their crop, and the evenings pruning and weeding. How I longed for them to have time for me. How I longed for them to take me to the park, or to the city. How I burned when my friends bragged about their fancy vacations, or shopping trips to the city, while I went home to a dark, empty house, my parents still working in the field.

The few times they did have some time off working, and we would go out to a shopping mall, they would embarrass me with their traditional dress. We had many stares and remarks about our appearances, with giggles stifled behind upheld hands. I remember asking them to modernize their clothing, but they were comfortable with what they wore, and that they didn't care what others thought. Now, I look back on it and realize that they had great self-confidence and individuality, qualities to be admired, and not despised.

With shame, this all flooded back to me, and I saw my parents in a new light. My mother's tears continued to drop onto the pictures in front of her. I looked at the ticket in my hand. All those dreams of leaving and living the modern life were about to come true. But I was no longer sure if that was what I really wanted. My mother saw me, and feebly tried to dry her eyes. Without hesitation, I approached her and we embraced. Despite my poor behavior of those years, despite all the shame and harassment I gave them, they were forgiving and accepting.

As we embraced, the ticket floated out of my hand onto the floor. I didn't see where it dropped, nor did I care.

One Fall Day

S.C.

It is a chilly, fall day on campus, here in the Deep South. Just like any other day, my roommates and I are sitting on the balcony, checking out the frat guys across the street, drinking beer, hooting and hollering. Was I supposed to be studying? Well, of course. But was I? No. Hell no. It got dark early, around four o' clock, like it always did this time of year. Soon, the fruit bats were screeching around in the trees, and we are all drunk. The front door to our apartment is open, the music is blaring, and the phone is ringing. We will let the answering machine get it.

The next afternoon, we all wake up, hung over, and make a run for some fast food. Taco Bell is the best hangover food, we all say. After scarfing down some tacos and burritos, I check the answering machine. My mother is saying that I need to call her. Whatever, I think to myself. I am going out tonight, to a frat party, I will call her tomorrow.

It is Saturday. Again, we are all hung over. I grab the cordless phone to call my mother. Ring. Ring. Ring. My mother answers, yelling, why have I not called sooner? I've been busy with school, I reply! From her next sentence on, my life will be changed forever. My father is ill. Very ill. He has throat cancer I was told. I must come home immediately. Two days later, withdrawn from school, I return home.

My father does not look like the same man. He is thin, yet puffy. His eyes are sunken, and he has a tube hanging out of his stomach. How long has he been sick? Since September I am told. I am angry. So very angry. Why had I not been told sooner? My mother decided it best not to fill me in on the goings on of my father. She had wanted me to finish out fall quarter. Who the hell cares about school, when your father, your world, is dying of cancer? My anger at my mother grew, like a weed, in my garden. Sprouting up fast, and growing, spreading, invading everything else around it.

To the doctor we go! This time I get to hear from the doctor just how ill my father is. I am told I have about three months with him, my father, so make the most of them. I break down, crying, sobbing. I am such a daddy's little girl! My father comforts me, telling me to please stay home with him until he passes. I quit school to honor his request. School will still be there, my father will not.

Christmas is so depressing this year! We sit down to have Christmas dinner and my father cannot eat it. I puree some turkey and mashed potatoes and gravy and help him put it into his stomach tube. How disgusting I thought, but what did it matter, he could not taste it. It was just nourishment for him. I go to bed that night, crying, sobbing.

Boy, what a way to start off the New Year! I am angry with my mother, sad for my father, and me, I am just always crying, sobbing, waiting for the worst day of my life to come. By this time, the tumors in my father's neck are bursting through the skin. You

can see into his neck. And the smell, oh the smell, it is just awful! One afternoon my father falls asleep with his head in my lap. The smell was gagging me, but my love for my father keeps me from throwing up. So I sit there, for hours, letting him sleep, about to barf any minute now, I think. My mother comes home, my father wakes up, and I leave the house. My anger for my mother consumes me; I don't like even being around her, she makes me want to barf!

Springtime is right around the corner. My father looks worse every passing day. He is unrecognizable to most. But not to me, he is my father, my world! The three months he was given is about up. I can feel my father slipping away. He is in so much pain; I can see it in his eyes, yet he never complains. Never says a word about pain. Why? Well, because he can't speak. He uses a whiteboard to do his talking, and says he has better things to tell me than how much pain he is in. I miss the sound of my father's voice. It has been far too long since I have heard it. Oh, how I wish I could just hear his voice one more time. Telling me, daddy's little girl, how much he loves me. I know he does, but I will never hear it again, I will only see it written on a whiteboard. So again, I go to sleep, crying, sobbing.

It is the first day of April. April Fools! No, there is no fooling. My father is dying before my eyes, my crying, sobbing eyes. By this point, my eyes feel like they are drowning. It is past the three-month mark my father was given. Time feels like it is at a stand still. I cry, I sob, but I am still so angry. Now, I am angry that my father is suffering, and let's not forget, livid with my mother. Still, she is like a weed, infesting my garden. I wish I could pluck her out, and throw her out with the rest of the yard waste. But I can't. She is my mother, and my father loves her too.

Taxes are due. My father struggles to help my mother with this yearly burden. He is so sick. He is lying in bed, trying to help, but not of much help. He wants assistance to the restroom. I am behind him with my hands on what is left of his waist. He is unsteady. He collapses. I go to the floor with him. He is dead weight. My mother screams hysterically. "Pick him up! Get him into bed! Get him back into bed!"

"I can't lift him myself!" I scream at my mother, "you have to help me!"

We cannot lift him. We are both crying, sobbing. The paramedics arrive and to the hospital my father goes. He was there two weeks before passing away.

Three days after his passing, we hold the funeral. The day was a beautiful, sunny day. But my garden was dead. The sunlight that helped my garden grow was gone. Now, it was just infested with a giant weed. But a week later, the weed was gone. It had plucked itself out and went to infest another garden. My mother packed up and moved to the Ukraine, taking all the precious memories of my father, my world, with her. No pictures left behind, nothing. It was as if my father had never been around at all. So, here I am. Just twenty years old. No parents. No siblings. I cry, I sob. I pack my car with all my belongings, which is not much, and nothing to remind me of my father. I drive across the country. I end up in Montana.

After five months of living in Montana, I feel sunshine once more. Sadly, however, still have not heard of or seen a weed. But it is time for my garden to grow yet again; I decide it is time to go back to school. It is here that I meet my eternal sunshine. My love. We begin to grow a lovely garden together, eventually combining our gardens into one.

After that, one glorious day, we hear that we are growing a new, little flower in our garden. So much sunshine, shining down, warming our garden, our hearts! My husband and I are overjoyed! Yet, less we not forget, all growing flowers need water too. Tears of joy, and tears of sadness, fill my garden. Joy, for the bundle of joy on the way, and sadness because my child will never meet my father, their grandfather. And probably, not their grandmother either.

Then, one fall day, seven years past, what reappears? The giant weed. Surely wanting to infest my garden once more. My mother is calling. Ring. Ring. Ring. I cannot pick up the phone. I let the answering machine pick up for me. She calls again, quite a few days later. I answer, this time yelling at her! “Why haven’t you called me sooner?” Throwing back at her her same words from years ago. I don’t remember her answer. I am still way too furious with her to even deal with what she says. But, I do hear that she loves me. And she is my mother, and my father loved her too.

So, now, here we are. The infamous weed has turned into a seed. And it is growing, slowly, in my now beautiful garden. But nonetheless, growing. And like any seed, I hope, maybe someday, it will bud into a lovely flower!

The Humbling Fall of '94

S.K.G.

Growing up in Bombay, Jasmine and I spent our earliest years in paradise. Papa, a chief marine engineer and an officer of high importance in the Indian Navy, would often take his two little girls to see his ships and play on the helicopters onboard. Our arrival was always announced by a trumpeter, and when we would set foot on deck, all the other sailors would stop what they were doing and stand at attention. Mama spent most of her days with my big sister and me, taking us shopping, to lunch with other officers' wives and children, and planning outings and events that supported our growth and development. Jasmine was growing up to be a witty, energetic, and candid firecracker. I, the yin to her yang, was shy, quiet, reserved, and thoughtful. Life for us three girls was centered on fun, spontaneity, and adventure, while the housework, chores, and all other tasks that could be considered the dirty work of being a parent and running a household were left for our maids.

Every evening, Mama would drape herself in the most delicate chiffon saris, with intricate beadwork and embroidery, and adorn her slender wrists and Hepburn-esque neck with expensive jewelry. Jasmine and I would wear our beautiful frilly frocks and shiny black shoes, which the maids kept immaculately ironed and remarkably scuff free, respectively. The chauffeur opened the car door for us four and drove us to the Colaba Country Club, where only the most elite of Bombay residents had membership.

"Good evening, sir," numerous voices, including those of other important Navy officers, would say.

"Welcome, Singh saab," the orderlies said, as they most respectfully bowed their head to greet my father, who I regarded as highly as God himself.

Papa and the other officers would each drink a neat scotch and laugh over a discussion of politics and other grown-up matters. Mama and all the other officers' wives would laugh, gossip, and share stories. Jasmine and I would play with the other children. However, I remember looking at the officers' wives, watching them in admiration, unable to stop myself from thinking about the fact that Mama was more beautiful than anyone else at the entire club. We would then eat a family-style dinner of a variety of five-star Indian dishes, including tandoori chicken and shish kebabs. After dinner, Papa, Mama, Jasmine and I and some of the other families would walk along the palm tree-lined waterfront walkway. I watched in awe as the majestic waves of the Arabian Sea crashed against the massive unrelenting rocks, fervently taking in all the sights, sounds and sensations, as though I somehow knew that it was all too good to last forever. This is how Jasmine's first seven years and my first five were spent. If India was a third-world country, she and I didn't know about it.

One day it all came to an end. The papers that Papa had filed for, almost a decade earlier came through and it was time to leave; time to leave behind our friends, our material possessions, and our opulent lifestyle. We packed a few things into a few

suitcases, gave away the rest, said goodbye to our friends, the only people I had known up until that point in my life, and went to America. Jasmine and I were devastated, and Mama, too, had her doubts, but Papa kept reassuring us all of the “opportunities that America held in store for us.” At seven and five years of age, we were unable to think about that seemingly distant future and understand what he meant, but we were not too skeptical, as Papa was always right and had never let us down before.

We arrived in Seattle, loaded our suitcases and ourselves into a dingy, old sedan, and my aunt drove us back to her house. “Perhaps the chauffeur was sick today,” I thought. We unloaded our things at her house, where we would be living until we got on our own feet. We would come to leave after less than a month, before we were really able to function independently, as our extended family, our only support system in this vast, unforgiving country, became highly abusive toward us. I will omit the details of that story, as they could be the basis of a whole new narrative, but ask the reader to take my word for it.

The autumn air was cool, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, but unlike the crisp, refreshing nature of the ocean breezes in Bombay, it felt cold and unwelcoming. The leaves on the trees were a brilliant, fiery saffron hue. Quite often, a frigid gust would displace a small unfortunate leaf off of the tree it had called home its whole life, carrying it on a whirlwind adventure, and eventually disposing of it on the ground and forgetting about it, allowing a once noteworthy member of a stately tree to get trampled. I had no idea that this would be a sign of things to come. This insignificant casualty in nature would be a rude analogy for the course of the next chapter of our lives.

Within their first week of living in America, Papa had two jobs and would work up to 80-hour weeks, as an engineer and a janitor. Mama, who had never worked a day in her life, got a job, learning to work as a CNA at a nursing home, earning a meager \$4.70 per hour. My parents, who could boast an almost regal status in India, were now foreign immigrants, earning squalid wages that kept us hovering near the poverty line. My parents kept my sister and me unaware of their desperate financial and job-related situations until years later, to keep it from upsetting us. We were upset anyway. We were experiencing culture shock, at a delicate age where the possible existence of such feelings, much less meaning of all it entailed was completely incomprehensible.

“This is Jasleen Singh. She is a new student who will be in our class for the rest of the year. I want you to make her feel welcome,” my new teacher told the class.

Mr. Wilson was a kind older gentleman with a white beard and a benevolent spirit, reminiscent Santa Claus. My first day of school was off to a fair start, as a girl named Janna befriended me and gave me a tour. At recess time, I timidly sat by myself, watching the other children play foursquare and wall-ball.

“Where are you from...Mexico?” one boy asked, as he approached me.

“No, India,” I shyly replied, embarrassed and fearful about the fact that my conspicuous accent would be ridiculed if I gave it more than a moment to allow itself to be heard.

“Oh. Does your dad drive a taxi?” he loudly barked. The other children burst into a roar of merciless laughter.

“Or does he work in a Quick-E-Mart?” another asked.

All the children, including Janna at this point, who had tried to spare my feelings, couldn't contain their amusement and were almost in tears at hearing this. “Thank you, come again,” he mocked in a crass imitation of an Indian accent. I, too, was also on the verge of tears, but for opposite reasons.

“How could they say this?” I thought to myself. “Don't they know about how important Papa is, and how all the other officers salute him and call him 'sir'? Do they know that he and two other high-ranking officers went to Zanzibar and essentially started up that nation's Navy?”

“No.” I managed to sheepishly reply, holding back my tears until I had turned around and found safety in a bathroom stall, where I could silently weep. My young mind was overwhelmed by feelings of anger, sorrow, and longing for my home and my old life.

The big move not only changed the people I was around and the activities I engaged in on a day-to-day basis, it also meant a loss of status, importance, and acceptance, as I went from being a wealthy Indian girl among Indians, to being an underprivileged, unwelcome minority. As is the case with many instances of grieving, I experienced a gamut of powerful and confusing emotions. I felt such a bitter anger, toward the horrible monsters I had to face at school everyday, toward the fact that I rarely got to spend time with my parents, as they were always at work, and most regrettably, at my parents themselves, not only for causing this hugely catastrophic change in my life, but also for being different, for allowing there to be a reason for which the ignorant school children could mock fun at them.

My denial was best evidenced by the fact that I began having elaborate daydreams about a deluded version of myself, to escape my grim reality. I would imagine a utopian world in which the best of all the situations and circumstances I had ever known came together. I, the heroine in my mind, wasn't really *me* however; I was a prettier, more fun, outgoing, popular, rich, and accepted version of myself with luscious golden blonde hair like Janna's, fancy frocks and shiny shoes, like my own in India, and the status my father had commanded when he stepped onboard a ship. The fact that my ideal mental image of beauty, which had once included the striking, graceful, and exotic features of my mother, had changed to a thin, buck-toothed, freckled girl with mousy blonde hair, was representative of all of the changing values and beliefs about my understanding of life. Denial often times gave way to bargaining and I would curl up in a ball, late at night, underneath my blanket and silently whisper to God, attempting to strike

a deal with him to make things better, promising faultless behavior in return. I was low-spirited for my first few months in America, and would find private moments in which I could cry without anyone seeing, as “that would just worry them,” I thought.

The most powerful part of the journey of my grieving, a long-awaited destination, was acceptance. Fall came and went, all the trees had lost their leaves, and winter’s pure, cleansing blanket of snow had come down over them, as though to allow for a brand new beginning. After months of grieving, I was finally able to gain a meaningful perspective on life, both as it was in Bombay and in Seattle. It was profound to have learned, at the age of 5, that having an over-privileged life is not a reality for most, that there can always be situations worse than that of the present, and to be appreciative of whatever life currently has to offer. Today, I shudder at the thought of what I would be like if I stayed in India. Society would most likely have another cruel, uncompassionate, superficial, loathsome, materialistic, Paris Hilton-like debutante on its hands. In her place is an ambitious young woman, humbled by a difficult, yet life-saving experience with poverty, rejection, and marginalization that now serve as her fuel to be the helper of and the nurse for so many other human beings, with depreciated societal worth, in similar powerless situations.

My Adventure in Iraq

T.A.

The car window was as hot as a stove burner. The blazing sun beamed in my face, which was covered with water. How hot was it anyway? My black scarf stuck to my scalp as if it had been glued there. Sitting next to me was my sister-in-law, Akbal, who laughed and talked aloud, dismissing the heat. Her long black robe was beautiful with its gold and silver sequins sparkling in the hot sun. Gold bracelets covered her arms that were wrapped around me. The men sat in front wearing their red and white Ishmials bundled on top of their heads so artistically. They didn't seem to mind the heat either.

As we neared the border, I saw men in green camouflage everywhere. This must be the American Army, I thought. Other men were dressed in brown and black suits with pointed hats. Were they British? No. They were speaking a language that I hadn't heard before. Everyone was shouting. As we slowed to a stop, some of the men dressed in these uniforms started to yell at our driver. All of them had large guns and I felt so scared. Oh God, I thought, what if they don't let us through? The driver stepped out of the car and handed the tallest guard some money. "Yella, Yella!" he shouted. That meant move quickly and make it fast. Christ, I thought. One can just buy their way across the border. Why did we even bother to get passports? Later I learned that it was safer not to show a passport for fear of religious persecution. I guess they were all used to such awful weather.

We arrived at Akbal's home safely. Her house was made of stone. There were no windows. The lack of windows I thought was interesting. Maybe this was the same reason women wear the veil so that they will not attract unnecessary attention. In a time of civil unrest, I guess this Iraqi family didn't want anyone looking in on them either. As the weeks passed, I felt safer living in a house without windows. Not only were outsiders unable to look in, but the impenetrable brick walls muffled the sounds of the bombs and the sirens which were heard all day and night.

Akbal's home was sparse. Bright colored cushions lined the walls for seating. There were no tables or chairs. A small television sat on the floor in the corner of the room. On top of the television was a Koran. After all, we were all Shiites and not Sunnis who dominate most of Kuwait.

Southern Iraq was barren. There were no trees, mountains or rivers seen. Visibility was limited because of a heavy cloud of dust which was thick in the air. I hoped we wouldn't take a wrong turn. I remembered the story of Jessica Lynch and how her wrong turn nearly cost her her life, not to mention the lives of others. I guessed we would get there since our driver was a native. I sure hoped so. An hour passed but it seemed like eternity. I felt a knot in my stomach and my heart raced as the suburban in which we were riding picked up speed. What was I thinking? Just hours ago, I was sitting in front of my television watching American Idol and drinking a Pepsi.

Soon the men started talking about the town. I looked out my window and saw men, women and children walking along the road. Most were dressed traditionally, wearing long black robes and colorful scarves. All wore plastic flip-flops. No one appeared to be tired like I was from the heat.

A picture of Ayatollah Khomeini hung on the wall with a few plastic flowers tacked around the wooden frame for decoration. Wall-sized bookcases separated two large rooms downstairs and were packed full of religion and history books. Concrete stairs led the way to the bedrooms and bathroom upstairs. Large blankets resembling sleeping bags upholstered the rooms. Mirrored closet doors lined the rooms which kept clothes, a few toys and extra bedding.

We ate on the floor in a circle. The children looked forward to eating as meals meant spending time with the entire family and family is much cherished in Middle Eastern culture. At least 20 children sat Indian style in the large circle with their mother, eldest sister or brother next to them. The father of the house chanted a prayer that everyone then repeated his words out loud. The English translation was “God is great and thank God for the food.” Lunch and dinner were combined and always consisted of chicken or fish served with rice, salad and bread. No one drank water or milk while eating. Akbal said we would be served tea after dinner. Everyone ate in silence and the children were told to be quiet if they spoke. Here, meals meant eating and it was not time to engage in chatty side conversations.

Tea time is an important ritual in the Arabic household. Everything from religion to politics to what the cost of bread is was discussed. Tea was served several times a day and always followed mealtime. In Akbal’s home, the men and women sat together to drink tea but this was not the case in many households. Islam does not encourage casual conversation between men and women who are not married.

Bedtime was typically around midnight. Sleeping was an experience in itself. While the temperature cooled to 90 degrees, there was no air conditioning to ventilate the large rooms. By choice, family members slept on the floor. Because I was not used to the heat, Akbal suggested that I sleep on the roof. I was surprised by this but found it to be much cooler than the house. Lying there at night, I could here the sounds of gunfire in the streets and periodically saw bright lights shower the skies from the bombs.

I awoke each morning to the sound of bells ringing followed by the call for prayer. “Allah Akbar” was heard loud coming from a speaker from inside the city’s mosque which meant “God is Great.” Local religious leaders were responsible for this task, which, in the summer, happened at a little before five-o-clock in the morning. I remember thinking that people did not sleep much since we didn’t get to bed until after midnight and now it was time to get up and pray. Later, I learned that nearly everyone in Iraq naps everyday for three to four hours in the afternoon. This was quite a relief.

I really enjoyed going to the market. The men and women from our large extended family walked together. Because the country has deteriorated so much since the

Americans invaded, it is no longer safe to walk alone, particularly if you are a woman. I always worried that, as an American, I would stand out like a white person walking amongst Black militants in the 1960s, but I did not. Since I too wore a black robe and scarf, I blended in with the crowd as if I belonged. People were friendly. "You from George Bush," one vendor said as I was buying gold. I nodded and he grinned. Since he spoke English, he wanted to talk to me more but my veil was a barrier to him. He didn't dare cross the line for conversation with my family watching.

I spent much of my stay talking and socializing with Akbal and her family. I really admired hearing stories and witnessing the strong family values of her culture and felt embarrassed when I talked about American values. Americans see family as only the nuclear family which is the husband, wife and children. Iraqis see family much different. Family encompasses not only the "nuclear family" but also literally everyone else in the extended family from first cousins down to great, great grandfathers. Iraqi people love, care about and police each other. The young take care of the old while Americans put their loved ones in nursing homes and then rarely visit them.

Although Akbal's family seemed displeased over these discussions, I was happy that I could finally dispel the myths portrayed by the media that all American women are sexually promiscuous, twice divorced and dressed like Pamela Anderson. Akbal also taught me a great deal about what it means to be a woman in Iraq and convinced me that inequality does not permeate every family. Her daughters all attend college and have normal social lives outside of their homes.

While I longed to go home where I could once again feel a sense of safety, I really enjoyed my time visiting Iraq. I learned about how other people live in the world and what beliefs are held by the people we now loathe in this country. I learned that Iraqis are innocent people who did nothing to have their lives interrupted and their safety forever jeopardized. My flight home is still much of a blur. Exhausted by little sleep and the constant heat, I slept the whole way home.