

# My First 83 Years





## Table of Contents

At what times in your life were you the happiest, and why? . . . . .	7
Have you pulled any great pranks? . . . . .	13
What is one of your favorite trips that you've taken? What made it great? . . . . .	17
What's one thing you wish you'd known before becoming a parent? . . . . .	45
What was one of the toughest parts about raising Jesse? . . . .	57
What are your favorite possessions? Why? . . . . .	65
What do you consider one of your greatest achievements in life? . . . . .	73
How did you meet Shelley? When did you know you wanted to marry her? . . . . .	81
Have you ever given or been the recipient of a random act of kindness? . . . . .	87
What is one of the strangest things that has ever happened to you? . . . . .	97
How did you feel when Jesse was born? . . . . .	107
What would you consider your motto? . . . . .	115
What qualities do you most value in your better half? . . . .	125

## Table of Contents

What is one of the most selfless things you have done in life? . . . . .	137
What are some of your special talents? . . . . .	155
Did you consider any other careers? How did you choose? . .	163
Do you have any notable ancestors? . . . . .	169
What have been some of your life's greatest surprises? . . . .	175
What is one of your favorite children's stories? . . . . .	183
What advice would you give your great grandchildren? . . . .	187
What inventions have had the biggest impact on your day-to-day life? . . . . .	195
What was your first boss like? . . . . .	207
Tell me about a time you got in trouble at work. . . . .	213
Who is the wisest person you've known? What have you learned from them? . . . . .	223
Who inspires you? . . . . .	231
If you could choose any talents to have, what would they be? . . . . .	245
What are your favorite memories of Jesse growing up? . . . .	255
What is your best advice when it comes to raising children? . . . . .	269



## Table of Contents

What is the farthest you have ever traveled? . . . . .	283
How has your life turned out differently than you imagined it would? . . . . .	297
What was your first date like with Shelley? . . . . .	305
What things matter most to you in life? . . . . .	311
What simple pleasures of life do you truly enjoy? . . . . .	317
How is life different today compared to when you were a child? . . . . .	323
Do you have any particularly vivid memories of your grandparents? . . . . .	331
What have you changed your mind about over the years? . . .	341
Has anyone ever rescued you, figuratively or literally? . . .	349
How has the country changed during your lifetime? . . . . .	371
What was one of the most romantic moments in your life? . .	383
Who have been your closest friends throughout the years? . .	389
What things do you think you cannot live without? . . . . .	399
What do you like most about your siblings? . . . . .	413
What was the neighborhood you grew up in like? . . . . .	423
Where did you go on vacations as a child? . . . . .	437

## Table of Contents

Did you have any nicknames as a child? How did you feel about them? . . . . .	445
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# At what times in your life were you the happiest, and why?



\*\*\*This question and those that follow were sent to me by Lingyan each week during 2022 and 2023. Each question provided me with the mental stimulation to write a new life essay each week. I'm at an age that requires stimulation\*\*\*

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When I was a young kid, three or four, the happiest days were my birthday and Christmas. The reason was fantastic presents – a pedal fire engine and a large tricycle. Later it was presents like a Lionel train set, skis, skates, a fishing rod, and a Sears fat-tire bicycle. I was too young to wonder whether my mother could actually afford all these presents. I knew only that Christmas morning around 5 A. M. was the time when my sisters piled into my bed and whispered if it was time to go downstairs and open our presents. It was my happiest day of the year.

## My First 83 Years

The Sears bike was a sturdy, one-speed bike with green fenders and thick white-wall tires. Growing up in a small town, I was part of a group of kids who organized our own games. At school recess we played pickup baseball or football, depending on the season. After school and on weekends, we rode our bikes from scattered locations to a small field behind the Depot firehouse, where you had to dodge a few boulders if a baseball was hit in a certain direction. We loved our pickup games, and always came home with a sense of euphoria and sore limbs that we hardly noticed. Even though it was a three-mile ride to the Depot firehouse, and I had to walk the bike up one steep hill, I never seemed to run out of enthusiasm for games with my friends. When Pauline invited me to her house after school to watch cowboys on their new television, I didn't mind the four-mile ride, because we held hands while watching TV. Thus, the Sears bike delivered me to my first romance and fascination with TV cowboys like the Lone Ranger. Playing baseball and other sports at that age made me happier than Pauline's interest in me, probably because playing baseball then was a lot more fun than trying to figure out women.

I was extremely happy when Mom bought our family a Silvertone television for Christmas not long after my bicycle excursion to Pauline's house. Eight miles round-trip on a bike seemed like a long way to go to watch cowboys on TV, hand-holding or not.

## My First 83 Years

When I was about ten or eleven, Mom put me on a plane to New York to spend my spring school vacation week with my grandparents at their apartment on Morningside Drive. The most thrilling day of my visit was the day Grandpa and I took the subway to Yankee Stadium to witness my first professional baseball game. There was something about the swaying and squealing of the train, something about all the strange-looking passengers, something about the city smells that made the subway seem like a magic event rather than just a way of getting some place. Inside the stadium, Grandpa bought two programs and found a man who sold Yankee patches made of felt. We picked out a round white patch with an Uncle Sam top hat on the end of a baseball bat. The word Yankees across the patch had a big Y. He said Grandma would sew the patch on my jacket. When we emerged from a small tunnel into the stands, I saw a grass field greener than any memory I had of green, and dirt redder than any at home. The white lines on the field seemed so perfect as to have been made by some machine that could measure the width of a human hair. We had front-row seats near first base. Seeing the Yankees for the first time seemed like a dream come true. The next day Grandpa took me downtown on the subway to visit his office on Lafayette Street, where he gave me envelopes with bright foreign stamps for my stamp collection. Later he and I walked to Chinatown for lunch at the Port Arthur Restaurant. I ate tasty new things that Grandpa suggested and drank tea for

## My First 83 Years

the first time. After lunch, he took me to the Hayden Planetarium, where we spent time together in the dark, looking up at the stars and planets and listening to a speaker talk about the universe. At other times I was playing Canasta with Grandma at their apartment (she had taught me with I was six). She took me to the Central Park Zoo and Radio City Music Hall, where we saw dancing girls called Rockettes and a romance movie. A Canadian Mountie was kissing some woman hard on the lips and singing to her. Grandma wiped her eyes with a tiny white handkerchief. Perhaps because of all the new adventures, I remember this as one of the happiest times of my childhood.

I called Mom from the prep school I was attending in Washington, D.C., to tell her I'd passed the exams for Annapolis and would be entering in June. I heard her crying on the phone. She'd dreamt that I would go to college but had never expressed an opinion about a program that produced naval officers. I suspected her joy about my receiving a free education from a prestigious institution suppressed any thought about whether my becoming a modern warrior was my true destiny. There was no war except the internal snake pit in which I fought the ghosts of my father. Mom and I were both joyous then.

As I'd neared the end of a vagabond year in Europe, I thought I might become a writer. On the night before my ship docked in New York, I tossed and turned. In the morning I ate breakfast

## My First 83 Years

quickly and scrambled up on deck. I saw the Statue of Liberty in the distance. I choked up. As Lady Liberty loomed larger, I couldn't restrain the tears. Crying about being home felt stupid. I hadn't wept when I stood before Michelangelo's statue of David, even though that had been an emotional moment. I was dry-eyed and laughing when I saw my two sisters waving at me from the dock. Both the Statue of Liberty and my sisters gave me the euphoria of being home after a long journey.

When Crown Publishers sent me the first copy of my novel, *Annapolis Misfit*, I held the book in my hands and thought it would make me happier. But the happy part had been the writing of it, and now I was involved in a sad divorce that seemed to drain the joy from the publishing achievement. Years later, after becoming fascinated by Frank McCourt's voice in his memoir *Angela's Ashes*, I began reading other memoirs — any with a captive voice. It was probably Anne Lamott's nonfiction that I blame for making me think writing about my family would not send me to Hell. It was her personal stories and self-deprecating voice that made me conclude she was probably the best writing teacher in my experience. When I began to write my own memoirs, the joy returned.

When I was attempting to write a second novel and needed a job, I rode my bike (no car then) four hilly miles to the local inn, where I worked at odd jobs like cleaning the swimming pool.

## My First 83 Years

Eventually I tended the front desk, the bar, and even subbed as the chambermaid. A woman who also worked at the inn thought I should meet one of her housemates, a woman named Shelley who soon worked at the inn too. Shelley had unusual empathy for injured souls. She drove a faded VW Beetle similar to the one that my beagle dog had ridden in with me so often, and when Shelley visited my house and prepared to leave, Pup jumped into her car and refused to get out. It was as though he was telling me she was the one. And he was right. Soon after our commitment to one another, she made him a huge pillow with a blue denim cover that went on all our travels and became his sleeping spot. This was one of the happier moments for me as was our marriage on beautiful Pack Monadnock Mountain a few years later.

Holding Jesse just after he was born seemed magical and spiritual, as if loving a baby was the most powerful emotion on Earth. Although cradling him in my arms for the first time was certainly one of my happiest moments, the years ahead were filled with joyous events that took him from a child to an adult. What I loved most about raising Jesse, was that I was happy even when we squabbled. Temporary discord never seemed to overshadow the persistence of love.



# Have you pulled any great pranks?



When I was twelve years old, the Congregational Church in my town sent me to a church camp called Sentinel Lodge for an August week in the White Mountains. It was a place where recreation consisted mostly of coed softball games and swimming in a small pond. I don't think it was intended as a place for great pranks. One of my pranks there was a coordinated effort with the kids in my tent. The second prank went awry and became one of my biggest childhood embarrassments.

I'm unsure who in my tent came up with the idea of short-sheeting the counselor's bed. But I was all in, including trying to get a flash photograph of him in a dark tent as he tried to get into bed. While he was at a counselor's meeting, we folded and tucked in the top sheet of so that it appeared to be both the top and bottom sheets. When he tries to get into bed, his legs can only go halfway down — as far as the fold. So when he entered

## My First 83 Years

the tent, we all tried to be silent. I had the camera pointed in his direction, hoping the dark was not impeding my aim. I waited a second or two until I heard his sheets rustle and a grunt. Then the flash went off, illuminating our counselor with his knees in the air. We all laughed. He said, “You guys are pretty funny.”

But my real joy at the camp was not pranks but rather “Jackie McLain.” When green-eyed Jackie held my hand, I relished the magic of her touch. Until Jackie reached some untapped place in me, I’d thought pretty girls saw me as an energetic puppy that should stay out of their way unless they felt like scratching a dog’s ears. When she reached out and held my hand, it made me feel that the religious instruction was insignificant compared to the way I felt when this slim girl touched my hand. Jackie McLain in her white blouse and short shorts seemed like a vision from God. I thought perhaps this vision counted as a religious experience.

I wasn’t sure why Jackie liked me. She was taller than me (as were most girls my age), but usually we sat on the floor of a lodge during bible class or on the ground during evening vespers. And during coed softball games, I was speeding around the bases and hoping she’d see how fast I was. Games here were about presenting an athletic image to the girl who liked me.

## My First 83 Years

Then, just before church camp ended, a vision from heaven occurred.

I'm at the waterfront on Dan Hole Pond and see swimmers splashing near a float that is a good distance from shore. Among the bathing caps out there, I spot Jackie McLain. I step into the cold water, adjust my swim mask, and begin swimming face down. I hold my breath, survey the bottom, and then bring my head up for a breath. I see Jackie McLain ahead. She and another girl are treading water and talking. I think wouldn't it be fun to surprise them. I can give them as sudden scare when I pop up next to them. I take a deep breath and dive down and swim in their direction.

My underwater training at the lake where I live has prepared me for just such a mission, one where I need to hold my breath for as long as it takes to swim like a shark to my objective. I see Jackie's torso as I approach. Jesus, she's lowering her top. She's adjusting her straps. Jesus, I'm out of breath, I have to come up.

I break the surface. Jackie screams and turns away and scrambles with her straps. I take a deep breath and go under again and swim away. She doesn't know if I saw her or not, and I'll never mention it to anyone. But seeing Jackie McLain half-naked is a sight I'll never forget, not because her body is unusual in any way, but because seeing her is an accident only God at the church

## My First 83 Years

camp could have planned.

Jackie talked with me the next day as if no stupid prank had occurred. We talked about exchanging letters, but she lived in some distant town from me. I didn't think we'd see each other unless we both returned to camp next summer. But I was happy with my memories of holding her hand and pretending that church camp was about religious matters instead of some strange new feeling in my heart.



Owl perched outside my studio window.

# What is one of your favorite trips that you've taken? What made it great?



One of my favorite trips was as an American discontent who quit my engineering job for a year-long quest to examine European culture and perhaps find my life's purpose. I began this trip in September, 1966. I was twenty-six years old and had saved enough money in three years while traveling the U. S. as a problem-solver for a company that made water stills and demineralizers.

On my flight from Kennedy International Airport to Luxembourg I thought about Barbara. She'd invited me to spend several weeks with her family in Germany and would meet my train when it arrived from Luxembourg. Her photos revealed a young blonde woman in an A-line dress that ended too far below the knees and

## My First 83 Years

had a white collar buttoned tight at the neck. Her parents appeared old and bucolic. If the Parker Pen Pavilion's international friendship computer at the World's Fair in New York two years earlier had matched me with a Greek or Italian woman, there might have been a chance for romance. But I couldn't visualize it with a big Teutonic woman, although I was unsure from the photos how tall Barbara really was. What was important was her kindness with the extended invitation. I thought having a family visit to begin my vagabond travels would lessen the anxiety about going it alone once I was on the road.

My plan was to visit Barbara and take a train to the Volkswagen factory in Wolfsburg to pick up the new VW Beetle I'd purchased through the Europe by Car organization. Barbara and I accomplished that a few days after I arrived at her home. There I learned about German family customs and that Barbara was seeking a romance that might take her away from living with her parents. After explaining that romance was not on my itinerary, we did take some road trips together in my VW to places like Heidelberg, and she had arranged for us to go with a German bus tour group for a week in Paris. Then I said goodbye with a promise to return.

I drove the autobahn to a hostile East German checkpoint that required a transit fee, paperwork, and a car search, and then

## My First 83 Years

traveled on to the friendly smiles at the West Berlin checkpoint. My guidebook directed me to an inexpensive student hostel near the Olympic Stadium. I called Erika Lessner, who was supposed to be Milt Thayer's international pen pal according to the Parker Pen computer at the World's Fair, but Milt said the closest he'd ever get to Germany was the beer we were currently drinking in the Lowenbrau Gardens. Erika invited me to meet her at the Berlin Free University where she was a student. Erika had written that she'd like to show me Berlin. And so she did, mostly at night, because this small dynamo with shaggy brown hair attended classes during the day. I wanted to see the Berlin Wall and look over the barbed wire at East Berlin. I went alone on a dreary day. I viewed the Wall of concrete blocks from a platform that allowed me to see tower guards with rifles and empty streets and drab apartment houses with bricked-in windows. It looked like an abandoned city, as if some plague had wiped out the population. I saw why some East Berliners had risked their lives trying to get over the Wall to the glittering city on this side, and why many were been shot trying it.

I drove back to Barbara's family for a couple nights. Barbara retrieved a new car radio that she'd ordered for me with her 40% Blaupunkt employee's discount. She had insisted that my car needed a radio and it would only cost me \$45. I installed the antenna and hooked it to the radio. The Blaupunkt had AM, FM,

## My First 83 Years

and short wave. Barbara and I tested it in the driveway and picked up modern music stations across Europe. She said, "You will be happy you have music." She asked me to return for a longer visit at Christmas, but I said I hoped to be in Switzerland by December.

A day later I was on a windswept beach near the town of Frederikshavn in northern Denmark. It was a gray afternoon, windy, the last day of October. My VW Beetle sat in an empty parking lot near a lighthouse that marked the northern tip of the Jutland peninsula. I was doing my best to kill seven hours until my ten P.M. ferry to Larvik in Norway. From there I would drive to Oslo to visit my step-cousin and her husband. As I walked along this blustery beach I wondered if I had any natural talent. What was I good at in grade school? I remember how much I loved words and sentences then. I thought maybe I could become a writer and express ideas that people would debate. I decided I should record my European observations. I returned to the VW, glad to have a refuge from the wind, and found a notebook that could be my European journal.

On the rolling ferry later, a young Norwegian woman, who was a bit tipsy from perhaps the wine she'd had with her bus group at dinner, began a conversation with me. When she became ill, I helped her to the ship's toilets and steadied her while she was sick. Before she left with her bus group, she gave me her address



## My First 83 Years

and phone number and said to call her from my cousin's apartment and that she would treat me to a dinner at her fiord cabin in a small town near Oslo, where she worked as a reporter for a local newspaper. I did, and our evening at Ingrid's place was one of my first writings.

I visited some famous museums while at my cousin Ann's apartment in Oslo and talked with her about how well she'd adapted to life with a Norwegian husband and was now able to speak fluent Norwegian. Despite her new life and an energetic toddler son, she said she sometimes missed her family in Boston.

I then drove to Stockholm for a couple days, staying in a pension and learning how to take a sauna. I read in my guidebook about a popular international hostel in Copenhagen where many traveling students stayed. When I arrived at the hostel, I met Ilan Joffe, an Israeli civil engineer who hoped to find work. Ilan and a traveling Dutch student joined me for a tour of the Carlsberg brewery. At the end of the tour we drank free beer. On another day we visited the place where they made Cherry Herring brandy, and I knew from my drinking days that cherry brandy was one of the ingredients in a seductive drink called a Singapore Sling. By the time we drank several of those, we were laughing like hyenas. The next day I drove Ilan Joffe to a few companies where he dropped off his resumé. Ilan was clean-cut and soft-spoken. He looked professional in his dark suit. Many years later, Ilan

## My First 83 Years

discovered me on the Internet from his home in Israel and said my transporting him to companies then had resulted in his getting a job in Copenhagen for a few years. He was grateful. We have continued to correspond.

I left Copenhagen with two American girls who'd posted a notice on the bulletin board that they needed a ride to Hannover in Germany. They intended to stay at the youth hostel in Hannover and suggested that I stay overnight there too. I said I was twenty-six and probably too old for youth hostels. They said only the youth hostels in Bavaria had an age limit. In Hannover, I purchased a youth hostel membership in the International Youth Hostel Association. I also had to buy a sheet sleeping bag because the hostels didn't provide sheets. Those two things would allow me to stay in youth hostels throughout Europe. I could stop worrying where I'd find a cheap place to sleep each night.

After a night in Hannover, I drove to Frankfurt next for a week's stay with my sister Karla's pen pal, Lotte, and her family. She and her two teenage brothers took turns showing me all the sights. Then I drove to Switzerland to what my guidebook said was a popular ski lodge in the small town of Leysin.

At the Swiss chalet in December, I met a rugged-looking Brit who looked like James Bond (Sean Connery) and had left home for Australia as a teenager and learned to fly any bushwhacking

## My First 83 Years

plane that could get off the ground. Nick was now a pilot for Qantas Airways, splitting time between his Australian home, an apartment in London, and a farm in the English countryside. He admired my vagabond quest, saying Australians called it a walkabout, which meant a period of wandering that originated with the Aborigines as a way for a young man to establish his manhood. The custom caught on with young white Australians looking for adventure. "That's why you see so many Aussies at the chalet," he said. "But they're just looking for a good time, not for any meaning in life." We skied together, found a ski-side chalet for cheese fondue and beer, and talked about life. Nick invited me to stay with him when I reached London.

Just before New Years, I left the chalet with two Canadian boys who wanted a ride to Zermatt with the intent to ski at the Matterhorn. But on New Years Eve we were in a YMCA in Geneva when several young women plucked us up and drove us to one of their homes in nearby France for eating, drinking, and dancing. An unexpected celebration. The next day I drove with the boys to Chamonix, where we took the highest cable car in Europe to the top of Mount Blanc. Freezing on top, but a breathtaking vista. The next day I drove to a town near Zermatt, parked the car, and took a steep train the rest of the way (since there were no cars allowed in Zermatt). After a couple days at the youth hostel there, the boys decided to stay and ski while I headed out on my

## My First 83 Years

own for Austria.

After a brief stop at a youth hostel in Zell am See, I drove north to the city of Munich and a small guest hostel that was recommended in my guide book. I attended a few February Fasching Festival parties with an American math teacher named John Lutz. At a small party at the hostel, I danced with a scarecrow and did not recognize her at first as one of the two women who ran the hostel. Mathlene invited me to have coffee at her apartment, which turned into a two-week stay with her and her two small daughters. One day I drove them and a visiting friend, Heidi, to a sunny snow resort in the mountains, where we threw snow balls at one another. Before driving on to Vienna, I agreed to meet Mathlene in Italy in April so that we could vacation there for a short time.

It was cold in Austria on the March 1st afternoon of my twenty-seventh birthday. Having gotten their name from John Lutz in Munich, I was having coffee and apple strudel with the Boehm family in their Vienna apartment and thanking them for the days they spent showing me the city and having me to dinner. After saying goodbye, I drove to the Esterhazy section of Vienna and walked onto a children's playground to the entrance of the underground Nazi bunker that had been converted to a youth hostel. I stepped through an inconspicuous metal door and down a tunnel of cement steps, arriving in a small complex of

## My First 83 Years

rooms where the only sound was the constant hum of the air filtration system. Each visitor got his or her own tiny room. I rested on my bunk, wondering if Hitler ever slept here. In the evening I went to a wine cellar with a blonde California girl who was also staying in the underground youth hostel. There another girl and her Greek boyfriend joined us for wine, and it was Stavros who gave me the name Lili Paganelli and a note of introduction. He said his cousin Lili was twenty-one and spoke English fluently. I left Vienna two days later, determined to drive a thousand miles to Athens in one shot, pushing my VW all day through barren Slavic lands and into the cold night, living on cheese and bread and goodbye pastries from the Boehm family. I stopped the car sometime after midnight and dozed until the chill woke me. Just after dawn I crossed into Greece. The sun rose to reveal rocky hills.

The Athens youth hostel was cold and dirty and filled with young hitchhikers — mostly American, Canadian, and British kids. And there were no toilets in the modern sense of the word, just open basins with raised foot pedestals on either side of a hole. My romantic notion of Greece was suffering until I heard a familiar voice call my name. John Lutz had just arrived and was eager to explore Athens with me. In the next days we visited the Parthenon, other ancient ruins, a warm beach, and Lili Paganelli, who lived in a modern apartment with her mother and said she'd

## My First 83 Years

studied at an American school in Athens and would like to be a secretary at one of the English-speaking embassies. The next day John and I drove to a dirt street in nearby Pireus where the single-story houses resembled mud-baked cubes. Yani Simineodas invited us in, and his mother served us wine while I told him how I met his Israeli friend, Ilan Joffe, in Copenhagen. Yani was in his last year at Athens University as a civil engineering student. He had short brown hair and squinty eyes that seemed more Anglo than Greek. His soft-spoken English was rough but understandable. The next night Yani, his brother, and a friend took us to a Greek café where the locals danced. Greeks were dancing and breaking dishes on the floor. Mostly men, mostly solo, only one or two lithe and flowing women. The bouzouki band played with an intensity that seemed to bring out the wild side of each dancer. Dip, turn, hoopah! Yani and his brother encouraged John and me to go up in front of the band and give it a try. John and I suggested that Yani and his brother go first. They said they didn't dance.

John pushed his chair back from our table. He walked to the front with that silly grin of his and was alone on the dance floor. The bouzouki players thought they saw a tourist in this skinny guy with the pale complexion and thick eyeglasses. The band played the bouzoukis harder than I've ever heard anyone play a string instrument. John danced his solo like an injured stork. The

## My First 83 Years

audience appreciated the obvious tourist. Big applause. We congratulated John as he returned to our table.

I went up next and was alone with the Greek rhythm and intensity. For once I had no fear, as if maybe I'd consumed just enough Greek wine to lose those inhibitions that tended to plague me. I felt the music. I made dips and spins and movements I'd only observed but which suddenly seemed ingrained in my heart. I remembered how Anthony Quinn had done it in the movie, *Zorba the Greek*. When he dipped forward, when he dropped down, he extended his arms and snapped his thumb and fingers. Maybe I wasn't really in my body. I was surprised when the music stopped. I could have danced forever.

I returned to our table, feeling relief that at least one fantasy had ended well. Yani and his brother said I looked like a Greek and danced like one. I knew when I was old and gray I'd remember I danced like Zorba once in my life, that during the dance I'd felt as though I didn't have to be shy if I could extend an awakening moment for an entire life. If I could live my life like the dance, I could embrace the future without inhibition.

At the Athens youth hostel, two Oxford University students, Lynn and Anna, wanted a ride to Dubrovnik and were willing to help pay for gas. On the way, we visited the ruins at Delphi and the monastery at Meteora. We stayed overnight at a hostel in

## My First 83 Years

Thessalonica and crossed the border into Yugoslavia the next morning. Once I turned the car toward Peć in the mountains, the route degenerated to a dirt road. In Peć, after a tourist agent put us up in an abandoned agricultural school for the night, we spent another exhausting April day in the mountains, finally reaching the outskirts of Dubrovnik about midnight. I drove along a dark residential street that paralleled a trolley line, squinting for any street sign that pointed to Lapad, where my guidebook said there was an “international center.” I saw the lights of an isolated café and three young men sitting at a round table in front. I rolled down my window and shouted, “Do any of you speak English?”

The men rose and approached the car. One of them said, “Yes, we speak it. Where do you go?”

“Lapad.”

The speaker had a rough face and a square jaw. His rumpled slacks and T-shirt gave him a disheveled look. He grinned and stuck his head against the window to scrutinize the women. The other two circled the car, making me nervous.

That was how I met Misha, who informed us that we were in Lapad but that the international center was not open until May. He said Lynn and Anna could sleep at this mother’s house nearby. I said I’d sleep in the car. The next morning, Misha walked us through the cobblestone streets of old Dubrovnik, a



## My First 83 Years

quaint walled town and one-time fortress beside the sparkling Adriatic Sea. Then Misha and I helped Anna and Lynn board a bus heading north. Misha said to me, "If you stay in Dubrovnik for a while, you can stay with my mother."

Misha introduced me to Vlaho and Rina, a married couple living in a makeshift apartment beneath the grandstand of a tennis stadium, and Darko and Ivica, who tended to socialize around a small dining table there. I enjoyed learning about their lives until Misha borrowed my VW and side-swiped a tourist bus, crunching the left front fender. Vlaho said he had friends who could fix the fender. But the work dragged on while I transported the friendly Slavs to various destinations in a car with a missing fender. I suspected banging out a fender and repainting it could take weeks and might be a deliberate plan to keep my car available for transporting stolen building materials at night from government construction sites at Lapad's seaside hotels. ("It's not stealing," Misha and his friends said. "It's socialismus. What belongs to one belongs to everybody. We take only a little for Vlaho's apartment and Darko's house.") I had Misha send a telegram to the youth hostel in Italy where Mathlene and I had been scheduled to meet before the car accident. She finally arrived in Dubrovnik by ferry and bus. Rina and Vlaho give us their apartment for a few days, but Mathlene was sad that we were with strange people and not alone on our planned vacation

## My First 83 Years

together. I asked Vlaho to have the sanded fender reinstalled. It might have been more romantic for Mathlene and me if it had not rained in Zagreb and Venice and on our all-night drive to Naples. But she seemed happy to leave Dubrovnik to the quirky thieves who believed in “socialismus.”

We spent two days as guests at a seaside villa with Michelangelo (Italian) and Laurel (British), who'd acted as an interpreter at the police station in Salerno when we needed to report that my VW had been broken into and what was stolen. Then I drove Mathlene to the train station in Rome, where she would get a train back to Munich. After a night at the youth hostel, I spent the next day visiting the Coliseum and the Trevi Fountain.

It wasn't until I arrived in southern France that I even knew the famous Formula One race through the streets of Monaco was about to take place. The last thing I expected to see was the death of a race car driver. If I had known this would happen, I would have avoided the race. Tragic events like that always made me dwell on my own mortality. Before I reached Monaco, I drove to Florence to see Michelangelo's statue of David. At the Academia rotunda, I walked around the statue for a long time, trying to memorize it. I'd reached a goal that touched some deep place, not like the Greek dance, more like an awakening. Le Relais International de la Jeunesse was a seaside youth hostel in a villa on Cap-d'Ail between Nice and Monaco. Women slept inside the

## My First 83 Years

four-story villa, and men slept on cots in a huge tent sheltered by olive trees and separated from the Mediterranean by a rock seawall. In a common dining room, you could have cheap French suppers with wine. Along the seawall was a coastal path that allowed you to walk into Monaco without much effort. I explored Monaco with two Danes and a giant American named Roger. The streets were filled with Formula One race cars preparing for the Grand Prix. The next day I watched the race with an American girl, sitting on top of a wall that overlooked the hairpin turn and harbor. We saw a driver zoom out of the tunnel and into a short, shallow S-shaped turn called a chicane. There he hit a light pole, flipped over, and was trapped under the flaming car. By the time rescuers extricated him from his car, I was certain he must have burned to death.

After a bout with the flu and several more days in the hostel's large tent, I drove on to the city of Nice, ate in an inexpensive cafeteria, and drove to the top of Mt. Alban, where I slept in my car. In the morning from this wooded hill I observed the city of Nice — the endless curve of the Promenade des Anglais with its grand hotels, palm trees, and early traffic. I sat on the hillside among wild flowers and wrote in my journal how Nice seemed softer from this high perspective, about the sounds of the city, about sunlight making the beach seem like an infinite white strip. Later I drove to a section of the beach opposite the

## My First 83 Years

Negresco Hotel and joined two British boys I'd met in Monaco. They were with a teenage British paratrooper, an English girl, and a young Danish woman. The Dane and I would soon begin an unusual relationship in which we divulged our vulnerabilities and history on an instinct of mutual trust.

I crossed into Spain on the last day in May. I was intrigued by exotic-sounding places like the Costa Brava, Costa del Sol, Torremolinos, Barcelona, and Seville. I ate supper in a roadside café near Marseille and slept in the car somewhere on the road to Arles. The next day I saw a sign for a bullfight in Barcelona. I drove there and bought a ticket. On Sunday the trumpets sounded, the band played, and about a dozen guys with funny hats and colorful costumes strolled into the ring. There was a lot of waving and applause. The small ceremony was brief, the matador guys faded behind wooden barriers, and a black bull with a white rump came snorting through a runway. I looked for the famous El Cordobés, but some guy called a picador charged around on a horse and stabbed the bull behind its shoulders until blood was seeping down. I looked for El Cordobés again, but a couple flunkies ran around the bull with barbed sticks, trying to implant them in the shoulders while the bull was snorting and hanging his head. I was getting the picture. The flunkies' job was to weaken the bull and tire him out. El Cordobés finally appeared with his little cape and let the bull charge by him a few times

## My First 83 Years

while the crowd roared. This continued until another flunky handed El Cordobés a big sword. The poor bull didn't have a chance. El Cordobés ran straight at the bull's glaring eyes and thrust the tip of the sword at a spot just behind the bull's head and between the shoulder blades. But he missed the spot. The sword bounced off the bull's shoulder. El Cordobés veered away. A flunky retrieved the sword. I thought they should let the bull return to pasture then, because he'd survived the kill. But, no. El Cordobés had to try again. The blade's tip banged off the shoulder again, and the sword flew even higher. On his third attempt, the sword plunged into the bull, which then sank to its knees. The crowd roared its approval. This wasn't how I'd envisioned the courage of El Cordobés. While leaving the arena, I decided a bullfight was one of the most disgusting events I'd ever witnessed. Why call it a fight when the bull has no chance from the beginning? The bullfight may have been appropriate in uncivilized Roman times when humans fought animals in the Coliseum, or good fodder for a Hemingway novel, but why would a civilized society allow flunkies to torture a bull until some hyped-up matador trots out to throw his sword into it? Maybe Zelda Fitzgerald, writer and wife of F. Scott Fitzgerald, summed it up best when she said of Hemingway's novel, "[The Sun Also Rises is about] bullfighting, bullslinging and bullsh[\*]t."

## My First 83 Years

At the American Express office in Madrid I picked up letters from home, including one from a friend who was my former college housemate. He'd written that his fiancée was studying in Madrid and had included her phone number. I called a girl named Barb, who gave me her address and said to come tomorrow afternoon when she'd be finished with her university classes. There wasn't much tranquility in Barb's apartment, but there was food and a sofa for me to sleep on. Barb's dark complexion and small, black-rimmed glasses gave her the appearance of a Spanish intellectual. Other American women in the apartment appeared more Anglo. Each woman had a Spanish boyfriend who appeared for supper and a visit to the bedroom. Barb's boyfriend, Paco, didn't like her long conversations with me or that I'd be sleeping on the sofa. But the women called the tune here, regardless of whether Paco saw himself as a matador needing to vanquish the American bull intruder. At breakfast Barb said I should visit the Prado Museum while she was in class, because it was one of the best art museums in Europe. I went there and was stunned by the work of Rubens, Rembrandt, Goya, and Breughel. I spent the next three days in the museum, trying to absorb everything. It was ironic that I'd never visited a museum in the States but was now suddenly absorbed in the world's great art. For a kid like me whose life had been consumed by sports and sports heroes, this fascination was a transformation I hadn't expected. Each room in the cavernous museum seemed to hold a new surprise that

## My First 83 Years

required quiet contemplation.

At the end of June, I left my VW in Le Havre for shipment to New York and boarded a ferry for the trip across the English Channel to Southampton. I was running low on money and couldn't afford to drive it during my last two months of traveling. Shrinking funds had contributed to my shabby appearance too. Italians had stolen clothes from my VW. So I continued to wear the same pair of trousers even though worn spots on the butt had become holes in two places. At times I considered wearing the Bermuda shorts in my luggage but didn't want to look like an American tourist. But the following morning I decided to wear my black and burgundy shorts. I was too ashamed of the trousers, and I'd seen movies with the British in shorts. I lugged my bag out to the road and held up a small American flag as younger hitchhikers had advised me to do in England and Ireland. I got a ride with a trucker who treated me to tea along the way. When we talked about free societies, he said, "Here you can't change the tiles on your roof without a permit."

In London I called the number of the Australian pilot who at the Swiss chalet five months ago had invited me to stay with him. No answer. Then I tried the number he'd given me for his girlfriend Meg. She said Nick was out on a flight, but she'd pick me up in Nick's Mini Cooper, which turned out to be a boxy red coupe. When I saw that Meg was a tall, brown-eyed beauty in a short

## My First 83 Years

dress that accentuated an elegant body, I thought lucky Nick had captured a modern Aphrodite. She was in the middle of moving, so I lugged some boxes for her and took a shower at her apartment. Meg cooked me a nice supper and said I should be comfortable sleeping on her sofa. In the morning Meg asked me to drive Nick's Mini Cooper to the Mayfair Hotel to pick him up. His flight crew always took a shuttle from the airport to the Mayfair. Meg needed to go to work.

When he was in London, Nick lived in his parents' small apartment on Baker Street. He said they were currently visiting his sister, who lived in Madrid and, on the one afternoon that I'd met her there, bitched that Nick was always sending Aussies to sleep on her sofa. I'd been quick to make other arrangements. When Nick asked why I was wearing Bermuda shorts, I told him about thieves stealing my trousers and jackets. He said he'd go with me to a London men's store while I bought new trousers and a sport jacket. "You really can't go around London looking like that. We'll tell them you just came in from the bush." I guess that was a manly image — just in from the bush. Just in from the Australian outback. The next day Nick stood in a fancy London men's store, telling me I looked good in brown slacks and a tan corduroy jacket. Spending the money hurt, but I wanted to know about Nick's life without embarrassing him. I added a dress shirt and looked more refined in the evening when we ate at a



## My First 83 Years

restaurant with a Qantas Airway stewardess and her friend Alicia.

In the morning the Qantas stewardess called Nick and had some sort of tantrum over the phone. Nick stayed calm. "Sorry, old girl," he said. "Wish I could...I have a previous commitment." After the phone call, Nick suggested that we drive to the farm. Down on the farm I met Nick's horse and a woman named Molly, who took care of the horse and appeared to be the third of Nick's women. Molly was attractive and unpretentious in a pair of old jeans. She and Ted and Ryan joined us for lunch and beer at the Frenshem Pond Hotel. Then Nick raced his Mini back to London, where we discussed happiness that night at a restaurant with Meg and the same Ryan who'd been with us for lunch. I thought the more wine we drank, the less anyone knew about happiness. I could tell when theoretical discussions were useless. Nick seemed more nervous than when we were in the Swiss Alps. Perhaps balancing three women here was not good for his metabolism. Later when Nick and I were alone in his car, he said, "I've been thinking of marrying Meg. But my last flight to Sidney, she jumped in the sack with the shop steward while I was gone. Now I don't know. What do you think?"

"Are you and Meg engaged?"

"Not really, although I thought we had an understanding."

## My First 83 Years

I should have reminded him that he was balancing three women in England and God-knows-how-many in Australia. Why should he expect exclusivity from Meg? And when you had a kind woman who looked like a Roman goddess, why did you need others? But I wasn't going to voice judgments. I'd continue to observe and stifle my opinions. "Do you think Meg would have done it if you were officially engaged?"

"I don't know."

"Do you love her?"

"I don't know that either. I know she's beautiful and we get on well together. And she's good in the sack."

"Can you see yourself spending the rest of your life with her?"

"I don't know. Things like that are difficult to predict."

"But would you have proposed to her if she hadn't jumped in bed with the shop steward?"

"I think so."

Perhaps Nick's problem was that he thought a shop steward was in the same class as a janitor. Maybe Meg should have gone to bed with another co-pilot or someone higher up the British social ladder. I was already having difficulty with Nick's ego and the class-conscious stuff about not appearing in public in

## My First 83 Years

Bermuda shorts. “You know what a Greek philosopher once said about marriage. ‘Am I not a man, and is not a man stupid? Yes, I’m married — wife, children, house — the full catastrophe.’” I laughed and added, “You should get married.”

“Why aren’t you married?”

“Because the girl I loved wanted a house by the ocean. I didn’t want a house by the ocean. American women are very materialistic. They want jewelry and a big house.”

“I think that’s universal.”

“If I were honest with myself, I’d say my failure with relationships is because I see them as ephemeral. I don’t think that’ll change until I know where I’m going with my life.”

“Are you any closer to finding the answer?”

“Some days I think I am. Other days, I don’t know. I can’t go back to being a mechanical engineer. There’s no soul in machines. The thing that comes to mind the most is the possibility of becoming a writer.”

“You could do that. You have a way with words.”

The next day Nick went out on another flight. Just when I thought I’d leave when Nick returned from his trip, his parents arrived with his scrawny, evil-looking sister. Nick’s mother was

## My First 83 Years

big and robust like Nick. His father was thin and quiet. They seemed surprised to find me in their apartment, and Nick's mother and sister seemed edgy about it. I thought maybe Nick hadn't told them I'd be there.

In the morning Nick's father came to me and lowered his eyes. "My wife really needs her privacy. I'm afraid you won't be able to stay. I'm sorry." If he'd said privacy the American way with the long "i", I probably wouldn't have minded getting kicked out. But privacy with the short "i" sounds like snobbish. "I'll be gone in an hour. If you don't mind, I'll leave my suitcase in Ben's room and take a small bag to Ireland. I'll pick up the suitcase when I get back."

Ben's father said, "That's fine. And please don't rush."

But I had to rush, because I couldn't wait to get away from the piercing glances of Ben's mother and sister. I thought I might know now why Nick had fled to Australia.

Standing out on the road with my little American flag, I felt despondent that my ship wouldn't leave for a month. After eleven months on the road, I was tired of traveling. But an affable Englishman gave me a ride and treated me to a mug of ale at a local pub. I felt better after the ale, especially that there were some friendly Brits who enjoyed conversing with me instead of seeing me as an intrusion on their privacy.

## My First 83 Years

When I reached Oxford, I wandered through the courtyards of the great university and wondered how many great writers formed audacious ideas in the ancient stone buildings. The next day I visited Stratford-on-Avon and Shakespeare's House, even though William was the person I'd hated most in high school, especially having to memorize crap like "the quality of mercy is not strained, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath."

Almost as soon as I reached Wales, a family picked me up, took me to their house for lunch, and then drove me to a spot on the other side of town where I'd have the best chance for another ride. Those who picked me up wanted to know about life in America.

After a ferry to Ireland, I found Dublin to be a cheap city for a short stay. I enjoyed movies and a horse-jumping event where an Italian rider spurred his horse too fast toward the hurdles so the horse couldn't get the spring it needed to clear the obstacles. I decided that was a metaphor for life. If you went too fast, you missed the different rhythms for each maneuver.

I was standing beside the road to Galway when a car sped past and then screeched to a halt. I ran up to the car. The driver said, "If I didn't see the American flag, lad, I'd never stopped. I've got the terrible hangover." The Irish were a great bunch. Then I got

## My First 83 Years

picked up by a Swedish family with small kids who wanted to know about the United States. Down around Kilarney, I even got a ride to the youth hostel on a horse-drawn wagon. I spent three days wandering around the lakes and mountains there, but the rain and cold stifled what little enthusiasm I had left.

It was night when I took the ferry to Fishguard in Wales and was surprised when a van was at the landing to pick up those of us who needed a youth hostel. The ride was along a bumpy dirt road that eventually led to a white house that seemed hardly larger than a cottage. I was so tired I didn't ask where we were. But in the morning I woke to the distant sound of the surf, looked out the window, and saw that this little house sat alone on the edge of a cliff. The ocean was pounding hundreds of feet below. After breakfast, I walked a path that followed the edge of the cliff. If there were no three-day limit at this hostel, I would have stayed until my ship left. This was the most tranquil place I'd found, where the only sound was the wind and surf.

The youth hostel sold a black-and-white picture postcard of itself as a distant white speck on the edge of a long curve of cliffs above the boiling surf below. Printing on the card said "Pwllderi, North Pembrokeshire National Park." I bought two cards, as if the extra one would guarantee the memory, and added them to my card collection. I was sorry to reach the three-day limit, but thought it was fair. If there were no limit, the amiable middle-age

## My First 83 Years

hostess could wind up with a small house filled with permanent residents.

I hitched to the city of Bath and visited the Roman Baths Museum. As I walked streets with famous Georgian architecture, I knew my interest in English history was done. I just wanted to be on the boat to America.

While hitching back to London, my host drivers sometimes asked about violence in America. I said the U.S. was still a social experiment trying to move toward a society in which class and race were irrelevant, that there was bound to be turmoil involved with this experiment.

When I reached the youth hostel in Southampton, the large suitcase I'd left there two months ago reminded me that I should travel lighter next time. A traveler really needed only a small pack, a camera, and a journal to store memories.

I embarked on a small student ship leaving Southampton, England, for New York. Like the destroyer I was on during an Annapolis summer cruise, it pitched and rolled, making the dinner plate slide away if you didn't hang on to it. I was discouraged that I'd chosen to spend nine days plunging up and down in the ocean instead of flying back fast. But the ship was cheaper than flying. At twenty-seven, I felt old among the young backpackers intent on clinging to summer romance. I stayed by

## My First 83 Years

myself mostly and thought about the Europeans I'd met. I wasn't sure why I felt depressed on this lurching ship. Maybe because I was unsure how to ditch an engineering career and pursue this new idea of a writing career. I'd begun a journal during the trip, but it was just bits and scraps.

I tossed and turned the night before the ship was due to dock. On a crisp September morning I ate a quick breakfast and scrambled up on deck. The water was smoother. I saw the Statue of Liberty in the distance. I choked up. As Lady Liberty became larger, my eyes fill with tears. But I was dry-eyed and laughing by the time I saw my two sisters waving at me from the dock. They were a feeling of home that was overwhelming.

Although the significance of this long trip did not sink in until later, when I had published a novel, I was aware that I had completed an important goal. The people whom I had met on this trip would always be as vibrant to me as the wonder of the Parthenon.



# What's one thing you wish you'd known before becoming a parent?



A traumatic childhood had caused me to forge a life with as few complications as possible. But, at age forty-seven, a miracle forced me into a more inclusive life. I wish I'd known then that my hesitation on parenting a child would be overcome by growth and healing from the experience.

A couple years after Jesse was born, I began writing an annual Christmas letter about life with our son. Friends said they looked forward to stories that portrayed him as my adversary and teacher. What I didn't know then was that Jesse was teaching me to heal myself.

Perhaps the most frequently asked question in a young child's vocabulary is, "Are we there yet?" It puts most parents on edge, often sending them into negotiation mode.

## My First 83 Years

On any trip that lasted over thirty minutes, Jesse always asked, “When we gonna be there?” Had I known I would hear this question thousands of times within the confines of our bug-splattered Camry station wagon, I might have worn earplugs. This was the question Shelley and I kept hearing on our drive from New Hampshire to Virginia. Jesse was strapped into his car seat in back with his favorite books, stuffed animals, and a snack bag on the seat beside him. He could read, eat, snooze, sing, enjoy the view, and talk to the animals. Why did a baby sleep the entire trip whereas three-and-a-half had to keep negotiating the time of arrival?

Helen Forman writes in *Frontiers in Psychology*, “We may reason about and carry out transactions involving events and activities in terms of standardized clock-time. Children, however, do not have access to this tool as their skills in time-keeping by means of clock-time is limited...How long is an hour? How much of a certain activity can fit within an hour or 20 min? What do I have to do now in order to be ready to leave for school in 10 min? These are the sort of temporal tasks children struggle with and for which they will need support from parents and teachers for many years.”

Periodically, Jesse repeated the same refrain. “Are we there yet?”

I said, “We’ve still got a long way to go.”

## My First 83 Years

“How long?”

“Three hundred miles.”

“How long does that take?”

“About seven hours.”

“Are we almost there?”

“No. We’ve still got a long way to go.”

“I wanna get down.”

“You have to stay in your car seat.”

“I wanna get down.”

So we screeched into every rest area and let him run on the grass. Then we strapped him in again. He seemed incredulous that each of these stops was not the journey’s end.

Jesse thought Virginia’s Chincoteague Island was a fine destination as long as we were flying kites on the beach or building sandcastles or running into the surf to cool off from the heat. But when I eased the Toyota wagon along a dirt road to a nature pond with wading birds, Jesse reversed course and refused to leave his car seat. When I asked him if he would like to run around “for a few minutes” while Shelley and I viewed some shore birds, it never occurred to me that the word birds was

## My First 83 Years

anathema to him or that the term minutes meant nothing at all.

“Don’t you want to see the beautiful birds?”

“No.”

Perhaps we could negotiate. “We’ll let you look through the binoculars.”

“Why do we have to stop here?”

“Because Mommy and I want to look at the birds.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Do you want to get out and run around for a few minutes?”

“No.”

So Shelley and I exited the car, moved away about twenty yards, and focused on egrets, blue heron, and swans. I glanced back at the car. Jesse stared away from us. Shelley said his blood sugar was probably low, that he probably just needed something to eat. I said, “It’s hard to enjoy the birds and the beauty of the pond while he’s brooding in the car.”

“Maybe we can come back when he’s in a better mood.”

“He doesn’t like bird-watching.”

“I’m afraid there’s not enough action in it for him.”

## My First 83 Years

I thought his need for action was the reason tired parents like us became cranky clumps. But I wanted to stay calm and learn what joyful patience felt like.

As he approached four years of age, his tactics changed, resulting in phrases such as, “Hey, Mom [or Dad], let’s compromise.” This did not mean he had softened his demands, but rather that he’d discovered a more effective way of attaining them. On Labor Day, when the three of us set off to climb Mt. Monadnock together (four-and-a-half miles round trip), Shelley and I decided that Jesse couldn’t make it to the top and back without gassing out and crying for one of us to carry him the rest of the way down. So if all went well, we’d climb just to the timberline, have lunch on the rock ledges there, and return. That’s when I made the mistake of saying, “We’re not going all the way to the top today. It’s a little too far.”

Jesse said, “I’m going to the top.”

I said, “It’s a little too far. We’ll just go to the timberline.”

“I wanna go to the top.”

“You’ll get too tired. Mommy and I don’t want to have to carry you down.”

“I won’t get tired.

“You will. It takes a long time to get there.”

## My First 83 Years

“I’m going to the top.” He then climbed faster, as if to show his energy level.

I became tired of his mantra and my futile attempts to reason with him. I shut my mouth and climbed. The way he was jumping from rock to rock, maybe he’d skin his knee. We could use that as an excuse to turn around. But I really didn’t want that either. I thought about the problem. Deciding maybe psychological manipulation would work, I said, “We’ll probably make it to Top One today, but not Top Two.”

Jesse jumped to another rock. “Okay, Daddy. We’ll go to Top One.”

Eventually we climbed a steep section of rocks called Jacob’s Ladder and stepped onto the ledges above the timberline. I said, “This is Top One. Let’s have lunch.” And so we did — a family picnic near a few other hikers who had chosen this time to rest at Top One. Perhaps it was the presence of resting hikers that gave Top One its authenticity. Maybe it was just the word top that stuck in Jesse’s mind. Certainly the ledges appeared to be the top of something.

As usual that night I sat on Jesse’s bed for seventeen minutes after I’d finished reading him a story. Why seventeen? It was originally fifteen minutes, but he kept negotiating for “just two

## My First 83 Years

more minutes,” so it became seventeen. Sometimes he used that time to bring up any anxieties. But he’d returned from the mountain with none.

As for me, I came to realize the importance of those seventeen minutes, which became a time when Jesse and I could express deep feelings that formed our spiritual connection.

Five-year-olds carry viruses anathema to the adult body and were bound to kill me sooner than later. In the autumn when he turned five, Jesse became ill. Shelley said, “Something’s going around at day care. All the kids have it.” Within seven days, I always had “it” too — only twice as bad as Jesse and Shelley. I suffered repeatedly from life-threatening forms of the snotty-child virus, including sinus infections and bouts of pneumonia. An immunologist jabbed immunizations into both my arms. On a TV report, I saw health workers wearing special suits to protect against the latest virus and thought I might have worn one of those, but the immunizations seemed to stop the virus rampage. The pneumonia vaccination was supposed to be good for a lifetime, but there were no such guarantees about the mysterious forms of the child virus.

As I sat on Jesse’s bed one night after reading to him, he negotiated, as always, that I stay to help ward off what he claimed were “bad thoughts.” This time he had death on his

## My First 83 Years

mind. “Daddy, when are you going to die?”

I hated questions like that, mainly because I was now fifty-two and didn’t want to think about my mortality. “I don’t know. I hope I won’t die before I’m a hundred.”

“Maybe a hundred and nine.” He’d just seen a TV report about a person who died at that age.

When Jesse became sick again, beginning early one week with a fever that persisted (up and down, sometimes over 104), Shelley drove him to his pediatrician, who said it was probably just “something that’s going around.” But two days later, his fever was still too high.

“Probably bronchitis,” Doctor Freeman said on the phone. Bring him in again.

I’d never taken him to the doctor, but Shelley’s facial expression said it was time for me to overcome my anxiety about certain social situations and deal now with the child virus. In the car Jesse kept telling me how much I’d like Doctor Freeman. “I’ll bet you can hardly wait to meet him,” he said.

I didn’t respond that this was an erroneous assumption, and I was exceedingly anxious in the waiting room with bedraggled mothers and sniffing children. I could die here. But once inside the examining room, I was at ease with the elderly doctor, who



## My First 83 Years

had survived the child virus for many years. When Jesse's examination was over, Nurse Rosemary gave him a lollipop. Doctor Freeman asked us to meet him in his office after Jesse got his shirt on. They left. Jesse examined the lollipop wrapper. "I don't like this flavor. I want to get a different one."

As a father who avoided conflicts about lollipops and almost any other potential dispute, I said, "Oh, that one's just fine."

"I want a different one."

"That one's just fine. Put on your sweatshirt. Where are your boots?"

He shrugged. Apparently he'd kicked them off in the reception area. "I don't want this one," he persisted. "I really want a different flavor."

I scowled and escorted him across the hall to the office, where the doctor was writing a prescription. The minute we walked in, Jesse said, "Doctor Freeman, I'm going to exchange this lollipop for a different flavor," and he went directly to the lollipop box on the doctor's shelf.

"Rosemary tries to get rid of those flavors nobody wants," Doctor Freeman told him, "but you were too smart for her."

I decided it was best to let the principal parties do their own negotiating but was irritated that Jesse was testing my limits in a

## My First 83 Years

setting where I had few options.

I had read that setting limits for a boy this age was like building a wall. You think he understands that the wall cannot be moved, but the boy will push forever to move the wall. If he moves it an inch, then he'll try for another inch. Whenever I became tired of holding Jesse's wall in place, the F-word rushed to my lips, forcing me to swallow it before its resonance proved I was unfit to raise a small child who knew how to negotiate.

I suppose every newborn child is a blessing whose personality is disguised until parents are ready to see it. I think I was content then that Jesse was teaching me how to be an insightful dad.



Jesse and me

## My First 83 Years



Shelley and Jesse



Jesse in his Jolly Jumper

## My First 83 Years



Shelley, Jesse, and me dressed up for her parents anniversary

# What was one of the toughest parts about raising Jesse?



I wanted to protect Jesse from serious injury without being a smothering helicopter parent. But because Shelley and I recognized early that we'd given birth to a risk-taker, keeping him intact was tough beyond our wildest imaginations. Though he often jumped off high places as a youngster, I think he was thirteen before he first broke a bone.

I had a bad cold that February and was not at Mt. Sunapee when Jesse took off over a jump on his snowboard and landed on his shoulder. "Bad news, Dad," he said from Shelley's cellular phone, "I broke my clavicle. We're heading for Monadnock Hospital. Mom wants to know if you can meet us there." A quiet Sunday evening in the emergency room. Shelley and Jesse's buddy flanked him as he lay on a bed with his arm in a sling. The

## My First 83 Years

X-ray revealed a break in the collar bone but not all the way through. A year or two later he would crack the same collar bone again after taking a spill on his dirt bike in a field track he'd built behind our neighbor's house.

That following summer, Jesse started pestering us about wanting to race dirt bikes. Many would say agreeing to this dangerous sport was a clear sign of mentally deranged parents. But because Jesse had met all the prerequisites (saving half the cost of a Kawasaki KX85 and getting A's in school), it was difficult to say no to a kid's passionate dream. When we joined a family to watch their boys' race, the mother convinced Shelley that it was a good family experience.

A year later, we hauled a new Kawasaki dirt bike home in our little trailer. According to Jesse, this was the happiest day in his life. We couldn't arrange for race-bike lessons before the first New Hampshire Challenge series race in mid-May, but Jesse argued that, except for the increased power, it wasn't that much different from the Honda XR70 he'd been riding for two years on the track he'd built in our neighbor's field. "Just stay behind the other riders and learn to ride the track," everyone advised him on the first race day. But he would be racing his KX85 over a jump called the Intimidator, and my anxiety level was rising. In the last race of the day, he was well behind everyone. Good. One more lap and this ear-blasting day will come to a safe and

## My First 83 Years

merciful end. Then he zoomed to the crest of a jump and, instead of nosing down, sent the nose of his KX85 straight toward the sky. The crowd gasped. In mid-air he pushed away from the green monster that was beginning its tail-first descent. The bike landed vertically on its rear tire, bounced, and flipped. He crashed feet first, rolled, bounced up, and shook his head. Standing near the scene, his friend's dad rushed to check if he was still lucid and then restarted his bike. Someone in the crowd near us said, "He's not going to ride again, is he?" But Jesse was determined to finish the last lap.

Among other riders who saw the crash, Jesse was the crash celebrity that day, except for one expert who said he'd seen "a lot worse than that." I hated the environment: swirling dust, rancid porta-potties, father's berating six-year-olds for not following their instructions, little kids crying beneath their big helmets. Too many adults trying to relive their childhoods.

At sixteen, Jesse asked if he could travel to Massachusetts with the Davis family the night before the Southwick race and sleep in their RV with his two racing buddies. He said to me, "You could drive down the next morning." I agreed. Shelley had taken him to the first race of the season, and I felt guilty about shirking my responsibilities. At the race the next day I inserted my ear plugs and watched him disappear on the first lap over a hill. He failed to reappear with the rest of the riders. "Where's Jesse?"

## My First 83 Years

everyone said with panicky voices. I knew he was tormenting his father. I exhaled when I saw Jesse and his buddy pushing his blue Yamaha down the hill at the side of the track. Those who saw the crash said he hit a bump and flew off his bike and landed on his back. He had a raw arm and a sore back. Friends gave him aspirin, and an EMT bandaged the arm. I had to sign a form that okayed his further participation. He wrapped a back-support belt around his middle and hobbled out for the second heat.

It was difficult to have faith that Shelley and I were doing the right thing for Jesse by allowing him to perpetuate his motocross obsession to the exclusion of any enthusiasm for college. When a friend called two weeks later to say Jesse had crashed his dirt bike while practicing at a sandpit and that an ambulance was taking him to the hospital, my fear was off the charts. The report that he was conscious as he was being loaded into an ambulance did nothing to dampen the agony I felt as Shelley and I headed for the hospital. He could lapse into a coma and be brain-dead before we arrived. I was certain there were no angels to protect a child with indulgent and incompetent parents. How could a kid with a professional motocross helmet fall into some sand and knock himself out? Apparently it was possible if you went flying over the handlebars, according to the young woman who'd run over to make sure he hadn't swallowed his tongue. That the helmet had a hairline crack, that the doctor in the ER made clear



## My First 83 Years

his disdain for dirt bikers, all caused me to believe I lacked a genuine faith that God would save my child from destruction.

“Will I need surgery?” he asked at beginning of his sophomore year at Keene State College. We thought his painful back might have been the result of flying off high mounds on his dirt bike during summer motocross races and the shock to his spine on hard landings. By mid-October Jesse couldn’t continue his commute to the college from our home, unable to drive or sit for three classes in a row. He found comfort only while flat on the living room sofa with his head propped up enough for schoolwork on his laptop computer. Or fully reclined in the passenger’s seat of whichever driver was transporting him to a doctor’s appointment or a class where an assignment was due. During the weeks after a diagnosis of a herniated disk in his lower back, Shelley negotiated unsuccessfully with pain clinics to get him in quickly. Finally a fourth clinic gave him same-day service. But the epidural didn’t work. On a cold December day, Shelley and I drove Jesse to a big hospital two hours away, waited during his late morning surgery, and drove him home that afternoon, “I feel better already,” he said. “The doctor said I should be good enough by summer to get back on the dirt bike.”

But Jesse decided to give up dirt bike racing. He announced his intention to pursue a dream of becoming a Formula One race car driver. “It’s a lot easier on the body,” he said. While earning

## My First 83 Years

money as a part-time computer technician and completing his Computer Science studies in college, he began saving to buy a used car that he could race.

To celebrate his twenty-first birthday, Jesse asked us to travel with him to the Skip Barber Racing School for three days at Lime Rock Park in Connecticut. Since he was paying an outlandish amount from his savings for this deal, Shelley and I agreed to cover lodging and meals. Our bed-and-breakfast had four cats that strolled across the breakfast table and a large dog that kept sticking its nose into my crotch. At the race track, six of Jesse's eight classmates were about thirty, one his age, and one older man. Two were women, one of whom had three kids. All eight seemed to be there for the rush of driving a race car. I'm not sure how he learned to maneuver corners at top speed and gear down quickly after blazing down a straight-away at 120 miles an hour, but he was the only one to never spin-out on a turn. Perhaps it was his dirt bike experience or the race simulator in his bedroom. Instructors and classmates often applauded his technique. So began his dream of living in Europe as part of the race circuit there.

I had silent doubts about the new direction of Jesse's racing career. During my European vagabond days, I had seen a Formula One driver die in a fiery crash at the Grand Prix in Monaco. But racing had boosted his confidence in things that

## My First 83 Years

mattered. Moreover, he knew professional race car drivers needed sponsors with deep pockets and that his parents could provide nothing beyond a college education. So he seemed in touch with reality.

One year later, just before beginning work on his master's degree in Computer Science, Jesse and a dedicated friend loaded a red Mazda Miata onto a trailer and towed it to the New Hampshire Motor Speedway for an event sanctioned by the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA), causing Shelley and me anxiety tremors in which the imagination sees speed demons crashing in various airborne configurations. It was an older Mazda sports car that he'd purchased for \$2500 and worked on with his friend during the spring and most of the summer, converting it from a used street car to an SCCA regulation Spec Miata while slowly depleting his savings. Because the Miata's engine had over 140,000 road miles on it, there was a chance that, once he revved the engine to warp speed, it would die on practice day and spare his parents the prospect of his bumping fenders at 100 mph for two days.

The day that Shelley and I arrived, the stadium bleachers that hold 100,000 during NASCAR races were empty, but scores of SCCA members, crew, and family were camped throughout the infield. Jesse's old engine lacked the power to pass other Miatas on the straight-aways, but his driving skill allowed him to catch

## My First 83 Years

some on the corners. In his best race, a driver came up too fast behind an older, slower driver, spinning both of them in front of high-flying Jesse, forcing him onto the grass and his parents into a new and more troubling anxiety. Silently I cursed the times that my now-deceased sister had introduced him to racing by bringing NASCAR tapes to our house when she visited.

At day's end, for a contribution to a leukemia fund, visitors drove their cars onto the track and followed a pace car (no passing allowed). Shelley drove and talked with Jesse up front about the dynamics of the track. I used the back seat to spread out and relax for the first time that day. For me, being on a race track in a Toyota RAV4 was less a rush and more likely a vision of all the trouble that lay ahead.



Kurt and Jesse during Maine vacation

# What are your favorite possessions? Why?



One of my favorite possessions is an eleven-year-old Toyota Camry, not just because the car has transported me to various destinations reliably over the years, but also because it contains the memories of driving my ancient mother to places like doctors, bookstores, and supermarkets. When she was in her nineties, I drove her each Tuesday afternoon for a grocery shopping excursion. Though her eyesight was poor, she still ran her own house and steered her own shopping cart along the route of semi-independence while I shopped for my family's food. While riding with me, she tested her eyes by attempting to read bumper stickers on the car ahead. One day she squinted at the tail of an SUV and said, "I like that one. 'I don't brake for Yankee fans.'" Then she cackle-laughed, as though visualizing running down my abusive father (a Yankee fan) when he was still alive.

## My First 83 Years

When I was seven, my parents moved from an apartment in Newark, New Jersey, to my grandparents' New Hampshire summer home, a gray clapboard house that sat high on a field-stone foundation and was located next to the Whipple farm, a family that had been my grandparents' summer neighbor for twenty years. Its slate hip roof, open front porch, and screened side porch were features of an old New England style. It had windows that rattled when the wind blew, a wood stove and hand-pump in the kitchen, and a two-hole outhouse that was part of a shed connecting the house to a barn. Laurel Lake was a five-minute walk. My mother rejoiced to be living in the house that held her summer girlhood memories. Later the house would become my most valuable possession.

During the first ten years that my family inhabited the old house, it accumulated some bad memories that resulted in my parents' divorce and my mother living in a new marriage in a different part of the state. After turbulent years in which I vagabonded through Europe, published a novel, got married and divorced, I met Shelley at the town inn where I worked. Eventually we married and lived in the house until we moved to Boston so she could get her masters degree at Boston University. Shelley and I wanted to move back to the old house, but well-paying jobs within commuting distance were scarce. But a few years later I landed a senior technical writer's position at Digital Equipment

## My First 83 Years

Corporation in Littleton, Massachusetts, only a one-hour's drive from the lake house. After enduring surgeries for endometriosis and two ectopic pregnancies during this time, Shelley was miraculously sustaining a viable pregnancy and ready to quit her OT position at the Massachusetts Hospital School. We moved back to New Hampshire in the summer of 1986. The artesian well and a modern heating system for the house were completed before Jesse was born a few months later. A bathroom, asphalt roof to replace the leaky slate, insulation, new double-pane windows, huge south-facing bay window in the dining room, and conversion of the screened porch to a sun room would come later. Converting the shed and outhouse into a guest bedroom and a writing studio for me would follow.

Shelley and I have lived in my grandparents' old house continuously for thirty-five years now, made more renovations, and raised Jesse here. Shelley has planted many flowers around the house, and we still have a huge pink bush that was small when my grandmother planted it. The tiny blue spruce given by a friend when Jesse was born is now fifty feet high. Shelley and I often take a midday walk along the shore of Laurel Lake, where my grandfather canoed with my future mother so that she could pick water lilies. Often as I pass through a room in the old house, I feel the presence of those I have loved and have loved me. Although the old house has seen both joy and sorrow, I know

## My First 83 Years

that the place where I grew up is still a valuable companion to my many memories.

I've often thought my writing studio, built over the old outhouse, was a symbolic location. But to possess a place for writing and quiet contemplation has been as valuable as any retreat for my mind. Bright windows allow me occasionally to see passing deer, birds, and other wildlife. The only problem now and then is ladybugs, which are beautiful insects. Tiny, round beetles with a red back and black spots. The trouble is they tend to infest my writing studio in winter, mainly because I have a warm, south-facing window. So they crawl around mostly on the window, but occasionally one lands on my keyboard or my computer screen. If you touch one, it releases a stink. And I don't want to injure them either. But if one continues to crawl around on a paragraph I'm trying to write, my patience wears thin. Then I usually slip a small piece of paper beneath the ladybug and transfer it to a windowsill far away from me.

And what writer could get by these days without a computer? I often think I've been with my Dell Desktop Computer more than with Shelley. But she seems to tolerate my need to transcribe my stories and often enjoys reading them, although she has warned me not to write about her. Many years ago when home computers did not yet exist, I wrote a novel on my grandfather's IBM Selectric Typewriter, using white-out when I made a typing



## My First 83 Years

error and needed to correct a mistake. To any elderly writer who once had to struggle with a typewriter, having computer word-processing and Google for research is equivalent to possessing some gift that a child like me could never have imagined.

I suppose having a hard-bound book with my name on the front cover is a valuable possession too. Certainly it is a reminder of the time that I set a goal to publish a novel and was able to achieve it. The book also gives me hope that I'm not done yet.

When I was a kid, I thought our first black-and-white television was a joyful possession that opened my imagination to the world of visual fiction, especially western cowboys like Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and the Lone Ranger. As I matured, I became fascinated by a TV series called *Run For Your Life*, in which an attorney's doctor tells him he will die in 9 to 18 months. This attorney decides to do all the things for which he'd never had the time — to squeeze 10 years of living into one or two years of life by traveling to Europe to encounter new people in new situations. This show motivated me to become a European vagabond and eventually a writer. Today I still value our more modern TV for the ideas and entertainment it can provide.

Another of my favorite possessions is located in my studio — a treadmill that provides me with the exercise I need, especially

## My First 83 Years

during the winter and days when it is uncomfortable to walk outside for any length of time. I have a TV monitor there too, allowing me to watch Netflix programs that make the treadmill time go by without much thought to the discomfort that the exercise may create.

The thirty or more photo albums that my mother left me when she died provide a valuable insight into our family history. Through the years she was persistent with her small Kodak cameras at photographing every family event. When she inserted her photos into an album, she put a little typed tag beneath it that identified the subjects. She tagged each album on the outside with a date — 1940, 1941, 1942, Karla and Kent Wedding 1975, etc. She posed us three kids each year for a Christmas card that she sent to friends and family. Looking through the albums reminds me of joyful times in our family.

I have my own camera too, a Sony digital that takes great photographs when I'm inclined to use it. I used it more when Jesse was growing up and recorded many of our family's events. Now I mostly grab it and shoot from my studio window when I spot some interesting wildlife in the yard. Some of these photos have been printed in the Keene Sentinel: a saw-whet owl perched on a branch, four bluebirds perched on the rim of my birdbath, and a bear stretched on the ground while hugging my bird feeders. Shelley has grabbed this camera when hers wasn't

## My First 83 Years

handy. Her photo of a hawk on our deck railing also made it into the newspaper.

I guess the bird feeders too are among my favorite possessions, even though I have to try to keep them from becoming the bear's favorite possessions. Sometimes I watch the birds from my studio window. When I hung the feeders one morning, a chickadee almost landed on my shoulder before I could secure the feeder to its pole. It may have been the brave one who has eaten seeds out of my hand before, but most of the chickadees seem accustomed to my comings and goings. Mostly the feeders are heavy with goldfinches, and the bright yellow males snap at one another if their sense of social distancing is violated. There are often six squirrels in the vicinity, scavenging for dropped seeds on the ground beneath the feeders. One day a hairy woodpecker was perched on the suet feeder but not eating. He was leaning back as if frozen, looking straight up. Then a hawk flew away over the trees. The woodpecker ate again. Several mourning doves are often bunched on the ground. Sometimes there's a purple finch, a red-winged blackbird, and the same red cardinal that often pecks at my window. There are several hummingbirds that seem to fight one another for the rights to a sugar water feeder. Like me, they must feel that a favorite possession needs to be guarded. My neighbor's cat Moxie likes to lie flat in the grass and watch the birds and squirrels. He went

## My First 83 Years

after a feisty squirrel once and may have gotten bitten. He hasn't done it again.

Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* is my favorite writer's guide book. She says, "Becoming a writer is about becoming conscious. When you're conscious and writing from a place of insight and simplicity and real caring about the truth, you have the ability to throw the lights on for your reader. He or she will recognize his or her life and truth in what you say, in the pictures you have painted, and this decreases the terrible sense of isolation that we have all had too much of...If something inside you is real, we will probably find it interesting, and it will probably be universal. So you must risk placing emotion at the center of your work. Write straight into the emotional center of things. Write toward vulnerability...Tell the truth as you understand it. If you're a writer, you have a moral obligation to do this. And it is a revolutionary act — truth is always subversive." My favorite memoir is Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*. I've held on to both books for twenty-five years.

# What do you consider one of your greatest achievements in life?



**B**ecoming a writer and publishing a novel.

Shortly after returning from a one-year vagabond trip through Europe at the age of twenty-seven, I embarked on a challenge that would be a more daunting achievement than the foreign odyssey or the engineering degree I'd earned four years earlier. I had decided to become a writer and possibly publish a novel. But if I wanted to write full-time, I'd need to replenish my savings.

I found an industrial engineering job at a Honeywell manufacturing plant located in old brick buildings along the Merrimack River in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and a modern apartment in Stoneham with another Honeywell engineer named Frank. Then I enrolled in a "Writing and Publishing" course, which was held in a Harvard University classroom one evening

## My First 83 Years

each week. The teacher, “Mrs. Horawitz,” was middle-aged and pear-shaped and candid about how few people ever made a living at writing. She said she’d started writing when her psychiatric practice became too depressing, seeing only the problems of humanity, seeing only the worst of life. Her husband was a doctor who provided the family support. She could afford to write short stories for women’s magazines. She said writing was fun, but the pay was lousy.

I didn’t care about the obstacles. She knew all about point of view, building a story toward a climax, and that John O’Hara’s stories were models for good dialogue. She had us read an O’Hara book called *Assembly*. She said an almost perfectly constructed novel was Herman Wouk’s *The Caine Mutiny*, and she advised the class to read it. What I didn’t like about her class were assignments to write about mundane events, like describing a waiter or waitress in a restaurant.

When I asked Mrs. Horawitz how you could know what went on in the minds of people you’d never met, she said the key to writing fiction was being able to use your imagination. A fictional character might blend the physical characteristics of an anonymous person with the emotional characteristics of an intimate acquaintance.

## My First 83 Years

When Mrs. Horawitz returned my writing, she said she thought I would become a writer. She asked what country I came from. I said I came from the United States, born in New Jersey. She thought I had an accent. What could Mrs. Horawitz be hearing? Maybe she was Jewish and heard ghost accents from those with German surnames. She was friendlier with me after she knew I was born in New Jersey. She said I should visit her on Cape Cod next summer, show her my writing, meet her daughter. Maybe Mrs. Horawitz was a matchmaker too.

Before our lease expired that summer, Frank spotted a newspaper ad for a dirt-cheap house rental on Montvale Avenue in Stoneham. It turned out to be a run-down Victorian facsimile on a tree-covered knoll near Interstate Route 93. The owner said he intended to demolish it eventually so that an office building could be constructed on that site. The house had two floors, eight rooms (four of which were upstairs bedrooms), seven fireplaces and two staircases. My friend Dave signed on immediately. Frank had no trouble finding another Honeywell bachelor to round out our foursome.

I was content to be where my share of the rent was miniscule and where I had a sunny bedroom with a small writing table. With the low rent, I could quit Honeywell and let my savings sustain me for at least a year.

## My First 83 Years

That October, after a year as a reluctant mechanical engineer, I gave my notice at work. Suddenly I was sitting in my bedroom at a writing table while my housemates drove off to work each day. Each short story I wrote sounded stupid. I spent more time at the bedroom window staring down the hill at a real estate office on the other side of Montvale Avenue. I thought if this experiment were to fail, it shouldn't be because I was spinning my wheels on short stories. I should write a novel. If I failed, at least I'd fail trying something big.

My grandfather had given me his old IBM Selectric typewriter. I loved turning it on and hearing the hum of it. I loved the clack of the keys. The hard part was rolling a blank piece of paper into it and staring at the paper. Looking at a white piece of paper for a long time led to a catatonic state.

What should I write about? What should I name my protagonist? What point of view should I use?

I got up and paced the floor until I stopped in front of my bedroom window. I didn't know what good it did to stare outside. There weren't any answers in the trees or down the hill at the real estate office. On top of my bureau were six novels that my girlfriend had lent me for inspiration — some Steinbeck, Hemingway, and a book by J.D. Salinger. *The Catcher in the Rye*. Even as I began reading *Catcher*, I knew something was wrong.



## My First 83 Years

This book was written from the first person point of view, using teen slang. Was slang legal in a novel? It was just the voice of this kid Holden Caulfield — what was happening in Holden's head. It was a simple style, not as complicated as *The Caine Mutiny*.

I put an old envelope in *Catcher* to mark my place. I went back to my typewriter and turned it on again. I decided my protagonist was Charlie. I began writing.

“Last week they threw me out of Annapolis. Made me resign. The whole thing made me sick, because the Naval Academy had been an opportunity to make something out of myself, a chance to see the world — places like Barcelona. Now that it's all over, I don't know exactly what I'm going to do.

The nightmare began about nine months ago...”

I was still clacking the keys when my housemates returned. I wanted to say I'd had an epiphany but stifled the thought. They'd be bored. Industrial engineers talked about sports, not epiphanies.

The next morning I woke up early. Compelling ideas crackled in my head. I thought I was feeling what Michelangelo must have felt when he created the statue of David hundreds of years ago — that there was some inexplicable force guiding me. Maybe it was what some felt on drugs — a high that could take a person to

## My First 83 Years

unpredictable places. It was a magic exhilaration I'd never felt before. I began writing about moments of anxiety my two roommates and I had experienced just before the upperclassmen would begin hazing us.

My wives and I were sitting around our room a couple hours before the first supper, trying to act calm. But sometimes you can't help being nervous. Ted, who was trying to play it real cool, was advising Bo and me that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself, F.D.R."

Some Youngsters, third classmen, in the room across the hall, were laughing and shouting about all the crazy things they did on their first summer cruise, like getting drunk in every Mediterranean port from Athens to Barcelona and finding millions of sexy European women.

Finally it was time. And once the shit started hitting the fan, I was too harassed to worry about anything else.

It had been ten years since plebe year at Annapolis, and I wondered if I could remember all the details. I walked to the window and stared out, trying to remember. I was startled at my recollection of pain and fear, like valuables stored in a bank vault for a long time and now being examined again. I returned to the typewriter. I was creating a unique world — my own world of thoughts and words.

## My First 83 Years

Wouldn't it be funny? Holden Caulfield goes to Annapolis. If Holden felt despair at prep school, just wait until he arrived at a place where insane upperclassmen were breathing fire right in his face.

I hoped I wasn't making the fantasy mistake — that is, confusing fantasy with reality. Falling in love with the fantasy of being a writer meant that, sooner or later, the mustard was going to hit the fan and plaster my life with Grey Poupon.

But my heart told me this love of words was no mistake, that I'd found the road that was meant for me. Words could describe a civilization — either the one you knew, or one from your imagination. I wondered whether my Annapolis exposé about the inhumanity of plebe hazing might cause trouble.

But I remembered what an infamous philosopher once said, "Life is trouble, only death is not." I began typing again and slid into a reverie of troublesome memories.

After six rocky years in which life kept intervening and thirteen publishers rejected my manuscript, Annapolis Misfit was published finally as a young adult novel by Crown Publishers. The book had good reviews from organizations like Publishers Weekly, Kirkus Reviews, Booklist, and the American Library Association. Two local newspapers interviewed me, took

## My First 83 Years

photographs of me on my front steps (one with my hound dog), and produced in-depth write-ups of my road to publication. I felt overjoyed at accomplishing this goal but disappointed with the lousy compensation that Mrs. Horawitz had predicted. I knew I had to find a better way to earn a living as a writer. By the time I was married and my wife and I had a son, I had established a well-paid career as a software technical writer with two hi-tech companies. But there was never anything as exciting in that career as seeing my name on the cover of a hard-bound novel.



Achievement: Chasing a bear in my underwear

# How did you meet Shelley? When did you know you wanted to marry her?



I met Shelley about five months after Lexxie left. My wife and I had come to the conclusion that publication of my novel and the companionship of two hound dogs was not a solution to our marital problems (mostly my antisocial nature and her drinking). In September of 1974, Lexxie said she planned to drive her Ford Pinto to the west coast and asked to take Droopy for protection. I figured it was only fair that she retain custody of one of our dogs. She said Pup Dog had always been my dog and we belonged together.

So at age thirty-four, I was left with a beagle companion and a three-speed bicycle, the consequence of having given my old VW to a neighborhood kid. As writer's block set in, I talked mostly to Pup Dog while rubbing his ears and contemplating my isolation

## My First 83 Years

from the living room sofa. He gazed at me as though he understood. Before leaving for the west coast, Lexxie sent a counselor who happened to live in Fitzwilliam to see me about my depression. He thought I needed to get out of the house.

My mother was now living in her third husband's home about fifty miles from me, while I lived alone in the old lake house, my childhood home. I was unlikely as a former mechanical engineer to publish a second novel. The Annapolis Misfit seemed to now be a lifetime misfit. My second novel about a vagabond in Europe had been rejected. The more I contemplated my situation, the more painful it felt. The dog gazed at me as though he understood what the counselor had said — that I needed to get out of the house. So I rode the bike four hilly miles to the local inn and got a job there, cleaning the swimming pool and eventually tending the front desk and the bar. I rode the bike all summer until the inn's owner sold me a Ford station wagon that had "Fitzwilliam Inn" imprinted on its side and so much rust as to imply that a multitude of crazy people probably oxidized while riding in it. I signed my book for a few guests who discovered it in the inn's gift shop. A woman who came to work at the inn as one of our bartenders thought I should meet one of her housemates. Suanne shared a house rental with two other women in Troy. She had alerted one of her housemates, Shelley, to an employee at the inn who was an ex-military guy but didn't

## My First 83 Years

behave like typical military men. He was a writer.

The innkeeper's wife was a voice teacher at the New England Conservatory of Music and thought she could draw more winter customers to the inn by having one of her students give a Sunday afternoon concert there in the large parlor, where there was grand piano. A young jazz pianist, Jeff, was playing the afternoon that Suanne introduced me to her housemates, Susan and Shelley. After the concert, the two women joined Jeff and me for a drink at a small round table in the inn's small cocktail lounge, where there was a nice fire burning in the fireplace. Even before I knew that the women were studying dance therapy at Goddard College, I was intrigued by the way Shelley moved with such a fluid and graceful way. But she seemed to converse more with Jeff, and I seemed to converse more with Susan before we all said goodbye for the evening.

Afterward Susan told Shelley that, if she wasn't interested in Kurt, she was "going after him." But a day or two later, Shelley stopped by the inn in the evening for a drink. I was just going off duty while Suanne had arrived to tend the bar. So I joined Shelley for a drink and conversation at a small round table in front of the flaming fireplace. After awhile I asked her if she wanted to follow me to Laurel Lake for a short visit to my house to see where I lived and to meet Pup Dog. At my house, Shelley was most interested in all the books in my bookcases, and so we discussed

## My First 83 Years

this book and that book and a few that we had both read. At the door when she was about to leave, we kissed. I had the feeling then that Shelley was someone special.

When I stopped at their Troy house on my way back from a March 1st birthday get-together with my family in Derry (my sister Donna and I shared the same birthday three years apart), I asked Shelley if she wanted to climb Gap Mountain with me on the weekend. Gap was little more than a medium-size hill and, at the time, had a little snow on the ground. At the top, I took off my shoes and danced in the snow like a photo I'd seen recently of Robert Kennedy running barefoot in the sand with his dog. I felt joyful. I said I wanted to marry her. But Shelley pointed out that I was still recovering from a traumatic divorce and she was still working on her master's degree in dance therapy. Also, our part-time subsistence jobs at the inn (she'd begun working part-time there) would be a shaky way to begin anything of that magnitude.

Shelley had unusual empathy for injured souls and a beagle dog with sad eyes. She drove a faded VW Beetle similar to the one that Pup Dog had ridden in with me so often, and when Shelley visited my house again and prepared to leave, Pup jumped into her car and refused to get out. It was as though he was telling me she was the one. And he was right. Soon after our commitment to one another, she made him a huge pillow with a blue denim



## My First 83 Years

cover that went on all our travels and became his sleeping spot.

It took a few more years to iron out various complications. I had failed to write a coherent second novel while working at the inn and needed a better source of income if I was to marry again and support a family. For awhile I worked in Peterborough as an editor for Wayne Green on a new magazine called Kilobaud. Then I followed Shelley to Boston, where she had switched her degree goal to the more marketable occupational therapy while studying at Boston University. I took temp jobs and did a state-sponsored night course in computer programming. My course work helped me get a well-paid job as a software technical writer at a dynamic high tech company called LTX Corporation. Three years later I landed an even higher-paid job at Digital Equipment Corporation in Littleton, Massachusetts, only an hour's drive from the old house at Laurel Lake.

One of the happiest moments for me during this time was our July, 1981, marriage on top of a beautiful drive-up mountain, Pack Monadnock, where friends and family gathered and a Boston minister who had a summer house at Laurel Lake presided over the ceremony. An informal reception took place at the lake house with outdoor croquet matches and a badminton setup for those young enough to want to run around.

## My First 83 Years

After graduating with a master's degree from BU, Shelley became an occupational therapist at New England Rehab Hospital and later at the Massachusetts Hospital School. We wanted to move back to Laurel Lake, and when I began working at Digital in Littleton, Massachusetts, a one-hour commute from the lake house seemed like a possibility. After enduring surgeries for endometriosis and two ectopic pregnancies during this time in Boston, Shelley was miraculously sustaining a viable pregnancy (our last chance) and ready to quit her job. We moved back to New Hampshire in the summer of 1987, a few months before Jesse was born. It had been twelve years since we first met that Sunday at the Fitzwilliam Inn.

# Have you ever given or been the recipient of a random act of kindness?



A random act of kindness is an unplanned action meant to offer kindness toward a stranger or an acquaintance. During a long lifetime, I have performed many acts of kindness for others but have probably received more than I've given, although my memory is tilted more toward those who have acted toward me with a generous heart.

When I was seven, my family moved from New Jersey to New Hampshire in the autumn of 1947. The town of Fitzwilliam placed me in a second-grade class at the school near the train depot, even though I'd already completed half the second grade in New Jersey. After a couple weeks, the teacher there decided to move me to the village school house into the third grade. I knew no one there and was smaller and younger than those kids. I felt

## My First 83 Years

anxious. Then a girl named Pauline passed me a small piece of paper that stated, “Julia and I love you.” I glanced at them with a smile. They smiled back.

When I was sixteen and an assistant counselor at Camp Takodah, I befriended a new kid in my cabin who seemed lonely and isolated. His name was Harold and he said he was living this summer with his mother in Fitzwilliam at Laurel Lake. He was thrilled when I said I lived at Laurel Lake too and that we should hang out together after camp. We did, and when I introduced him to my younger sister, Donna, who was his age, he was even happier. His mother was Christine McGuire of the famous singing McGuire sisters. She sometimes invited me to dinner and let me drive their Cadillac on teenage excursions with Harold. Befriending a lonely kid was an act of kindness in which I received an adult reciprocation that was totally unexpected.

When I was at Annapolis flight indoctrination the summer of 1960 in Pensacola, Florida, my roommate and I decided to hitchhike to Mobile, Alabama (about 60 miles), on one of our few free days. On a street in Mobile, an elderly man approached us and asked about our uniforms. When we explained who we were and that ours was just a brief adventure, he asked if we had any place to stay that night. When we said no, he wrote down his address and said he would leave his front door open. We were welcome to sleep on his living-room sofas. Later that hot night,

## My First 83 Years

although the house was dark, the screen door was unlocked. We slept on his sofas and left early the next morning.

When I was at Michigan State University and learned that my housemate was from Massachusetts but did not enjoy Christmas at his home because his mother had died when he was younger and his stepmother didn't like him, I invited him to spend Christmas with my blended family in Derry, New Hampshire. He enjoyed the attention of the women in my family. John was blonde and unusually handsome. My sisters fell in love with him.

When I completed my engineering degree at Michigan State and returned to work in Boston, my sister Donna was living in an apartment on Beacon Hill with another single woman and working in the business offices of an airline at Logan Airport. When I invited her to ski with me at Gunstock Mountain over the Christmas holidays, I thought she'd gained a little weight while I was away. It wasn't until two months later that she called to say needed a ride to the hospital. She was having a baby. I raced to her apartment and drove her to the nearest hospital — Massachusetts General. They said they didn't deliver babies. Go to Boston City Hospital. Somehow we made it there in time. About all that I remember at the hospital was a social worker telling me Donna intended to give up the baby for adoption. I said I was worried about my sister. Donna had told me on the way that she'd had a bad experience with a doctor and thus had

## My First 83 Years

had no prenatal care. The experience made me feel as though, as a protective brother, I had somehow let her down. Forty years later a woman called me to say she thought we were related. I said she was welcome to visit us but that her mother, Donna, had died of cancer ten years earlier. I felt the only kind thing I could do now was to have her meet the family she had never known.

On a rolling ferry in Europe, a young Norwegian woman, who was a bit tipsy from perhaps the wine she'd had with her bus group at dinner, began a conversation with me. When she became ill, I helped her to the ship's toilets and steadied her while she was sick. Before she left with her bus group, she gave me her address and phone number and said to call her from my cousin's apartment in Oslo and that she would treat me to a dinner at her fiord cabin in a small town nearby, where she worked as a reporter for a local newspaper. I did, and my evening at Ingrid's place was one of my first writings.

When next I drove my VW Beetle to a hostel in Copenhagen, I met Ilan Joffe, an Israeli civil engineer who hoped to find work. Because navigating the city was difficult on public transportation, I drove Ilan to companies where he dropped off his résumé. Ilan looked professional in his dark suit. Before leaving Copenhagen with two American girls who needed a ride to Germany, I drove Ilan to his last interview. Years later, Ilan discovered me on the Internet from his home in Israel and said

## My First 83 Years

that my transporting him to that last company had been his final chance before returning to Israel and had resulted in his getting a job in Copenhagen for a few years. “You saved my life,” Ian wrote.

In Germany I drove to Frankfurt and showed up at the door of my sister Karla’s pen pal, Lotte, and her family. She and her two teenage brothers took turns showing me all the sights. Then I drove to Switzerland to what my guidebook said was a popular ski lodge in the small town of Leysin. There I met a Qantas Airlines pilot who said I should stay at his apartment when I got to London. Just before New Years, I left the chalet with two Canadian boys whom I’d offered a ride to Zermatt. They wanted to ski at the Matterhorn.

In Athens, I showed up at Lili Paganelli’s family’s apartment with an American friend (Lili’s cousin in Vienna had given me her address). Lili and her mother invited us in for an afternoon coffee. When John and I showed up the next day at the family home of Yani Simineodas (an address from my Israeli friend in Copenhagen), Yani welcomed us and had his mother serve us wine. A couple nights later, Yani and his friends took John and me to a local café, where the Greek dancing was as wild as I’d dreamed.

## My First 83 Years

When I needed to report a break-in to my car, a young couple who acted as interpreters at the police station in Salerno invited us to stay with them. My friend Mathlene and I spent two days as guests of the couple at their rented seaside villa.

After arranging to ship my VW from Marseille to New York, I took the ferry to Southampton in England and hitched a ride with a kindly truck driver to London, where I called the number of the Australian pilot who at the Swiss chalet five months ago had invited me to stay with him. No answer. Then I tried the number he'd given me for his girlfriend Meg. She said Nick was out on a flight, but she'd pick me up in Nick's Mini Cooper. She was in the middle of moving, so I lugged some boxes for her and took a shower at her apartment. Meg cooked me supper and said I should be comfortable sleeping on her sofa. In the morning Meg asked me to drive Nick's Mini Cooper to the Mayfair Hotel to pick him up. I stayed then with Nick at his apartment on Baker Street.

Trying to hitch rides in England, I'd been advised to hold out a little American flag. I felt despondent that my ship to New York wouldn't leave for a month. After eleven months on the road, I was tired of traveling. But an affable Englishman gave me a ride and treated me to a mug of ale at a local pub. Almost as soon as I reached Wales, a family picked me up, took me to their house for lunch, and then drove me to a spot on the other side of town



## My First 83 Years

where I'd have the best chance for another ride. Those who picked me up wanted to know about life in America. After a ferry to Ireland, I was standing beside the road to Galway when a car sped past and then screeched to a halt. I ran up to the car. The driver said, "If I didn't see the American flag, lad, I'd never stopped. I've got the terrible hangover." Then I got picked up by a Swedish family with small kids who wanted to know about the United States. I felt much kindness during my hitch-hiking days.

When I was seventy-five, I needed a surgeon to save my life from a cancerous tumor in my colon. At Massachusetts General Hospital, a smiling little woman with a long skirt and white doctor's coat entered the examining room and cupped her hands around one of mine. In what sounded like a Slavic accent, she said, "I know you don't want to do this again, but I would like to see the enemy. I promise I'll be gentle. Then we can form a plan to defeat the enemy." After she examined my lower colon with a scope that displayed the enemy on an adjacent screen, I sat slumped on the edge of the examining table. She slid toward me on a rolling stool until her knees were against my legs. She held my hands in hers. "I know you're scared," she said. "Try not to worry. We're going to defeat the enemy." Her kindness made me feel as though she saw more in me than a damaged patient and that her empathy was genuine and loving. After my surgery, knowing my love for birds, Shelley's mom sent cards with

## My First 83 Years

bluebirds and cardinals, noting her love for me and those of her friends who had me in their prayers. Later, in her last year of life, I mailed her a large envelope each week — a loving note on a colorful card and one of my family memoirs. She said she looked forward to reading what I sent each week.

When my neighbor Kitty broke a leg on an overseas trip and would be hospitalized for a time, I mowed her lawn. When I was having chest pains (diagnosed as a heart attack later) on a Sunday night, Kitty drove me to the hospital and called Shelley, who was currently away on an extended trip. Even though only one person was allowed to visit me after a stent was placed in one of my arteries at a larger hospital late that night, both Jesse and Ling made the long drive there to support me. Jesse was by my bed with words of encouragement as the anesthesia wore off and made the long drive from his home in succeeding days to sit with me in the hospital while I recovered. Two surgeons called Shelley to discuss my condition and progress. When I returned home, I received comforting emails from friends and family. Shelley's friend Joan sent me a napping blanket similar to the one she'd used years ago during her recovery from breast cancer surgery. My niece Keri sent me a care package filled with heart-healthy treats and colorful pajamas. How fortunate, I thought, that I was receiving kindness from so many.

## My First 83 Years

For years I've done a lot of small things that I hope were kind: Donated metal goods to my neighbor Richard so that he could cash it in at a recycling center, books to the town library, and money to local and international organizations that help those less fortunate. I try to keep my bird feeders filled with seeds and my house filled with love — like doing the laundry, cleaning the kitchen every night, and often doing tasks that are not usually my responsibility but, without mentioning it, knowing my intent is an act of kindness.

## My First 83 Years



Doesn't this look like a kind person?

# What is one of the strangest things that has ever happened to you?



One of the strangest things that ever happened to me occurred a few weeks after my graduation from Michigan State University.

My talks with job recruiters at MSU that last summer semester had gone well, although I realized I didn't have what it took to be a highly coveted mechanical design engineer. Luckily for me, big companies like Shell, Mobil, and IBM were looking for technical graduates who could be sales engineers. I received offers from Shell and Mobil after interviews at their Detroit offices but finally accepted an offer from the soft-spoken manager of IBM's office in Lansing — a slight, smiling man who seemed genuinely enthusiastic about hiring me. The IBM salesmen wore suits with vests and acted as though selling IBM punch-card machines for data processing was an easy job. The sales engineer who took me

## My First 83 Years

to lunch drove a shiny black Chevy Corvette. I could see myself in a sports car.

Also, if I worked in Lansing, I'd be near John, my college housemate, while he completed his senior year. It was an easy decision. When the summer term was over, I'd go to IBM's Detroit training facility for eight weeks and then return to their Lansing office, presumably in a new sports car.

My mother never said what she thought about my going to work for IBM, known in industry circles as "Big Blue," only that years ago my grandfather had been acquainted with Tom Watson, the founder of IBM. Since my grandfather had noted that Tom Watson was a teetotaler, I assumed their relationship had not been an intimate one. And I suspected that Tom Watson, Jr., who ran the company when I joined, would not be throwing any keg parties for IBM trainees.

I thought my mother believed she could stop worrying about me once I became an IBMer. She had begun to see in me some adult characteristics that would lead to a normal life. But if you distrusted everyone as I did, particularly authoritative men and seductive women, normal was a distorted vision.

I was living with a group of IBM trainees in a company-paid hotel with efficiency suites. I had a good salary, and IBM paid a meal allowance that I saved by cooking my own meals. In my

## My First 83 Years

free time I visited new car showrooms and fell in love with a red British sports car called a Triumph Spitfire. I thought life was good until I learned the affable manager who hired me in Lansing had transferred to a new IBM location and that his replacement was coming to Detroit to take me to lunch. The new manager knew nothing about me, so I figured his intent was to size me up. Unlike the manager who'd hired me, this tall one had the sour look of a man with hemorrhoids. His questions to me seemed obligatory rather than arising from any genuine curiosity. Our conversation seemed stiff and awkward, causing me to worry about this situation after he left. I tried to suppress any anxiety, but this man had disdainful eyes. I didn't trust him.

Then I began to doubt a career selling IBM's electronic punch-card machines. Punch cards were boring, even if the punched holes had meaning for card readers and computers. I thought maybe I'd stay at IBM for a year and then find something else.

I studied hard until the IBM training managers told our class what the IBM rules were. Sales engineers should drive a GM car because General Motors was IBM's biggest customer. If we took a customer out to lunch, we should not drink alcohol. If the customer coerced us into having a drink, we should call the office after lunch and say we were going home because we had a drink. One slouch-shouldered manager said we should stand up

## My First 83 Years

straight, always wear a dark suit, and take notes in class. When I heard the last rule, I deliberately left my pencil untouched on the desk while the others picked up their pencils and opened their notebooks. My mind drifted off.

The rules pissed me off. It felt as though I were back in grade school. When IBM interviewed a prospect, I thought they should give the candidate an “IBM Regulations” book that let a stupid sucker like me know that authoritarian organizations like IBM and the Naval Academy each had a rule book that must be considered a person’s bible of life.

I thought, To hell with it. I’m not about to live my life by Old Man Watson’s rules.

I bought the red Triumph Spitfire, a two-seat convertible that gave off a growl when I accelerated. I drove through the streets of Detroit with the top down and the breeze across my face. People noticed when my red car growled. I wouldn’t be squeezing many GM customers into this car unless someone wanted to sit on someone’s lap.

As if the rules from the slouch-shouldered manager weren’t bad enough, I was having trouble with a female trainee who wore wool suits and walked with a side sway like a penguin. She had brassy orange hair and heavy orange lipstick. Orange was a good color only on fruit. She liked to drink in the evening at one of



## My First 83 Years

Detroit's jazz joints with a small group of us men. Maybe because I was one of only two single men in the training class, she always sat next to me. When she had too much of the hard stuff, she leaned over and aimed her orange lips toward me. I turned away discreetly, disappearing to the men's room when she became too insistent. I did a solo dance on top of a table because the band was gyrating on top of the bar and the IBM trainees dared me to do it. The dance got me away briefly from the protruding orange lips.

Friday was the last day of training class, and a secretary told me I needed to meet with the head of the program. It was a sunny November morning, almost noon. I was looking forward to driving my Spitfire back to Lansing and seeing John again. I came into an office with glass windows that overlooked the city. The manager told me to have a seat.

The manager said, "We've evaluated the work of all the trainees in the program. The trainees who've been at IBM longer than new hires like yourself obviously have an advantage because they already understand IBM products and services. We appreciate the effort you've put in while you were here, but in the end we decided your talents aren't really suited to our work."

While he went on blah blah blah about six week's severance pay and expenses back to Lansing, I felt suddenly pissed off.

## My First 83 Years

I said real loud, “You mean I’m fired? You mean to tell me this training program was nothing more than a trial period?”

He glanced nervously at his open door. “Please keep your voice down.” He jumped up and rushed to close the door.

“If I’d known this training stint was nothing more than a trial, I never would have taken this job. You don’t judge a person in eight weeks.”

He returned to his desk. “We try to make a fair evaluation on what a trainee’s prospects will be for a long career with IBM. And we’re not saying you don’t have talent, just that it doesn’t seem to be what a sales engineer needs to be successful with IBM.”

What they didn’t want was a nonconformist, but he wasn’t honest enough to say I was fired because I bought a British sports car and danced on a table in a bar and didn’t take notes in class. I felt like saying, “You’re a lying sonofabitch.” Instead I said, “I haven’t changed in eight weeks. I’m the same person your manager evaluated then. Does this have anything to do with the new manager in Lansing?”

“Not at all,” he said. “Lansing makes its evaluations, we make ours. We just feel you’ll have more success somewhere else.”

Guys who used the proverbial “we” really pissed me off, but I had nothing more to say to him. I should have been happy to be

## My First 83 Years

out, but I wanted to leave on my own terms. I wanted the satisfaction of telling those stuffed shirts to shove it. I wished I hadn't felt rejected again.

I got up and left his office. People in the outer offices were rushing around with worried looks, talking in hushed tones. One woman was crying. I asked a secretary about the commotion. She said, "President Kennedy's been shot. They think he's dead."

I went to find a TV. I saw people crying, heard frightened voices, as though a nation was coming apart. I didn't have the luxury of feeling sorry for myself, for being shot down by IBM at the very same moment that an assassin was taking down the President. At that instant, I saw the two simultaneous tragedies as a strange coincidence.

I packed my bags and drove to East Lansing and talked about the President's tragedy with John, who had taken my spot at the big house where I stayed during the summer. I crashed in a sleeping bag on the floor of John's bedroom, where I had nightmares about a man chasing me with a gun. I could never see the face of the man with the gun, so I always assumed it was my father. But John suggested maybe the faceless man symbolized my fear of death. I said I wasn't afraid to die, but maybe I was.

I called my mother and said I'd be home for Thanksgiving, that things hadn't worked out at IBM. I asked if I could stay with her

## My First 83 Years

and my stepfather until I found a job in Boston. Her voice was affirmative and welcoming, as it always had been when I had trouble. She refrained from asking what happened and said she was glad I'd be working closer to home.

On the drive out of Michigan, I had time to think about another failure. I don't know why I was seduced by big names like Mobil and IBM. If I had any conviction about my character, I would know that selling for IBM wouldn't be much different than the time I tried unsuccessfully to sell encyclopedias. Selling anything required a lot of bullshit.

The snow began blowing off Lake Ontario. I was somewhere between Hamilton and Buffalo. Trailer trucks passed me and threw up a wall of wet snow that thumped the side of the little red car and covered my windshield. I was driving blind, I was going to die. I exited the highway in Buffalo and found a motel. In my room, I was shaken. John had been right. I was afraid to die.

I thought life could be brief. Was that what President Kennedy's assassination and my IBM downfall were trying to tell me? What if I were to die young? What were the things I'd regret missing while I was alive? I'd regret that I never had a beautiful woman who was meant to ride in my Spitfire with the top down and the wind blowing our hair. I'd regret that I never got to lie on the

## My First 83 Years

beach in Nice or Cannes and drink French wine. I'd regret missing beer festivals in Germany and the Coliseum in Rome and the Parthenon in Athens. I'd regret never reaching Florence to see Michelangelo's statue of David.

I decided I was going on a vagabond trip in Europe before I turned thirty. It made sense to have a plan for each decade of your life. Living and dying with regrets made no sense. I slept well, maybe because I had become determined to accomplish my dreams. I felt as though my traumatic experience at the same moment as Kennedy's death meant more than I was seeing.

In the morning the motel parking lot was plowed, and I brushed snow off the Triumph Spitfire. I pulled away from the motel, quickly finding the entrance ramp to the New York State Thruway. I pushed the accelerator hard. The engine growled as I sped east into the rising sun.

Returning to Boston and spending a year in Europe would change my life in so many ways that I had not yet imagined, it was easy for me to believe in my later years that my new direction then was somehow preordained and begun by the death of a President that I had revered during the time he'd brought honor to our country.

## My First 83 Years



Not knowing how many trees Jesse will climb

# How did you feel when Jesse was born?



Doctors had said the chances of Shelley bearing a child were slim. She was thirty-six and had had multiple surgeries for endometriosis and ectopic pregnancies. I was forty-seven and possibly too damaged from my own father to be a good dad.

But then some miracle occurred. The fetus survived this time.

In Shelley's seventh month, we moved from an apartment near her doctors and the hospital in Boston to my abandoned childhood house in New Hampshire, a place I thought might still be cursed. (It's difficult to know when curses are gone.) I was sure the baby would be born in our car during the two-hour drive to the hospital. Childbirth classes had had nothing to say about a father pulling out a slimy baby. I was just supposed to chant "push-push" to provide the illusion that I was helping. Shelley thought I worried too much. She said, "First-time mothers

## My First 83 Years

always take a long time to deliver.”

Shelley’s water broke just after midnight. She said, “I’m going to change into a dry nightgown so you can take my picture.”

“WHAT??? I’m not taking pictures now.”

“You promised you’d take my picture while I was pregnant. I want you to take one now before we go.”

“There’s no time. We’ve got to get going.”

Leaving the room, she said, “It’ll only take a minute. I’ll get the camera.”

When a woman loses water suddenly, does all reason drain out too? How could she be adamant about photos when we should be shooting down the highway? The F-word rushed to my lips, forcing me to swallow it before its resonance proved I was unfit to be an understanding husband.

She returned in a white cotton nightgown, handed me the camera, and turned for a profile pose.

Nineteen hours later, her doctors at Brigham and Women’s Hospital were frustrated that the baby refused to turn its head and emerge. A reluctant child resided inside a stubborn woman. The baby’s intransigence was a sign of the larger problem. I would soon be responsible for a stubborn child — probably for



## My First 83 Years

twenty years. It was a nerve-wracking thought.

Doctor Hernandez, a small woman from Shelley's OB-GYN group, consulted another female physician, who reached in and touched the baby's head. The two women moved away and talked. Doctor Hernandez returned and said, "Shelley, let's get that baby out of there."

I balanced on a stool eight feet from the operating table, glad I was far enough away so as not to see blood. Doctor Hernandez grumbled as she cut through layers of scar tissue from Shelley's previous surgeries. She said, "Shelley, don't come to me for your next Cesarean." If not for the anesthesia, Shelley might have punched her in the mouth. Doctors were supposed to reassure the half-conscious mother, not say go somewhere else next time. But the sarcastic surgeon finally wrestled Jesse into this world at 9:38 P.M. A nurse cleaned him, wrapped him in a soft blanket and knit cap, and placed him in my arms. Holding him seemed magical and spiritual, as if loving a baby was the most powerful emotion on Earth.

I hated having the nurses take him away for the night. I stayed with Shelley in the recovery room and then later in her small private room, where the nurses rolled in a narrow cot that they squeezed in next to her bed. Because she was still groggy on Saturday, I held Jesse most of the day. The look and feel of him

## My First 83 Years

sleeping in the crook of my left arm was a joy beyond anything I'd imagined. I knew his nursing and natural bond with Shelley would soon diminish my role. But I relished these initial days with him. I hated leaving the hospital Monday morning for my job. I rushed back to the hospital in the afternoon with the news that my supervisor, a woman whose own husband didn't help with the kids, said I should stay at the hospital and learn things like how to wash the baby.

A nurse who had obviously held many slippery babies demonstrated how to give him a bath. Tricky job, I thought. Like trying to grip the slimy frogs I'd caught as a kid. I wasn't sure I wanted to touch a wet seven-pounder. The bath was probably something Shelley should do.

Then why did I volunteer a few weeks after we got home? In a burst of warped reasoning, I said, "If I give him his bath, it'll be a break for you and a chance for me to do at least one significant thing with him when I get home from work." Perhaps I said it because Shelley looked as though she'd spent each day on a cattle drive. I hoped she didn't regret suspending her career as an occupational therapist for life as a full-time, nurse-on-demand mother. She had said she wanted to be with our child for a couple years before working again.

## My First 83 Years

Getting Jesse into the bath was relatively simple. I hoisted him into a mustard-colored dishpan in our kitchen sink. We played with an assortment of plastic cups and old shampoo bottles. I blew Wonder Bubbles through a magic wand; he tried to catch them as they floated down. We laughed.

But almost overnight he could walk. So then I lured him into the bathroom by blowing Wonder Bubbles in the doorway between our kitchen and adjoining bathroom until he came running to catch them. Sometimes I offered new bath toys, like a turkey baster that squirted water. Once I sat with Jesse and watched a video in which Raffi, the children's Pied Piper, sang about the "joys of taking a bath." BUB-BUB-BUBBLY BUBBLES. I sang along while Jesse grinned and swung his arms to the music. When the song ended, I said, "Time for your bath, Jesse."

He grinned at me. "No bath, Daddy."

He didn't articulate his reason for rejecting the bath on that particular night. I didn't understand that toddlers are the pillars of a fierce "no" and "won't" culture that drives them to irrational acts and their parents to the brink of desperation.

He agreed then to a shower with me, maybe because it was something new — men taking a shower together. But his interest didn't last. Not long after satisfying his curiosity about showers, he wanted to take baths again and, finally, that Mommy should

## My First 83 Years

be the bath-giver.

Having been rejected at bath time, I took over the reading of bedtime stories. Despite his enthusiasm for the books I read to him, he insisted that one of the stories be a new made-up story from my imagination. One night he said, "Daddy, does your head hurt?" I asked him why he said that. He said, "So many books inside your head." What hurt was the pressure to think up a new story each night. Often I felt stuck at "Once upon a time," a side effect perhaps of the tired mind, or just a depleted imagination.

I never understood the dimension and intricacy of raising a child until Jesse was born. Abraham Lincoln had said, "A child is a person who is going to carry on what you have started. He is going to sit where you are sitting, and when you are gone, attend to those things which you think are important...the fate of humanity is in his hands."

I was anxious about the fate of anything being in Jesse's hands. I didn't see how his passion for jumping off high places and racing around as though his pants were on fire was going to further the state of humanity.

While looking through photo albums around this time, I found a forgotten letter that I'd written when Shelley took infant Jesse to Ohio to attend her grandmother's funeral.

## My First 83 Years

### LETTER TO MY SON AT FOUR MONTHS AND FIVE DAYS

Sunday, February 14, 1988

Dear Jesse,

Today is Valentine's Day. You are 4 months and 5 days old today. I have loved you passionately for all of these days. I love you today, and I wish that you and your mama were here. I want to hold you close to me today, to feel your baby cheek next to mine, to have you grin at me like you do when you see my face or when I pump your little legs or when I sing foolish made-up songs to you. You are the little boy who had no chance to be born. But God prevailed, and you are now the miracle of my life.

When I think of you as a miracle, tears always come to my eyes. I was a man who did not believe in miracles. And yet there you were. As a child I often prayed for miracles, and then at some point I just did not pray for them anymore. Disappointment perhaps. Not wanting to be disappointed again. Someday I will tell you about that.

My love for Jesse has grown in more ways than I could have imagined at the time I wrote down my feelings that Valentine's Day. But I don't remember ever showing him the letter.

When Jesse was old enough to ride a school bus, my company offered an early retirement package that included nine months

## My First 83 Years

of pay, allowing me to stay home until I found another job. I was watching The Oprah Winfrey Show one day when Toni Morrison was Oprah's featured guest, discussing her book, *The Bluest Eye*. During the interview, Oprah paraphrased something Morrison had said earlier: "Do your eyes light up when your child walks into the room?"

Not always, I thought, especially not when Jesse was in a bad mood. But I always listened at three o'clock for the rumble of the school bus. I'd move to a window. My eyes would light up as he crossed the road in front of the bus and walked up the driveway. When he came through the door, I'd hug him for the one exhilarating moment that reminded me why loving this child was the most important thing I would ever do.

# What would you consider your motto?



**W**hen you are afraid of something, move directly toward it.

Although I've adopted other personal sayings through the years, this belief about battling fear seems to come up the most. As a child with an abusive father, I grew up in a dysfunctional family with many fears that I tried to hide or suppress. Over time I learned that when I tried things that caused anxiety, I had less fear.

Years after Dad's death, the sound of the phone still startles me. I guess my brain thinks he's calling from the grave and threatening again to come home and kill us. Now a modern phone displays a caller ID when it rings. When I don't recognize the caller, my brain seems to decide it's either telemarketing, scams, or Dad's incarnation that now goes by the name Donald Trump. If I used the phone more, maybe my brain would calm

## My First 83 Years

down.

One of Eleanor Roosevelt's more famous quotes is, "You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, 'I have lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.' You must do the thing you think you cannot do." In her quote she specifically says, the things YOU THINK you cannot do. These things are based on your fears and beliefs about yourself. You may think someone else can do it, but not you.

Later I found a similar Ralph Waldo Emerson quote: "Always do what you are afraid to do."

After one session with the Keene High School choir at the beginning of my sophomore year, I regretted that I'd signed up with the idea that singing might be fun. I sang by ear mostly and was afraid Mister Cook, the choir director, would shout at me when he discovered I couldn't read notes. Even worse, I didn't want to take private voice lessons just because Mister Cook said everyone in the choir was encouraged to do so. But my mother said I should sign up for the voice lessons.

Mrs. Garro was a tall stringy woman. She said "I think if we work hard on 'Mother Machree' and 'Kitty of Coleraine,' you'll be ready to sing those songs on talent night."



## My First 83 Years

“What do you mean, talent night?” I said.

“All of my students and others in the music department perform in the auditorium on talent night.”

“You mean solo?”

“Sure. You’re the best natural tenor to come along in a long time. You can show your parents and other parents how good you are.”

“I can’t do that. I’d be too scared.”

“Everyone has a little stage fright. Especially the first time. But I guarantee you’ll get over it. You’ll do a fine job.”

“Do I really have to do this?”

“You don’t have to, but I’m sure Mister Cook and your parents will be disappointed if you don’t. And I’d like people to hear your voice.”

I’m not sure why I agreed to do it. The thought of singing solo in front of an audience was a nightmare. But I survived the performance and subsequent nights when I sang as a soloist on choir concert tours. I was less anxious at the beginning of senior year when I had to speak in the auditorium about my trip to Boys Nation in Washington, D. C. as one of New Hampshire’s two representatives. About the time I finished seven months at a prep school and would soon enter Annapolis, the high school

## My First 83 Years

secretary called and asked if I would return to speak at their assembly. A year earlier the school principal had said he doubted I could make it into Annapolis. I actually felt comfortable for once, standing on that stage as an Annapolis man in front of the principal and those teachers who thought my poor senior grades were the bones of a failure. But I couldn't reveal my personal obstacles (my parents' turbulent divorce) or say how boring and sour most of my teachers were. Or how the school had failed to ask if I had a problem that was affecting my grades.

I endured the fear that came with being hazed and shouted at during my first year at Annapolis. But in my third year, a strange feeling seeped into me. Life at Annapolis seemed empty, as if someone had turned the "off" switch in my head. I didn't feel like studying anymore. So I stopped. It wasn't really a conscious decision, just something that happened one night and continued to the next, as if something inside me had become disconnected. I played Solitaire at my desk every night. My two roommates said if I didn't study, I'd flunk out. It seemed as though my mind had become a dangerous place, a cesspool of illogical thoughts. That choking sensation I'd felt as a plebe had returned. I didn't have the maturity then to overcome the shame and fear of quitting a place that most people thought was so prestigious. Thus, the Academy had to make the decision for me.

## My First 83 Years

After graduating from Michigan State University, I finally became mature enough to develop my motto and articulate it. While visiting my former college housemate, I said, “When I’ve finished paying off my car and a college loan from my mother and stepfather, I want to save enough to bum around Europe for a year — get enough time away from the States to think about whether my place is here or in a more civilized society. Maybe find out what I should do with my life.”

“Are you going to travel with anyone?”

“I thought about going with someone. But I figure if do it alone, I’ll force myself to meet Europeans. I need to conquer my fears...be more uninhibited, like Zorba the Greek. In the movie, he says, “Life is trouble. Only death is not. To be alive is to undo your belt and look for trouble.” I knew then that moving toward my fear would give me courage.

And yet a year later, when I heard the first engine roar on my Icelandic plane from New York to Luxembourg, I felt the turmoil in my stomach. As the plane moved onto the runway, I smiled through tight lips. I was anxious but thought it was the fear that came from testing myself against the unknown, against the possibility of confronting trouble. Sure, I didn’t have a hotel reservation in Luxembourg, but I was moving toward an anxiety that convinced me that I could find the way. I had a new car

## My First 83 Years

waiting for me at the Volkswagen factory in Germany. And I had a pen pal who'd take the train there with me.

When I returned from Europe on a student ship a year later, I was anxious about my decision to give up an engineering career to become a writer. But I felt compelled to try it after working another engineering job for a year to replenish my savings. After quitting, I began writing a novel full-time in a rundown house that I shared with three other guys. Had my girlfriend not been pressuring me to get married, I might not have felt she would dump me as she had two years ago when I said I didn't want to get married until I found a purpose in life. I was frightened of marriage but knew I needed to commit some day. And Zorba had said when asked if he was married, "Am I not a man? And is a man not stupid? I'm a man, so I'm married. Wife, children, house, everything. The full catastrophe." So I moved toward a situation that I would be unable to sustain. After six rocky years in which life kept intervening and thirteen publishers rejected my manuscript, *Annapolis Misfit* was published finally as a young adult novel by Crown Publishers. By then Lexxie and I realized that publication of my novel and the companionship of two dogs was not a solution to our marital problems (my antisocial nature and her drinking). I was afraid of divorce but forced myself to declare it. I was anxious about change but forced myself to confront it.

## My First 83 Years

A reporter came to interview me about publishing the novel and produced a profile for the local newspaper. I was overjoyed at overcoming the anxiety while accomplishing this goal but disappointed with the lousy compensation that my writing teacher had predicted. I had to find a better way to earn a living as a writer. By the time I was married again, I'd established a career as a software technical writer with two hi-tech companies. Having had the experience of marriage once, I was not afraid when I married Shelley. I was only slightly anxious when Jesse was born but had no desire to move toward a similar event, considering the precariousness of Shelley's four surgeries and ectopic pregnancies prior to this C-section birth.

I've often thought my fear of death began during an autumn foliage drive when I was eight. Ignoring the colorful trees, Mom implied Dad was failing as a beer salesman, saying she was having trouble paying the bills. The rationales for spending or not spending escalated until Dad's shoulders snapped back, and he said, "So you're saying it's my fault then. So you're saying it's all my fault. Okay. If I'm such a failure, I see no point in living. I'm going to kill us all." He then jammed the gas pedal to the floor and accelerated our old Pontiac down the road, causing the steering wheel to vibrate. I tried to comfort my whimpering sister by saying he was just trying to scare us. Ultimately he let up on the gas, deciding he didn't want to die after all.

## My First 83 Years

Now my fear of death revolves around the question of whether God allows mentally-ill people into heaven and, if so, would I have to meet Dad again there. A middle-aged Baptist woman wrote Dear Abby and said, “I believe when I die I will go to heaven. My problem is, if going to heaven means being reunited with my parents and other family members, then I don’t want to go! The idea of spending eternity with them is more than I can stand, but I don’t want to go to hell, either. Any thoughts?” Dear Abby replied, “Yes. When you reach the pearly gates, talk this over with St. Peter. Perhaps he would be willing to place you in a different wing than the one your parents and other family members are staying in. And in the meantime, discuss this with your minister.”

Bad advice! It was probably the woman’s minister who was pushing the heaven reunion business in the first place. I thought St. Peter should have a talk with Abby about blowing off this woman’s dilemma with the facetious quip about requesting “a different wing.” That was like getting healthy food tips from Paula Deen.

I suppose reading about death is one way of moving toward it. A book that calmed me the most was one on reincarnation by Brian Weiss, the true story of a prominent psychiatrist, his young patient Catherine, and the past-life therapy that changed both their lives —Many Lives, Many Masters. Another way was to care

## My First 83 Years

for my aging mother during the last twelve years of her life. In doing so, I became more familiar with her fears and medical problems and less anxious about my waning years of life.

Another life slogan that I might have chosen:

### Be Grateful

Although I didn't recognize its value until old age, each morning I write down in a small notebook five or six things I'm grateful for on this particular day. Doing so reminds me how fortunate I am to still be here. I just wish I had more time...without any anxiety.

## My First 83 Years



# What qualities do you most value in your better half?



## Courage

My brother-in-law said our son wouldn't have friends because Shelley and I didn't believe in spanking. Without the firm hand of discipline, he said, quoting the biblical "spare the rod and spoil the child," our toddler was destined to grow up a spoiled only-child, implying that spoiled kids have trouble with relationships.

I was surprised Shelley didn't strike Jesse's virtuous uncle with a rod. It was risky telling a courageous woman who'd had surgeries for endometriosis, two ectopic pregnancies, and a C-section birth, that she was remiss in having only one child and was raising him the wrong way.

## My First 83 Years

So what happens to a rambunctious boy who was never spanked? As it turned out, Jesse loved to jump — BMX bike over makeshift ramps, snowboard over jumps, and eventually a dirt bike over huge mounds of dirt. Shelley and I agreed to support his new passion if he continued to achieve high marks in school and found a summer job to help pay for maintaining the race machine. At local race tracks, he added new friends who shared the racer camaraderie. Shelley was one of the few mothers who had the courage to be with him at the starting line, where thirty machines were roaring at the beginning of a race. His high school English teacher, who brought her husband and small children to one of his races, e-mailed us her startling opinion of the man-child who was averse to school: “Jesse is a rare breed that mixes unassuming charisma with unassuming raw intelligence. I’ve met very few people of his caliber, and his acquaintance reaffirms why I teach.” Earlier Shelley had had the courage to confront a sarcastic 5th grade teacher, who’d made Jesse cry and said he was ruled too much by his emotions.

What we saw was a boy who made friends easily, was loved by his six cousins, and had become a responsible adult. For that outcome alone, Shelley and I believed love and reasonable discipline had resulted in a better outcome than the harshness of spanking. On one visit to my sister and her family, the virtuous uncle volunteered that he was wrong in his prediction about how

## My First 83 Years

sparing the rod would ruin Jesse's future. Like Jesse's English teacher, the uncle had come to enjoy his nephew's "unassuming charisma." I still felt like giving the uncle a few whacks with a rod for not recognizing Shelley's courage.

### Empathy

Shelley has a genuine feeling for drawing people out. It was one of the first things that I loved about her. She connects well with all age groups but is particularly insightful in her communication with elders.

For example, a few months after turning one hundred, my mother stopped eating much and was sleeping more during the daytime (often in her clothes in bed). Shelley and I thought she was nearing the end. As caring for her became more complicated and my energy was being compromised by daily radiation treatments to shrink a cancerous tumor that would require colon surgery, Shelley called Home Healthcare to Mom's house and then Hospice. Just before Thanksgiving, my sister Karla flew in from Colorado to help with Mom, who kept fighting to get out of bed. As she weakened, Mom asked why she felt so bad. Shelley asks her why she thought she felt so bad.

Mom said, "Because I'm old and dying."

Shelley said, "Your spirit is strong, but your body is very tired."

## My First 83 Years

Shelley and Karla had been taking turns sleeping at Mom's house. Shelley was there when Mom died in her sleep in the pre-dawn hours of December 2, 2015. Shelley called me around 7 AM with the news.

A few years earlier Shelley had been with her father when he died. Five years after my colon surgery, she was with her own mom as she neared death, doing her best to make sure her mom's last week was a good one. Shelley has unusual compassion for those who are suffering.

### Wisdom

Shelley was wise enough to know what renovations our old house needed around the time Jesse was born and that she and Jesse should be together full-time for a couple years after his birth before returning to her career as an occupational therapist.

I agreed with that plan and even volunteered to help her a few weeks after we got home with Jesse. I said, "If I give him his bath, it'll be a break for you and a chance for me to do at least one significant thing with him when I get home from work." Perhaps I said it because Shelley appeared as though she had spent each day on a cattle drive. I hoped she didn't regret suspending her work life to be a full-time, nurse-on-demand mother. But we got through that time together, much to Jesse's benefit.

## My First 83 Years

Shelley had unique insight in helping solve emotional conflicts, like the time Jesse kicked me in the nose. In preparation for Jesse's first T-ball game on a team called the Pirates, I began playing baseball with him in back of our house. We set up bases. I pitched to him, he whacked it, I tried to retrieve it and run him down before he raced around all the bases. He dove and slid into the bases. One day as he was charged around the bases in his soccer shoes (hard rubber cleats on the bottom), he suddenly became fussy. I suggested he go inside for a snack. While he did that, I lay on the grass, face up, eyes closed, enjoying the warm sun and the sounds of spring. Then I heard his thundering feet as he ran down the back slope in my direction. Closer. Closer. WHACK! Jumping over me, he clipped my nose with his shoe and knocked off my eyeglasses. I sat up and held my nose.

"Are you all right?" he said in a panicky voice. "Are you all right, Dad?"

"No, I'm not all right. I think you broke my nose."

He began to cry. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

I called to Shelley, who was raking leaves from her flower garden. She came and examined my nose.

"Damn baseball," he sobbed.

## My First 83 Years

“This had nothing to do with baseball,” I said. “You just made a bad decision.”

Later as I lay on the sofa with an ice pack on my nose, Jesse came cautiously and asked, “How’s your nose, Dad?”

“Better. Thanks for asking.”

After awhile I’d had enough ice packs and went back outside to haul Shelley’s leaves. When I returned, Jesse was busy writing. Shelley would tell me later that he’d begun crying again and told her, “Dad will say a lot of terrible things to me. Dad will hate me forever.” She said he needed to talk to me. He said he couldn’t. She then suggested that he write down his feelings. As I sat in the living room, reading, Jesse came to me and silently placed a note in my lap. The note said: “Dear Dad. I’m sorry I kicked you in the nose. I did not mean to do it. I hope you forgive me.”

I put my arm around him. “Of course I forgive you...it was just an accident.” Then Shelley came in, and we each recounted times as a child when we’d made bad decisions that led to accidents. In retrospect, I regretted insinuating that he broke my nose and adding to his trauma. I was pissed off and in pain, which caused my exaggerated negative reaction. I wish I had minimized it. This event changed my view on how Jesse saw me. I vowed to become more approachable for him and more nurturing during painful times.

## My First 83 Years

Anne Lamott's book about writing, *Bird by Bird*, mentions writing about a person whom we love and events like this that change us. In the book, she says, "...there is still something to be said for painting portraits of the people we have loved, for trying to express those moments that seem inexpressibly beautiful, the ones that change us and deepen us." Jesse's pain and request for forgiveness was a defining moment for both of us. And it was Shelley who helped make it happen.

### Love

Knowing instinctively what love is about and being there when love is needed is a remarkable gift. This trait in Shelley was especially apparent during my cancer treatment.

"Whatever it is...it has to come out of there." Doctor Jennifer is talking to Shelley in hushed tones as though whatever-it-is should not be heard by other patients in the recovery area. I'm waking up from a routine colonoscopy. In my haze I turn my head enough to see the frown on this spindly young doctor. Even in the fog of anesthesia, I sense Doctor Jennifer is going to begin using the C-word. A more pervasive fog descends as Shelley drives us home and tries to calm my anxiety. The mist of fear makes me blind to the colorful trees of autumn.

## My First 83 Years

Shelley is holding my hand the next day while another doctor performs an endoscopy and takes photographs of the tumor. The day after that a technician performs a CT scan that reveals hernias in addition to the tumor. Since I have no visible hernia, I find it distressing to learn that my athletic body of seventy-five years seems to be going into the trash can all at once.

On the referral of Doctor Jennifer, Shelley drives us two hours upstate for an appointment with a well-known seasoned surgeon (SS). In the examining room a testy nurse says the SS needs to see the tumor for himself and that Shelley can't be present.

Shelley says, "You already have photographs of the tumor. Why does my husband need another invasive procedure?"

The testy nurse says, "The sigmoidoscopy is non-negotiable."

We don't like the testy nurse or the old SS. Shelley contacts a friend, who puts her in touch with a woman in our town whose husband died shortly after his surgery with the same SS and his team. When this woman contracted cancer a couple years later, she rejected the SS and chose a team of surgeons at a large Boston hospital. So Shelley sets up a surgical appointment for me there with a well-known doctor who also teaches at Harvard. My loving wife seems determined that I survive. Soon we are in Boston.



## My First 83 Years

In the examination room there, I feel no relief. The city, the hospital's crowded corridors, the sirens — not the atmosphere for a man who once lived in Boston but fled to the country long ago. But when a smiling little woman with a long skirt and white doctor's coat enters and immediately cups her hands around one of mine, my heart eases. Doctor Lilliana says, "I know you don't want to do this again, but I would like to see the enemy. I promise I'll be gentle. Then we can form a plan to defeat the enemy." So the gown, the toilet, the prep procedure again. But this time Shelley is welcome to stay.

Two weeks before my surgery, Shelley drives us to Boston and the hospital again to meet with a consulting nurse who will instruct on how to prepare for surgery and a stoma nurse who will mark my skin for placement of a surgically-created hole in my abdomen where poop will leave my body after Doctor Lilliana removes part of my colon. The stoma nurse uses her magic marker to draw the X-target three inches to the left of my navel and instructs me to keep that area dry until surgery. I wonder again how something so foreign can actually be happening. I don't think I could do it without Shelley.

In early February, Shelley and I check in to a hotel near the hospital, where I begin drinking nasty solutions to clear my colon. Early the next morning we walk to the hospital. Soon I'm flat on a cart outside the operating room, being prepped by some

## My First 83 Years

guy who says he climbed the same mountain on which Shelley and I were married thirty-five years ago. A good omen.

Eight hours later I share a hospital room with a frail, bearded man who looks older than me and has some mysterious virus that is causing an open sore on his leg and making him seriously ill. While Shelley is at my bedside every day, the bearded man has no visitors until a woman who says she is a professor at the college where they both teach. According to ongoing medical discussions at his bedside, his open sore could be contagious. So I avoid our common toilet (by virtue of my catheter and ostomy bag).

Weeks later I have minor surgery to insert a port into my chest, and then chemotherapy drugs are dripping into the port every few weeks. Halfway through my treatments, a hospital chaplain stops by my seat in the chemotherapy room and starts talking to Shelley and me. He writes articles for a local paper. We have the scribe connection.

Shelley is my coping mechanism, having been with me through all of it. She is a stellar example of love when a husband is at his worst. She emails my progress to friends and tells of those who are praying for me. Her friend Joan sends me a napping blanket similar to the one she used years ago during her recovery from breast cancer surgery.

## My First 83 Years

And yet, I feel broken. In his book, *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stevenson writes, “I guess I’d always known but never fully considered that being broken is what makes us human. We all have our reasons. Sometimes we’re fractured by the choices we make; sometimes we’re shattered by things we would never have chosen. But our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis for our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing.” I must try to see this view. Shelley sees a survivor, not a broken man.

Shelley emails friends whenever follow-up CT scans in radiology and colonoscopies with Doctor Jennifer indicate a good outcome. Dr. Jennifer is smiling on these occasions now when I’m coming out of the fog of anesthesia. Many friends write notes of love and encouragement. I write them my thanks. Knowing my interest in birds, Shelley’s mom sends cards with bluebirds and cardinals, noting her love for me and those of her friends who have me in their prayers. My son tells his friends that his dad is beating cancer.

Shelley’s love and that of many others seemed to be what pulled me toward physical recovery and a less anxious mind.

## My First 83 Years

# What is one of the most selfless things you have done in life?



I guess being the caregiver for my mother during the last twelve years of her life was probably my most selfless thing I've done. That period challenged me in many ways.

Mom was eighty-eight when her third husband died. I missed him, not because he'd had many admirable qualities as a stepfather, but because he'd been a highly responsible pain in the ass to my mother for forty-three years. Since I lived nearby and worked mostly from home as a telecommuting technical writer, I became her next overseer. Having to monitor a risk-taking teenager who raced dirt bikes and an elderly mother who ignored safety advice was a precarious family dynamic that the Sandwich Generation was calling the full catastrophe. "Why me?" I often asked myself. It seemed unnatural for a man on the

## My First 83 Years

verge of retirement with his own family responsibilities to have to take on the added problems of an ancient mother whom he never quite forgiven for the harebrained behavior that had stained his childhood.

Near the beginning of her book *A Bittersweet Season: Caring for Our Aging Parents — and Ourselves*, Jane Gross writes of discussions she had with three elderly mothers of her friends: “They were embarrassed by their own diminished capacity and frightened of what lay ahead, but nothing was worse, they said, than being a burden. Like my mother, who died in 2003, they fought dependence, even as it became inevitable.” Ms. Gross goes on to say, “Never before have there been so many Americans over the age of eighty-five. Never before have there been so many Americans in late middle age, the huge baby boom cohort, responsible for their parents’ health and well-being. Most often, neither the aged parents nor the adult children are prepared for this long, often tortured, time in life, or for those role reversals, which are unanticipated, unwelcome, and unfamiliar. How do we become our parents’ parents without robbing them of their dignity? How do they let us?”

Usually women are the best caretakers, possessing considerable empathy and skill at communicating with old folks in distress. But one of my sisters had died earlier of cancer, and the other lived across the country with three of her six children still at

## My First 83 Years

home. Shelley was the nurturing type but had a demanding job as an occupational therapist working in schools with young children. My stepsisters lived a couple hours away and had their own responsibilities.

Not only was I naïve about the role reversal trap of parenting my mother, but she and I were incompatible. I didn't like to chat or shop, and I had a penchant for sarcasm ("an excellent blade to carry when life is beating you up," says author Laurie Halse Anderson). Mom had been a flirtatious younger woman and, in her heart, still saw that woman in the mirror. But others saw her as a tiny, wrinkled lady who laughed even when the dialogue lacked humor, leading friends, nurses, and doctors to remark that she was one of the cheeriest women they'd met. She'd had gallstone surgery at ninety and probably thought surviving something like that made her impervious to the smaller dangers in life — like losing her balance, falling, and breaking bones. And though doctors recommended she use a cane to improve her balance, she refused to use the one I'd bought for her.

And Mom trusted everyone, even giving a National Enquirer telemarketer her checking account number and then calling me to ask if she screwed up. I trusted no one except my wife and son, thinking that everyone else, including Mom, had an ulterior motive. (My son had once said, "Hey, Dad — not everyone's out to get you.") But Mom had broken trust during those years when

## My First 83 Years

a child needs to believe his parents will keep him safe.

I didn't want to be responsible for shepherding Mom toward the death trap called "end of independence." But, for whatever reason, I couldn't refuse my new role.

...

"You can live to be a hundred," Woody Allen once said, "if you give up all the things that make you want to live to be a hundred." Useless advice for Mom. I thought she should stop flirting with men and eating frozen cream puffs and chocolate éclairs. But she seldom took my advice. At barely ninety-five pounds, she took the advice of a "sexy" doctor, who said at her age she could eat anything she wanted.

Mom did struggle though with her fear of dying. She called each night at eight to let me know she was still alive, although sometimes she was engrossed in a novel that distracted her from the time. Then I called her. When she developed a pain in her left ear and neck, she seemed convinced it was her carotid artery. She spent sleepless nights wandering around her house, worrying whether her time had come. The examining doctor said she'd probably strained her neck, which seemed reasonable in that, when she dozed from a sitting position, her head dropped back and her left leg hooked over the arm of her living room sofa like some dormant octopus clinging to its favorite coral reef. When I



## My First 83 Years

asked why her leg was up, she said it was comfortable that way.

Mom said falling on her head or butt was no big deal, because no damage could be done to those areas, but her hips and ribs and arms were more vulnerable. So I had to drive her to the ER whenever a fall left her in pain. But except for the occasional falls, she said she had no pain, making me wonder why I woke up each morning with an aching hip and shoulder.

When she was first living alone, I minimized the risk by having the local hospital install a Lifeline system, thinking she could just press a button if she were in distress. But she wouldn't wear the Lifeline wristwatch or pendant, saying she'd call me if something happened. When she ventured outside, she carried her phone in her pocket. She could be stubborn, especially when it came to anything marking another loss of independence.

Even with declining eyesight, she could still read bumper stickers on passing cars as I drove us to the supermarket each Tuesday. "I like that one," she'd said one day. "I Don't Brake for Yankee Fans." Then she'd cackled, as if the thought of running over my father (a Yankee fan) brought her a belated delight.

At the supermarket Mom took off with her grocery cart while I shopped for my family. I knew she inspected older men there as though she were eyeing a box of doughnut holes. On one shopping trip I spotted her leaning into the freezer case,

## My First 83 Years

searching for her favorite shrimp scampi dinners. Considering her bad eyesight, I asked if I could help. She said, “Did you see that hunk in the dairy aisle? The tall one with the good legs.”

About a neighbor man, she said, “Laura was sick yesterday, so she sent her husband to drive me to the garden club meeting. God! Is Bob a hunk! He can drive me anytime.”

About a gay antique dealer, she said, “He’s so handsome. It’s such a shame.” I was somewhat queasy about Mom quivering for a hot gay man.

She wanted all her doctors to be hot heterosexual males, although I hoped to find physicians who exhibited expertise in areas of her concern other than sexual attraction. If this seemed a little over the top for a woman her age, I realized Mom’s life had always revolved around men — for better or worse.

I thought the best way to keep Mom independent was to examine her house and figure out what she could do and what she couldn’t, or had no energy to do, or had decided not to do because she’d rather be reading and eating crackers. I should encourage her continued participation in the town’s garden club and newsletter group, members of which always made sure she had a ride to their meetings. I should try to be congenial about her nightly phone calls, even though I never felt like chatting. I should help her look forward to small things. To that end, any

## My First 83 Years

trip to a doctor's office or nurse's clinic included a trip to a book store for large-print, used books (mysteries and thrillers).

I also wanted to change my poor attitude — the sarcasm that I often directed at Mom as arrows from a painful childhood. Jane Gross writes that the unexpected tasks of caring for an elderly parent “kicks up all the dust of childhood...everybody sort of becomes who they were when they were 10.” The last place I wanted to be was ten again.

To fuel her optimism about the future, I told Mom about a woman who fulfilled a wish to drive on the New Hampshire Motor Speedway for her hundredth birthday. Mom said, “I want to play tennis on Misha's court when I'm a hundred.”

“If you can't see a tennis ball by then, I'll have someone hit a beach ball to you.”

“I'll bet I could hit that.” Then she cackle-laughed until she is out of breath.

As the eldest resident in our town, Mom became part of the town's 250th anniversary celebration, riding in a parade and receiving a memorial cane. But then, bad luck. Two months later she fell in her kitchen and fractured a rib, and a month later she tipped over in a chair at a newsletter meeting, sustaining a painful contusion on her pelvis. Days later a friend brought

## My First 83 Years

scallops from a local restaurant and left before Mom got the first one stuck in her upper esophagus. I arrived for my daily visit, found her gagging, called 911, and followed the ambulance to the ER. As Mom recuperated, I wondered where God was in all of this.

...

I was having trouble finding a sense of composure. I suppose this anxiety had something to do with the constant stress of being the caregiver for a woman who was struggling against diminished capacity. I felt as though I was living life on a precipice. I was no more competent to make the right decisions for her than I was when deciding how to keep my son safe. With Mom, I had to learn on the run.

First, if you think you should stay in the waiting room while your mother maintains her independence with her doctor or dentist, there is the risk she may return with garbled feedback and acquiescence to questionable medical advice. Mom had a tendency to smile and say yes to medical people. It became my routine to go to the examining room with her, even if I had to step into the hall while she changed into a hospital gown.

Give the medical people your phone number (not hers) as their primary contact for appointments and feedback. Keep track of her pill supply. The day arrived when Mom was too slow

## My First 83 Years

punching in her prescription numbers on the pharmacy's automated phone line, which then timed her out. So then I did that task too.

If your mother breaks two of her few remaining teeth on a piece of candy and the dentist advises surgical removal of the rest instead of adding two new teeth to her partial plate, consider that dental surgery presents a risk for a woman on blood thinners. You may need to suspend her Warfarin pills and give her Lovonox shots prior to surgery. Each day for two weeks I asked Mom to raise her blouse to expose her belly. Then I pinched up a fold of her skin there, sunk the needle into the fold, and pushed the plunger.

If your mother's cardiologist says her potassium levels are too low and should be boosted with huge pills called Klor-Con, there is a risk that this pill will react adversely with her other medications (or choke her to death). If her pharmacist or Internet sources confirm a conflict, say no to the pills. Say you'll make sure she eats more bananas. Contrary to her tepid feelings about an empathetic female gerontologist that we'd visited, Mom loved her cardiologist because he was a young male who said she was going to be his first patient to reach a hundred.

If your mother falls and the doctor prescribes pain pills like Vicodin, start her on stool softeners immediately. The medical

## My First 83 Years

folks may not tell you that pain pills cause constipation, which if unnoticed for a week, will send her back to the ER with an impacted colon requiring a painful excavation and a daily obsession with stool softeners.

If your mother loads her grocery cart with sweets, don't make sarcastic comments like I did with Mom. Doughnut holes and frozen banana yogurt with peanut butter swirls may be among her few remaining pleasures. However, if she can't eat the sweet stuff by several months past their "use" dates, then trash them discreetly — especially if the chocolate éclairs have a cream filling and she's lactose intolerant.

If you get discouraged about all this, remember that it will be your turn some day. Hope that you have respected your child as he or she was growing up in your house. Consider the risk if you have not. That child will either accept the responsibilities of your disintegration or pick a lousy nursing home where they tie you down and make you suck broccoli through a straw.

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Shelley and I didn't want Mom living with us in the house where she'd raised my sisters and me. Our son would leave soon. We wanted the empty nest to be a permanent condition and not an invitation for an old bird to replace a young bird. When she stayed for a week in our guest bedroom during an ice storm that

## My First 83 Years

knocked out power in the region, she wandered, asking questions like, “What are you doing? Where are you going?” In her own house she had a routine. But in this once troubled house that I’d purchased from her years ago, where I risked returning despite its bad memories, Mom was at loose ends. I’d been unsupervised as a child, disappearing with my fishing rod for long periods of time. Her return to this house seemed to kick up the bad dust of my childhood.

Ironically, our forced partnership lent itself to my learning new things about her. As she recalled the memories of her life periodically, Mom fed me her secrets, such as the circumstances surrounding my birth, why she said throughout my life that I was “lucky to be born.”

But it was not Mom’s mating secrets that troubled me most. It was her failure to keep my sisters and me safe from the vain, well-dressed man who drank and beat her while shouting vile expletives that articulate men usually avoided, including threats to “kill the kids.” Despite all the good things she’d done in my life, I still had trouble getting past that particular transgression.

Consequently, I didn’t feel fulfilled in helping Mom, despite the fact that experts said fulfillment comes from spending retirement years doing volunteer work. It felt like a job that should have gone to a cheerful person with no reclusive

## My First 83 Years

tendencies.

Each Tuesday I woke up anxious about driving Mom to the supermarket. I was unsure if it was my fear of crowded places or whether I was worried Mom would experience some catastrophe while we pushed our shopping carts along separate routes — Mom, starting toward the day-old bakery goods while I headed to the dairy aisle. I knew her stability was better when she pushed a grocery cart. Without support like that, she walked slowly with her left eye closed, wobbling sometimes. She said her eyes hadn't worked well together since her stroke years ago, and so she saw distances better just using her right eye. But she said she tried to keep both eyes open at the supermarket so men wouldn't think she was winking at them. She rejected my sarcastic suggestion of a black patch for the left eye.

Even though she didn't say so, I knew she refused to use a cane because she didn't want to appear old. Hanging on to my arm in the supermarket parking lot was okay. But if she was on her own in the dairy aisle and saw the hunk with the good legs again, there was no way she could impress him if she had a cane. Once I saw her cut a coupon from her Star Magazine that advertised "Liquid Collagen Skin Revitalization" to "fight the effects of aging." I sensed a case of optimism over logic, considering that she already possessed bottles and tubes and jars of skin rejuvenation products that had not yet helped attract any man



## My First 83 Years

from the dairy aisle.

Once at a supermarket pharmacy, I left her at the pharmacist's counter to pick up her pills and suggested she wait in an adjacent chair until I returned with a couple grocery items. Moments later I saw the pharmacist and his assistant hovering above someone who was lying on the floor. Mom had sojourned to the magazine racks, returned, and slipped over backward, landing on her back. "She says she's all right," they said. She took my arm, and we exited to the parking lot. "I think there was a wet spot on the floor," she said. "I saw a man with a mop on our way in."

"I thought you were going to wait for me until I came back."

"I should have."

"Are you hurting?"

"I landed on my back, bumped my head a little. But I'm alright. I've got a hard head." Then she laughed as if Laurel and Hardy had just whacked her with a plank.

Usually I called Mom at noon on Tuesday to confirm our previous night's decision and asked if she still felt like shopping. "Oh, yes," she usually said. "Are you going to the post office?" This was not really a question. She had mail she wanted me to drop off there, often birthday cards that she sent to the multitudes on her birthday calendar, or a couple letters or bill payments, or her

## My First 83 Years

entries to the Publishers Clearinghouse Million-Dollar Sweepstakes. I requested Publishers Clearinghouse remove her name from their mailing list, because every bureau drawer in the house except her underwear drawer was filled with mostly-useless, Chinese-made paraphernalia that she'd purchased to enhance her chances of winning.

Each day I stopped my car at the bottom of a steep, tree-lined driveway that stretched up for about two hundred feet. Until the winter after turning ninety-seven, she trudged down the driveway and back up twice a day — once early for the newspaper and again midday for her mail — even in winter, when she wore rubber straps with metal cleats over her boots (“The best present you ever gave me,” she said). But as she lost stamina to do that, I began driving to her house after lunch to retrieve mail and do chores.

Mom's tiny, single-level white house stood at the top of this steep driveway on a knoll surrounded by trees and a small yard. When I arrived, I usually found her sitting on her sofa, where she read, wrote cards and letters, did crossword puzzles, ate, and snoozed. She enjoyed reading large-print novels like Jodi Picoult's *Lone Wolf*, Robert Parker detective stories, and even *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which she said wasn't very good despite all the talk about it at the newsletter and garden club meetings.

## My First 83 Years

On Tuesdays, once we returned to her house after grocery shopping, I unpacked her groceries while she sank into her sofa. I loaded her small freezer with microwave dinners and pints of Ben & Jerry's ice cream or frozen yogurt. Before leaving, I always said we'd talk on the phone at eight.

She always said, "Thank you for everything you do for me. I really appreciate it."

Knowing she was grateful helped me on days when I despaired about her decline and our awkward relationship.

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Mom reached one hundred on June 13, 2015. Because she was emphatic about no big gathering, I drove her to my house for lunch, stopping along the way at the lake of her joyful childhood and a view of the mountain she'd climbed then. I knew that scene always makes her nostalgic. Along with presents from my small family, I gave her a gratitude list of twenty-nine good things in my life for which she'd been responsible.

A few months later Mom stopped eating much and was sleeping more during the daytime (often in her clothes in bed). Shelley and I thought she was nearing the end. As caring for her became more complicated and my energy was being compromised by daily radiation treatments to shrink a cancerous tumor that

## My First 83 Years

would require colon surgery, Shelley called Home Healthcare to Mom's house, and then Hospice. Just before Thanksgiving, my sister flew in from Colorado to help with Mom, who kept fighting to get out of bed. As she weakened, Mom asked why she felt so bad. Shelley asked her why she thought she felt bad.

Mom said, "Because I'm old and dying."

Shelley said, "Your spirit is strong, but your body is very tired."

Shelley and my sister had been taking turns sleeping at Mom's house. Shelley was there when Mom died in her sleep in the pre-dawn hours of December 2nd. Shelley called me around 7 AM. As I bumped around Mom's house later, I found my gratitude list on her living-room coffee table, along with mounds of other stuff that she intended to revisit in the near future.

I suppose, like every child, I had loved Mom in the beginning but had fallen out of love with her during the turbulent years. Now, after twelve years of my caring for her, I thought she'd been content to have me ease her through the tough transition from independence to infirmity. I hoped she'd seen my small acts of help as a form of love larger than the words often used to proclaim it.

## My First 83 Years

I like to remember the laughter that spanned her one hundred years and how our love had been rekindled more toward the end. Still, I wonder why I hadn't felt the emotion of a loss that should have compelled me to cry. I thought it might be time to see a therapist.

Shortly after Mom's death, I learned she had passed a cancer gene called Lynch Syndrome to my sisters and me. How did her three children contract cancer while she never did? How did she live to a hundred while eating all those chocolate éclairs? Her sister had survived breast cancer and a double mastectomy at fifty but had not eaten chocolate éclairs. Perhaps the éclair was the antidote to the harmful gene.

I don't think Mom knew she had the cancer gene. Even when her health was declining, I felt obligated to tell her that I was being treated for colon cancer. She had said, "You'll be fine," which had been her reaction to all my trials in life.

Since I'd always endured past trauma, I thought perhaps I'd be fine this time too. If not, and if I made it to heaven, I intended to look for Mom and demand that she share her chocolate éclairs.

Although I've lived in other places when I was younger, Shelley and I have now lived in my childhood house for thirty-five years, made some renovations, and raised a child here. Often as I pass through a room, especially one in which we've hung one of her

## My First 83 Years

watercolor paintings, I feel Mom's presence. Whenever she saw one of our renovations for the first time, she usually said, "My mother would have been so pleased."

Whenever I visit her gravestone at the town cemetery, I remember the laughter that spanned her one hundred years despite all the emotional pain and suffering.

Townsfolk say I inherited her smile, not realizing that she and I often had to fake it.



Mom at our house at the dining room table

# What are some of your special talents?



**T**alent is a subjective quality that most people yearn for. When I was younger, I thought I was a talented athlete. I was a good baseball player in grade school, the best badminton player at Camp Takodah (except for one counselor), a successful boxer at Annapolis, and an agile tennis player. Being fast and athletic helped me gain confidence in the field of sports. But I was too small to realize larger athletic dreams.

What I didn't predict was being told in high school that I had a good singing voice. I had no confidence there was any truth to it. Also, I knew my family's troubles were eating my brain then and that a good singing voice was not a talent that I wanted to pursue.

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## My First 83 Years

Beginning a vagabond trip in Europe ten years later, I thought how unhappy I'd been as a mechanical engineer. I wandered on a blustery Denmark beach, wondering if I had any natural talent, trying to remember what had come easy in grade school. I recalled my love for words and sentences then. This led to the thought of a writing career. I knew a lot could be said for writers like Thoreau being remembered for so long. And there was my connection with Thoreau in that we'd both enjoyed climbing Mt. Monadnock a few miles from where I grew up. I knew Thoreau climbed Monadnock several times and recorded observations in his journal. So I'd decided there on that windy Jutland peninsula I should record my observations about those Europeans who might allow me into their lives.

Returning from Europe a year later, I took a manufacturing job near Boston to replenish my savings and enrolled in a "Writing and Publishing" class, held a couple nights a week in a Harvard classroom. "Mrs. Horawitz" wanted our class to describe people we'd never met. When I asked how you could know what went on in the minds of people you'd never met, she said the key to writing fiction was being able to use your imagination. A fictional character might blend physical characteristics of an anonymous person with the emotional makeup of an intimate acquaintance.



## My First 83 Years

When Mrs. Horawitz returned my writing, she said she thought I would become a writer. I should visit her on Cape Cod next summer, show her my writing, and meet her daughter. Maybe Mrs. Horawitz was a matchmaker. But I already had a girlfriend.

After six years in which thirteen publishers rejected it, Crown published Annapolis Misfit as a young adult novel, a first-person vernacular similar to J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. This semi-autobiographical book about a Naval Academy plebe who endures rigorous hazing until he rebels received good reviews from *Publishers Weekly*, *Booklist*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and the *American Library Association*. Two local newspaper reporters interviewed me, took photographs on my front steps, and wrote articles about my road to publication. I had accomplished a goal but was disappointed with the lousy compensation that Mrs. Horawitz had predicted for writers. I knew I had to find a better way to earn a living as a writer, and so I became a successful software technical writer.

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Twenty years later, I became fascinated with Frank McCourt's voice in his memoir *Angela's Ashes*. I began reading other memoirs — any with a captivating voice. It was probably Anne Lamott's nonfiction that I blame for making me think writing about my family would not send me to Hell. It was her personal

## My First 83 Years

stories and self-deprecating voice that made me conclude she was probably the best writing teacher in my experience.

Lamott's book *Bird by Bird* stands as the one that allowed me to find my voice and write with a certain abandon. After retiring from a well-paid technical writing career, I worked on a memoir about growing up in a dysfunctional family, using humor at times to mitigate a painful childhood. I knew my mother wouldn't laugh at my description of how I came of age in a harebrained family, and when I let her read a draft, she said, "Don't publish it until after I kick the bucket."

I hadn't decided yet if publishing it would bring too many problems. "What if I kick the bucket before you do?"

She laughed.

Two years later, as a still healthy woman in her mid-nineties, she'd forgotten I wrote the memoir ("What memoir?" she said, when I mentioned letting my sister read it). Her mantra had always been that "we should forget the past," as if you could bury it in a deep hole, and perhaps she had. I couldn't. I thought the most important thing Anne Lamott said to me was this:

"We write to expose the unexposed. If there is one door in the castle you have been told not to go through, you must. Otherwise, you'll just be rearranging furniture in rooms you've

## My First 83 Years

already been in. Most human being's are dedicated to keeping that one door shut. But the writer's job is to see what's behind it, to see the bleak unspeakable stuff, and to turn the unspeakable into words — not just into any words but if we can, into rhythm and blues. You can't do this without discovering your own true voice, and you can't find your true voice and peer behind the door and report honestly and clearly to us if your parents are reading over your shoulder. They are probably the ones who told you not to open that door in the first place. You can tell if they're there because a small voice will say, 'Oh, whoops, don't say that, that's a secret,' or 'That's a bad word,' or 'Don't tell anyone you jack off. They'll all start doing it.' So you have to breathe or pray or do therapy to send them away. Write as if your parents are dead."

Because my father had died years ago, the culprit in my memoir could pose no problem now. But Mom was alive and opposed to my exposing the family secrets. So I waited until she died before shopping the memoir. So far, just a few journals have published pieces of it. Now I'm finishing memoirs about my European vagabond days and a 30-year parenting chronicle about raising a risk-taker without having a meltdown. My obsession with memoir persists, perhaps to make some sense of my life.

"I don't know where the idea originated that memoir writing is cathartic," says Koren Zailckas, author of the best-selling

## My First 83 Years

memoir Smashed, “For me, it’s always felt like playing my own neurosurgeon, sans anesthesia. As a memoirist, you have to crack your head open and examine every uncomfortable thing in there... Ultimately, I think a memoir leaves its author with more terror than comfort, more questions than closure.”

If Mrs. Horowitz had made this clear, I might have refrained from cracking my head open and exposing my family these years later. But she’d wanted to teach the great American novel. She never mentioned the memoir and its discomfort level.

Many journals and magazines have now published my essays and short memoir pieces. A little over a year ago, the Boston Globe published one essay titled “Do Your Eyes Light Up When Your Child Walks into the Room?” The online responses to it indicated that my writing may still move people, which is an act of love that I cherish.

From a friend: “I really loved the piece in the globe. Your writing is so rich. I am glad that is being recognized.”

From a friend’s acquaintance: “I just read Kurt’s column, Wow! So moving and well written.”

From a doctor named John: “A brilliant article — I read it twice simply to savor the message throughout today!”

## My First 83 Years

From a retired Boston minister: “I read it in print in our Sunday issue. What a fine and touching tribute to the kind of respect and affection that can take place between a father and a son.”

From a friend: “I loved your essay and felt so privileged to be able to picture Shelley, Jesse, the driveway, and other scenes in your article. When I started at BU, I did not know WHAT to do when those OTs came at me with hugs. Hugging was not something that happened in our home. Isn’t it lovely that we have grown to love giving and receiving hugs? I hope Callie and Mac each see the light in my eyes when they arrive, as it is surely there.”

From a friend: “I was away at a family wedding this weekend and didn’t catch the Sunday Globe. It’s the only paper I get delivered these days, preferring to read the rest of the week on line, but when I returned home yesterday, my Sunday issue hadn’t been delivered. Still, after trying to play catch up in the garden this morning, I looked up the archive for yesterday and swiped to the Globe Magazine. I always look forward to reading CONNECTIONS, and this week’s piece pulled me right in with a quote from Toni Morrison. Then the writer referred to his wife Shelley. But it wasn’t until dirt bikes came into the picture that I thought, Wait. Who wrote this? Even before I found your name, I knew it was you. I loved your piece as much as every Christmas card you have ever sent, for the heart and joy and truths you

## My First 83 Years

always share with your readers.”

I take comfort now from some wise words from Tom Ryan’s book, Will’s Red Coat: “...sometimes you have to be very old to be noticed. We don’t all flower at the same time.”

# Did you consider any other careers? How did you choose?



**T**he first time I thought about a career I was twenty years old and had just finished my second year at Annapolis. I was at the Naval Academy's flight indoctrination summer in Pensacola, Florida, and had just flown in a jet in which the pilot let me have the control stick and perform a barrel roll. I loved the cool whoosh of the flight and thought if my career was going to be in the Navy, then I wanted to become a pilot. But in my third year at Annapolis, I soured on the regimented life, had a PTSD crisis, and was expelled. A few years later I read about Navy pilots who had been shot down in the jungles of Vietnam, some of whom I knew from the Academy. I thought then that God may have saved my ass by preventing a stupid career choice.

## My First 83 Years

Because I had three years of engineering credits from Annapolis, it made sense to finish the Bachelor of Science degree at another college. Although I had no real interest in engineering for a career then, I knew that a mechanical engineering degree would provide job security in the future. So I graduated from Michigan State University with a BSME. My talks with job recruiters at MSU that last summer semester went well, although I realized I didn't have what it took to be a highly coveted mechanical design engineer. But big companies like Shell, Mobil, and IBM were looking for technical graduates who could be sales engineers. I received offers from Shell and Mobil after interviews at their Detroit offices but finally accepted an offer from the soft-spoken manager of IBM's office in Lansing — a slight, smiling man who seemed genuinely enthusiastic about hiring me. But during the next eight weeks at IBM's training facility in Detroit, the managers there decided I wouldn't be a good sales engineer either.

I then took a job in the Jamaica Plain section of Boston with Barnstead Still and Sterilizer, which made sense to me because the characters at this small company seemed like nonconformists. For one thing, the president of the company was an MIT graduate who chased fire engines in his Mercedes. Stan Beran, who supervised my training in the company's run-down research lab, was originally from Czechoslovakia but



## My First 83 Years

was an expert on Boston sports teams. Another trainee, Dave Elliot, lived with his parents in Arlington and was a recent Northeastern graduate. Dave and I learned from Stan about stills and demineralizers. A still boiled water and created steam, which rose and passed around a coil of cooling water that condensed the steam back to water with no minerals or bacteria. A demineralizer passed cold water through two resin beds that performed an ion exchange to get rid of the water's dissolved metals. There were stills small enough to fit on a counter top and large enough to fill the top floor of a high-rise building like the Institute of Health. Hospitals and biology research labs used distilled water. Electronic companies used demineralized water to rinse electronic components. Barnstead was training me so I could travel to customer sites to solve technical problems. When I was troubleshooting equipment at Boston hospitals, I met doctors who were irritated that their distilled water was contaminated. I asked when was the last time they cleaned the still. They didn't know. I cleaned the still. When at companies like GE in Albany, I talked with plant managers or maintenance men who were responsible for our equipment. I flew to Louisville because an angry contractor insisted the new still he installed at a hospital didn't work. I discovered that this genius had forgotten to plug in the power cord. On flights to exotic locales like Buffalo and Omaha, I lugged a leather bag filled with wrenches and other tools. But I was unhappy as a traveling

## My First 83 Years

service technician. So for those three years with Barnstead, I paid off my college loans, ordered a new VW Beetle that I would pick up at the VW factory in Germany, and saved enough to travel in Europe.

I'd been on my vagabond trip for about a month when I wandered onto a blustery Denmark beach on the Jutland peninsula, wondering if I had any natural talent, trying to remember what had come easy in elementary school. I recalled my love for words and sentences then. This led to the thought of a writing career. Returning from Europe a year later, I took a manufacturing job near Boston to replenish my savings and enrolled in a "Writing and Publishing" class, held a couple nights a week in a Harvard classroom. After another year as a mechanical engineer, I quit my job and began writing full time in an old house that I shared with three guys who'd worked with me at Honeywell.

During the next six years, I entered into an ill-fated marriage, moved to my old childhood home in New Hampshire, and sent my manuscript to publishers. Thirteen rejected it until Crown published Annapolis Misfit as a young adult novel. I had accomplished a goal but was disappointed with the lousy compensation that my writing teacher had predicted for writers. I knew I had to find a better way to earn a living. At first I took temporary jobs and tried unsuccessfully to write another novel.

## My First 83 Years

After my divorce, I worked as an assistant at the local inn. After I met Shelley there, I worked for a while as the editor of a computer magazine in Peterborough.

When Shelley moved to Boston to pursue her master's degree at BU, I followed her and took temp jobs while continuing to write. I took a free Massachusetts course in mechanical drawing and found a job with GTE in their drafting room. But drawing lines all day was too boring to be a career. I then took another free Massachusetts course in computer programming that met each evening and Saturdays at a nearby vocational high school in Chelmsford, where Shelley and I were then living. But after completing the course, my spring job interviews for a low-paid, entry-level programmer position turned into a competition with every spring college graduate then. With my writing background, the course managers said, I should try to sell myself as a software technical writer. And so began a career that would support my family well for many years.

Although my business career was now technical writing, I began writing a family chronicle as an annual Christmas letter to friends and family to provide humor, the hazards/rewards of family life, and the problems/solutions in raising a risk-taker. By writing in real-time, I captured action and dialogue with considerable accuracy. At various times I considered discontinuing the letters, but my readership persuaded me to

## My First 83 Years

continue. A few years ago I decided to convert these letters to a memoir, editing irrelevant material and adding some comparisons to my dysfunctional childhood. After retirement from a technical writing career, I began writing more memoirs and personal essays.

During the past five years, parenting essays adapted from my family memoir have appeared in the Boston Globe, Bacopa Literary Review, Discretionary Love, Grown and Flown, Parent Co, Your Teen Magazine, The Ravens Perch, and The Good Men Project. Three European vagabond memoirs have appeared in Eclectica Magazine. Other essays and memoirs have appeared in Snapdragon, Oyster River Pages, and the Adelaide Literary Awards Anthology. A draft of my coming-of-age memoir of growing up in a dysfunctional family was a Bread Loaf competition finalist ten years ago.

My love of reading and writing persists, particularly memoirs. I guess I have no further career ambitions than to end my life as a freelance writer.

# Do you have any notable ancestors?



**T**he Gallup family is one of the oldest in this country. My mother, Elizabeth Gallup, was born in Medford, Massachusetts, in 1915.

The patriarch of this family, and my maternal ancestor, is John Gallop. He was born in 1591 in Mosterne, County Dorset, England, and sailed for America on March 20, 1630 on the “Mary and John,” which arrived in Boston. He acquired a ship and became engaged in coastal trade, and on occasion, served as a pilot for ships entering Boston Harbor. Current day Gallop’s Island in Boston Harbor is named after him.

On this island Captain Gallop had a small farm. He also owned a meadow on Long Island in the harbor, a sheep pasture on Nix’s Mate (also a harbor island), and a house in Boston.

## My First 83 Years

John Gallop's wife, Christobel, did not travel with her husband to Boston, choosing to stay behind with their four children. But John Gallop had become an important member of the colony and Governor Winthrop was eager to keep him in America and not see him return to England as he was planning to do. So Winthrop wrote to Reverend John White in England and asked him to try to persuade Christobel to come to America. And so she arrived with their children in Boston three years after her husband on September 4, 1633, after a rough 8-week voyage on a ship named "Griffin." On the ship were also two historic characters: Reverend John Cotton and Elder Thomas Leverett. John Gallop, himself, piloted "Griffin" through the harbor via a new channel that he had discovered. Gallop was said to have been better acquainted with the harbor than any other man of his time.

He gained fame when, in 1636, after a desperate encounter off Block Island, he recovered a vessel that had been captured by the Narragansett Indians from his friend, John Oldham, whom they had killed. This is supposed to be the first engagement that ever occurred between the inhabitants of the American colonies and enemies afloat.

The next year, 1637, he took part in the Pequot War with Massachusetts forces. He also participated in King Philip's War and was a renowned Indian interpreter.

## My First 83 Years

John Gallop was supposedly very important to the development of trade between the Massachusetts Colony and Connecticut and Rhode Island.

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My mother's father, Oren Oliver Gallup, was an expert in trade too, albeit three centuries after his famous ancestor. In the 1900's, Oren wrote articles for export trade journals and for the New York Times. Early in his career, he was exporter for Simond Saw and Steel Company of Fitchburg, Massachusetts, and later formed his own export company in New York City. He was called to Washington during World War II to head up the export division of international price control. He was the last charter member of the Export Managers' Club on New York and served first as its secretary and then its vice president.

When I was about eleven, my mother put me on a plane so I could spend my spring school vacation with her parents at their apartment in New York City. Sometime during my vacation week, Grandpa and I took the subway to Yankee Stadium. Grandpa parted his white hair in the middle with precision but often has smudges on his wire-rimmed eyeglasses. I liked his soft voice, easy grin, and the smell of his cigars. Grandpa said he'd been to almost every country in the world, even Russia. There was something about the swaying and squealing of the train,

## My First 83 Years

something about all the strange-looking passengers, something about the city smells that made the subway seem like a magic event rather than just a way of getting some place. Inside the stadium, Grandpa bought two programs and found a man who sold Yankee patches made of felt. We picked out a round white patch with an Uncle Sam top hat on the end of a baseball bat. The word Yankees across the patch had a big Y. He said Grandma would sew the patch on my jacket. Other days Grandpa took me to the Hayden Planetarium and to his office, where he gave me colorful foreign stamps for my collection. Years later, when he was almost 80, he flew with Mom to my graduation at Michigan State.

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My paternal grandfather, Paul Curt Schmidt, was not famous like Captain John Gallop. Grandpa Schmidt immigrated to America from Germany around 1900 and worked as an aeronautical engineer for some years before returning to Germany to get married. While there, World War I broke out, and so he was stuck there until the war ended. My father was born there and was three when the family finally returned to America around 1920 and settled in New Jersey, where my grandfather resumed his career with Wright Aeronautical Corporation.



## My First 83 Years

The Wright Aeronautical Corporation traces its history to the 1909 Wright Company of Dayton, Ohio, founded by aviation pioneers Orville and Wilbur Wright. In 1916, their company merged with Glen L. Martin leading to the formation of the Wright-Martin Aircraft Corporation, and their relocation to New Jersey. After the war, the company reorganized as the Wright Aeronautical Corporation and moved its headquarters to Paterson, New Jersey, in 1919. The company's future was secured when it purchased the Lawrance Aero Engine Company. Charles Lawrance and his team were successful in building a nine cylinder air-cooled radial engine, J-1, for the U.S. Navy. The Wrights acquired the Lawrence Company in 1923, and together, they would produce the engines that powered the Golden Age of Aviation.

In 1929, the successes and competition among the pioneers of the aviation industry resulted in the greatest aviation merger of its day. Twelve Wright and Glenn Curtiss affiliated companies united to form Curtiss-Wright.

During the Second World War, Wrights played a major part in the war effort. The plants in and around Paterson, New Jersey, produced over 142,000 aircraft engines. Wrights engines served in every theater of World War II. During the War these engines were used in the Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress and the B-25 Mitchell. After the war, they found their way into DC-3 for

## My First 83 Years

commercial airlines worldwide. My grandfather, Paul C. Schmidt, was one of the aeronautical engineers who designed these engines.

On our Christmas visits with my German grandparents, Mama Schmidt always hugged me to her big belly so my nose almost stuck to her dress and prompted me to say “Ich liebe dich” (I love you). On every visit she joked about my time as an infant, when I’d said “swigadette” for the cigarette she was smoking. I think she was the dominant force in their marriage. Papa Schmidt was a quiet man who disappeared after supper about the same time my cousins and I heard “Santa” clomping around on their roof. I adored Papa, because he was kind and gentle and once led me by the hand as we walked to a Saturday kids’ matinee at a Nutley movie theater. And I loved the smell of his pipe. My relationship with him was fairly brief, because he died a year after we moved to New Hampshire, when I was only eight.

# What have been some of your life's greatest surprises?



My boyhood dreams had centered on a big Sears bike with white-wall tires and a coiled-spring shock absorber in front. And a new phenomenon then called a TV set. It never occurred to me that my parents were too poor to provide either one. Thus, I spent the time before my tenth birthday lobbying my mother for the big Sears bike and the TV, using the argument of how many families in town already had a TV. To my surprise, I received the bike for my birthday that year and was soon riding it to all my favorite fishing spots on the shore of Laurel Lake. It was another year before a Sears TV set appeared at Christmas. My mother's surprises meant she had to scrape up monthly installments and get a job to supplement my father's barely adequate salesman's salary.

## My First 83 Years

The summer after my junior year at Keene High School, the Fitzwilliam American Legion Auxiliary sponsored my attendance with 178 boys during a week of government learning at NH Boys State at the University of New Hampshire. I campaigned for and got elected to minor state offices like Clerk of the Senate and supervisor of the voter checklist. Near the end of the week, administrators passed out a small booklet on state government, saying we'd be given a little test on the material. I didn't know why such a fun week that included lots of tennis should be marred by a test, but I stretched out on the campus lawn with my friend, Stuart, and studied the booklet. Stuart said all the guys were going attend a dance with some 4H girls, who'd just arrived on campus. Feeling bashful that I was usually the smallest boy at a dance, I stayed in my room that night, continuing to study the booklet. The next day we all took the true/false test in a big hall. The last day I sat with my Keene friends at the final ceremonies. Boys State administrators announced awards and certificates, while everyone whispered that a kid named John was a sure thing to be one of the two chosen to go to Washington, D.C., for Boys Nation. You had to send a guy who could play guitar and sing Elvis Presley's "Hound Dog." So when John's name was announced, no one was surprised as he walked up front. When they announced the second name, I thought it must be someone whose name sounded like mine. I didn't move. The Keene boys poked me and said congratulations. As I walked to the front, I

## My First 83 Years

heard someone say, “He got the highest mark on the test.” By some strange miracle, I was going to Washington. It was the first time I felt special, as if the asterisk next to my name said something good instead of always too small.

Nine months after the Annapolis hierarchy determined I was unfit to become a naval officer, Michigan State University sent a letter confirming it could overlook my bad behavior at Annapolis. What a surprise. UNH had already turned me down. My problem was I didn’t want to be a mechanical engineer but couldn’t afford to waste three years of credits I’d accrued in a mandatory confinement where my dreams of travel and romance had been dashed. On a warm March day my plane arrived in Lansing, Michigan. As my taxi rolled through the MSU campus, I could see trouble everywhere. So many long-legged women in short skirts walking the campus paths. What a surprise, what a change from the Annapolis environment. I thought chasing long-legged women in short skirts might be good for my mental health but bad for my studies. If I didn’t complete the engineering degree, I’d be disappointing my mother again and lending more credence to my life as a failure.

I was surprised by the generosity of European people when I took my vagabond year there at age twenty-six. They opened their homes to me, which seemed not an American trait. I stayed with the family of my German pen pal, my step-cousin and her

## My First 83 Years

Norwegian husband in Oslo, my sister's pen pal in Frankfurt, a family in Vienna, a gang of thieves in Dubrovnik, a couple's vacation house near Naples, a friend's fiancé's student apartment in Madrid, and a Qantas pilot's apartment in London. Numerous families invited me in for coffee if I showed up on their doorstep unannounced. When I hitchhiked in Wales, I was totally surprised when a family picked me up, took me to their home for lunch, and then drove me to a good spot outside their village, where I could get another ride. Many drivers were curious about a young hitchhiker holding out a little American flag.

Many years later, the surprises were not so pleasant. "Whatever it is...it has to come out of there." Doctor Jennifer was talking to Shelley in hushed tones as though whatever-it-is should not be heard by other patients in the recovery area. I was waking up from a colonoscopy that my PCP had said was due, because my last one, although it had been clean, had been ten years ago at 65. In my haze I turned my head enough to see the frown on this spindly woman. Even in the fog of anesthesia, I sensed Doctor Jennifer was going to begin using the C-word. A more pervasive fog descended as Shelley drove us home. The mist of fear and surprise made me blind to the colorful trees of autumn. The next thing that surprised me was the unusual empathy from the surgeon who would operate. In her examination room, I felt no

## My First 83 Years

relief. The city, the hospital's crowded corridors, the sirens — not the atmosphere for a man who'd once lived in Boston but fled to the country long ago. But when a smiling little woman with a long skirt and white doctor's coat entered and immediately cupped her hands around one of mine, my heart eased. Doctor Lilliana said, "I know you don't want to do this again, but I would like to see the enemy. I promise I'll be gentle. Then we can form a plan to defeat the enemy." After she finished the procedure, I sat at the end of the examining table and breathed deeply. She rolled her stool up against my knees and cupped my hand in hers again. "I know you're scared but try not to worry. You're going to be okay. We're going to defeat the enemy." On a subsequent visit, after guiding Shelley and me to her assistant to set up a surgery date, Doctor Lilliana grabbed my hand again and smiled. "You're so cute." Then she hustled away to other patients. I didn't believe "cute" really described a small, anxious man, but her remarks surprised me and made me feel as though she saw more in me than a damaged patient.

Even though her health was declining, I'd felt obligated to tell my mother I'd been visiting the Keene clinic each day for radiation to shrink my tumor before the surgery. She had said, "You'll be fine," which had been her reaction twenty years earlier to my sister Donna's lung cancer that had killed her at fifty-three. But Donna had smoked. I was glad Mom would never

## My First 83 Years

know that I'd prodded my other sister Karla around this time to see a doctor about her gut problems and weight loss. So, three kids, three cancers. How had Mom lived to one hundred without getting cancer? How had our alcoholic, cigarette-smoking father lived to 78 without this curse? My sister Karla called from Colorado to say her surgery had been successful and that she hadn't need chemotherapy. A genetic testing laboratory concluded that we'd both inherited a cancer gene commonly known as Lynch Syndrome. We'd known that my aunt had had breast cancer long ago, but hadn't thought much about it then. The jolt here was the surprise genetic factor.

The pain in my chest began on Sunday morning when I was alone in the house. I had no one to say it was probably just anxiety, since I'm a worrywart and that diagnosis was the most logical conclusion. I was glad twenty minutes later when the chest pain disappeared. During lunch I reminded myself that Shelley had been away for exactly one month, another cause for anxiety. As a retired couple, we were accustomed to taking a walk at noon and having lunch together afterward. But she'd had to visit her dying mother halfway across the country and was still tending to postmortem obligations there. Even as an antisocial writer who prefers to be alone, I realized her emails saying she wasn't sure yet when she'd return were putting me on edge. Shelley called around 6 P. M., talked about the current problems



her mom's death had left behind, and asked how I was doing. I mentioned my morning chest pains that had gone away, and she made some joke about my not having a heart attack. Not long after ending our call, the pain began again, radiating through my chest a bit more forcefully than before. During the next hour I did some bends, kneeled on the floor while stretching my chest across a soft hassock, and microwaved a dinner that remained untouched on the table. Then I prayed. Why was I so fearful about the possibility of a heart attack and dying alone here? I'd done things in the past that required courage — standing up to an abusive father, singing solo in my high school choir, surviving plebe year at the U. S. Naval Academy, vagabonding alone through Europe, getting married twice, helping to raise a child, taking care of my mom during her nineties, and recently chasing a bear out of our yard while in my underwear. I was slim, while the bear was fat and filled with cholesterol. If anyone was likely to have a heart attack, it would be fatso. Not me. I had to do something besides twist my head in knots. I decided to call Kitty, our friend and retired nurse who lived across the street. I explained the situation and asked if I should call 911. She said she could drive me to the ER at our local hospital. The dark drizzle against her windshield and Kitty's occasional question about how I was feeling seemed to make my chest pain more ominous with each mile. At the hospital, a number of masked medical people came bursting into the waiting area, escorted me to the

## My First 83 Years

inner sanctum, and laid me on a gurney. The following moments were a blur in which my life became a flurry of masked marvels that poked, jabbed, and attached me to an EKG machine. One of them said, “You’re having a heart attack.” And then some soothing words about not worrying. How could I not worry about a surprise like this. What now?

Two months later I was in the hospital again for a terrible pain in my stomach — this time a blocked bowel. Another fxxxing surprise. Having been healthy all my life, I must have been under the illusion that medical anomalies would never happen to me.

Some surprises happen gradually, not all at once. I was about twelve when I began to realize my father did not love my sisters and me. That’s when his physical and verbal abuse of my mother turned into violent episodes. Often he threatened to “kill the kids” as a means to control her, I thought, although I wasn’t sure. Up until then my father and I had tossed a baseball together, and he’d taught me how to play tennis on a neighbor’s court. I admired his athleticism. But when I was old enough to understand the words “alcoholism” and “narcissistic,” I realized he cared about me only in the sense of how it reflected on him. (He was irate when I was expelled from Annapolis and had given no thought to my trauma and feelings.) It was a devastating surprise, albeit one that seeped in over time, to realize my father had never loved me.

# What is one of your favorite children's stories?



I have no memory of my parents ever reading a book to me. I only remember having Superman comic books as a small child and that, when I was eight and could read well enough, my Grandmother Gallup began sending me The Hardy Boys mysteries. I think I read the first book in the series, The Tower Treasure, around that time. But eighty years is a long time to remember details like that.

What I do remember vividly are the children's books that I read to Jesse when he was small. I think I enjoyed them as much as he did. They were as new to me as they were to him. The book I liked best was The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh.

Up until Jesse was about three years old, I read him books with lots of pictures, like the Dr. Seuss books and The Very Hungry Caterpillar. But Winnie the Pooh and his diverse companions in

## My First 83 Years

the Hundred Acre Woods hit a magic button for both us. Around the time we read the book, we watched the classic movie, Pooh and the Honey Tree, singing along with Pooh from our living room sofa. Jesse patted his stomach when Pooh felt a “rumbly” in his tummy. Then, on TV each Saturday morning, we watched The New Adventures of Winnie the Pooh. On one occasion, he said, “I want to go to Pooh’s house.”

I said, “Where does Pooh live?”

He pointed to the woods behind our house. I told him we might not find Pooh there, but that I was willing to help him look.

As I remember Jesse’s Pooh fantasies, I regret sometimes that I helped perpetuate them. Not that it was bad for a child to have fantasies about a sweet group of characters. But from a realistic standpoint, Pooh is a bear who consumes large quantities of sweets (honey) and is a poster child for the nation’s campaign against child obesity. Pooh rarely runs anywhere, lies around a lot, and says “Oh, bother” when things don’t go his way. I’m really glad Jesse did not enter kindergarten saying things like “Oh, bother.” Eeyore’s depression is probably a result of PTSD from having his stick house knocked down so many times, making him a poster child for the nation’s reliance on antidepressants. Rabbit is bossy and puts forth plans that would never make it through the United States Congress. Piglet stutters

## My First 83 Years

and is abnormally anxious and could probably benefit from psychiatric counseling to deal with his inferiority complex. Tigger, whose personality our leaping boy most resembled, is too bouncy and probably needs to learn to be more introspective. Kanga and Roo have mother/child issues that revolve around Roo's refusal to leave the nest (mother's pouch, in this case) and forge an independent life. Owl is the intellectual who rarely gets involved. As for Christopher Robin, he is a kid who carelessly leaves his stuffed animals scattered all over to the extent that these dorky creatures have had to come to life and fend for themselves. I suppose the redeeming quality of the group is their friendship and desire to help one another. But really, they are a dysfunctional outfit that should not serve as role models for small children.

Even though he enjoyed having Shelley and I read to him, it took some perseverance on our part to get Jesse interested in reading fiction. As he matured, his personal reading tended toward instructions on how to get Pokémon characters to evolve, how to build a model airplane, how to use flight simulator software on his mother's new (and fast) Pentium II computer, how to build robots described on the Lego website. But Shelley and I continued to read fiction to him at bedtime, and finally found books that, at the end of our reading sessions, made him say, "Don't stop now! You can't stop now! Please?" Joanne Rowling

## My First 83 Years

(Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone) and Louis Sachar (Holes) provided us with wonderful characters and gripping plots. I think we read all seven of the Harry Potter books. Later we got caught up in October Sky (the book and movie), the true story of a '50s teenager from a West Virginia coal mining town who wants to become, against all odds, a rocket scientist like Werner Von Braun.

When Jesse was a toddler, I gave him his bath each night, and Shelley read him his bedtime story. But there came a time when he insisted that "Mama" should give him his bath. Having been rejected at bath time, I took over reading of the bedtime stories. Despite his enthusiasm for the books I read, he insisted that one of the stories be a new made-up story from my imagination. One night he said, "Daddy, does your head hurt?" I asked why he said that. He said, "So many books inside your head." What hurt was the pressure to think up a new story each night. Often I felt stuck at "Once upon a time," a side effect perhaps of the tired mind, or just a depleted imagination. But in retrospect, even though I can't remember a single one, those imaginative stories may be among my favorites, because I can remember that there were enough inside my head to recall the joy of being with Jesse when my fantastic tales emerged.

# What advice would you give your great grandchildren?



**D**ecember 1, 2022

Dear Great Grandchildren,

Your grandmother, Lingyen, asked me what advice I would give you. Because I'm old now and will not be alive when you are born, I'm writing this letter so that your grandmother or parents can pass it on to you when you are old enough to understand what previous generations have gone through while Planet Earth was beginning to deteriorate. If the problems have been fixed by the time you are adults, you're lucky. If not, then your experiences may be worse than when I was alive.

About the time that I turned eighty, our town in southern New Hampshire received four inches of snow on a mid-January day

## My First 83 Years

and then rain on top of it. And then freezing. Same the previous winter. A perennial mess. It reminded me that, when I grew up here, it was always just fluffy snow. So much so, that we kids skied all winter down Bullock's hill and sledded at thrilling speeds down the precipitous Sandy Hollow Road. When I first had a driver's license in my pocket, the snow banks had been plowed so high on the sides of our snow-slick country road that I jumped into my mother's old Dodge. On a straight-away, I jammed the brakes and yanked the steering wheel hard left, causing the car to spin until it hit the snow bank. When I repeated my spins, I felt an astonishing exhilaration. Recently I watched a Netflix movie called "Don't Look Up" in which scientists discover that a huge comet will hit and destroy the Earth in six months. The politicians and a slick-talking entrepreneur dilly dally and come up with false solutions that don't work. Half the country believes the scientists are lying. I've read that the movie was a metaphor for global warming. A lot of talk and no action. No cooperation among countries that could act. Russian President Putin, a madman really, cared only about bombing Ukraine. China cared only about annexing Taiwan. Donald Trump cared only about being reinstated as a President who would say that global warming is a big lie. The consequences in the movie were predictable. Earth got busted.



## My First 83 Years

On another day it was freezing rain again, topped with some sleet for good measure. I considered walking down our icy driveway to the mailbox to insert a letter that I wanted the mail carrier to pick up. To minimize the risk of slipping on the ice, I stretched my Get-A-Grip rubber devices over the bottoms of my boots and stepped outside. I wiggled my boots on the ice to see how well the spikes on the bottom of the Get-A-Grips were holding. I made it to the road without any problems, but the mailbox door was frozen shut. I could have walked back to the house to retrieve a rubber mallet to bang the ice but thought too many trips over the slick stuff was inviting disaster. So I ran my warm fingernail along where the mailbox door meets the body. I banged on it with my bare hand. It finally let loose, but then I realized the mailbox flag was frozen in the down position. More yanking and banging. Finally it gave way. I put my letter in the box and trudged back up the driveway, thankful that my Get-A-Grips were preventing me from falling, breaking my hip, and dying in a nursing home. (My elderly mother, your great great grandmother, who'd lived alone for the last twelve years of her life, once said the Get-A-Grips were the best present I ever gave her.)

That same day I realized sleet was accumulating on top of the birdbath. A chickadee on the edge of the birdbath was staring at the sleet pile, probably wondering why his drinking water had

## My First 83 Years

disappeared below. I concluded that the bird bath heater had stopped working. All that freezing rain had probably infiltrated the electrical connection to the extension cord and caused the circuit breaker at the outside outlet to short out. I put on my winter gear again, stepped gingerly to the outlet on the side of our house, and reset the circuit breaker there. I then scooped the sleet/slush out of the bird bath so that the water was visible again. Once back inside, I warmed my hands and watched the bird bath. The chickadee returned, perched on the edge, and dipped his head several times to drink. Then a titmouse came, and then a nuthatch, and then a junco, and then a couple blue jays. All seemed oblivious to global warming and the declining bird population.

During the falling of huge tree limbs in December 2008, the infamous New England ice storm knocked out our power for a week. While the storm raged, your great grandmother and I lay awake in bed, listening to the interminable cracking of each ice-heavy limb and wondering if our bedroom was too close to the woods. When a limb thumped the porch roof a few feet from our bedroom window, I wrapped a pillow around my ears. When a tree hit the barn, the house shook like an earthquake. I uncovered my ears and paced until dawn and thought how lucky it was two years ago that great grandmother had had an electrician purchase a generator for us and install a special

## My First 83 Years

switch panel for it in our basement. But a generator doesn't run long without more gasoline. Roads were cluttered with fallen limbs, local gas stations had no power, and my mother lived four miles away without any heat. Things were getting sticky. But my son, Jesse, had a Tacoma truck, and so I loaded a couple empty gas cans and jumped in, hoping we could get from our littered country road to a main road. I held my breath as he maneuvered over downed power lines, over debris, and under hanging branches until we reached the main roads. We found that the city of Keene had functioning gas stations. After filling the gas cans, we returned to our town and extricated great great grandmother from her house. My mother said she was okay at our house but worried about my being on a slippery barn roof with a chainsaw, trying to cut up the tree that had fallen on it.

In a Los Angeles Times article, David Wharton detailed how climate change was threatening the future of the winter Olympics. When the U. S. skiers and snowboarders arrived in Switzerland in early fall to train on the year-round ice and snow of an adjacent glacier, they witnessed an unfamiliar scene. "It wasn't just the massive chunks of ice breaking loose, crashing down. New waterfalls appeared, tumbling from surrounding cliffs, as if the frozen terrain were melting away." Recent calculations by NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration stated that 2021 was among the six hottest years

on record.

This year, 2022, seems to be the year of the floods. A powerful storm system triggered flooding in the Appalachians in late July, inundating and sweeping away homes in the night and killing at least fifteen people. The destruction followed flooding a few weeks earlier in the mountains of Virginia and Tennessee. In June, flooding hit mountains in the western U.S., where rain combined with melting snow can be particularly destructive. Storms dumped up to five inches of rain over three days in and around Yellowstone National Park, rapidly melting the snow pack. As the rain and melting ice poured into creeks and then rivers, it became a flood that damaged roads, cabins and utilities and forced more than 10,000 people to evacuate. The Yellowstone River shattered its previous record and reached its highest water levels recorded since monitoring began almost a hundred years ago. Florida and Caribbean islands like Puerto Rico have had two extremely destructive hurricanes this year. The United States has had killer tornadoes, and there have been many other devastating floods around the world.

Frances Davenport, Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Atmospheric Science at Colorado State University said, “Although floods are a natural occurrence, human-caused climate change is making severe flooding events like these even more common [<https://www.gyclimate.org/>]. I study how climate change

## My First 83 Years

affects hydrology and flooding. In mountainous regions, three effects of climate change in particular are creating higher flood risks: more intense precipitation, shifting snow and rain patterns and the effects of wildfires on the landscape.”

The floods and melting ice, of course, were just a symptom of global warming as it affected the Earth’s deterioration during my time here. Perhaps the situation is better now in your time.

If not, I do feel sorry for your generation that we left you with this mess and impending catastrophe. You must understand that my generation of politicians and industrialists were short-timers here on Earth and mostly had a selfish agenda without much concern for the environment. If your generation is to save the planet, you will need to elect tough visionaries to do the job.

Even if the Earth is still in a state of chaos during your time, remember to love one another. My best advice is to love the Earth and its inhabitants. Don’t let the world die.

Love to you all from a generation that wishes you all the best in life.

Great Grandpa Kurt Schmidt

## My First 83 Years

# What inventions have had the biggest impact on your day-to-day life?



**T**elevision. When I was twelve, on Christmas, 1952, there was a Sears Silvertone black-and-white TV in the corner of the living room as my sisters and I came bounding down the stairs early that morning to see what Santa had left us. I'd been hounding my mother with the premise that so many people in town already had one, although I think that was not true. I began watching TV all the time, especially the Lone Ranger and other cowboy heroes. My father liked watching boxing matches. The first mass-produced television set sold in 1946–1947. Television broadcasting stations and networks in most parts of the world upgraded from black-and-white to color transmission between the 1960s and the 1980s. That small black-and-white TV box has now been reinvented as a large, flat-screen viewing theater with remote control devices to turn it on and off. I watch my favorite

## My First 83 Years

programs every day. Recording devices even allow me to record programs that I can't watch at the time that they are broadcast but later at my convenience.

Computer/word processing. When I first began writing a novel, I was using an old IBM Selectric typewriter that my grandfather had given me. I loved turning it on and hearing the hum of it. I loved the clack of the keys. The hard part was rolling a blank piece of paper into it and staring at the paper. Looking at a white piece of paper for a long time usually led to a catatonic state. And it was slow and inconvenient when I made a typographical error, causing me to patch it with white-out or start over. Sending the novel to a publisher meant a large pile of typewritten paper in an envelope in the mail. When the home personal computer (PC) was invented and running Microsoft word processing software, writing became much easier. Software inventions like "spell checker" made correcting a typographical error just a couple flicks of the keys. Sending a book to a publisher, or an essay to a magazine, requires only a few seconds now to transmit it electronically. Because I write a lot and am at my computer much of the day, this is the invention that seems to have the most frequent affect on me.

The Internet. I didn't know that the dawn of the Internet Age would infiltrate our house like some insidious and odorless gas. When he turned nine, Jesse learned that he could order computer



## My First 83 Years

software (GAMES) through his school. “How come we didn’t get a computer this summer?” he said. “Didn’t you say we were going to get a computer this summer?” I told him I’d be bringing my old PC home from work when they got a new one set up in my office. As soon as the PC was home, he said, “When can we get on the Internet?” As soon as we had an Internet Service Provider, he said, “When can we find Internet addresses that have games you can download?” I ascertained that he could read game descriptions on the Internet but only I could download...and only if he agreed to do some extra math problems that I made up for him. He grumbled when he discovered that many of the games required a Pentium chip (a faster processor). He said, “Dad, can we get a Pentium chip for this computer?” The Internet and its access to “game” software eventually provided a learning tool for him as well as entertainment. He found a friend who sold him an old computer for \$100, and shortly thereafter he was running computer wires in web-like fashion, connecting computers throughout his room. Racing via multiple computers became a loud event and signs of a budding computer scientist. For me, access to the outside world via email and search engines such as Google became a valuable tool that I use every day.

Email. In an email exchange with a friend from my old company, he said his new company needed a good tech writer. Was I interested? I had been given a 9-month early retirement

## My First 83 Years

financial package from my old company, which had allowed me to spend the summer with Jesse. But it was about time for me to get back to work. The trouble was that their location would mean I'd have a 60-mile commute to Hopkinton, Massachusetts. My friend said that EMC would probably allow me to telecommute most of the time. In my interview, the company was willing to let me work from home three days a week, which could be increased to four days. I was hired in one of the easiest job applications I'd ever had, all because I had an email connection with a friend. Because I am now a reclusive retired technical writer living at home, email is a valuable way for me to stay connected with friends and publishers, with whom I need connect from time to time. When Shelley travels to Indiana, she sends me an email when she's boarded the plane and another when she's landed. While she's away, we exchange longer emails every day, as though we are sitting at the dinner table discussing our day.

Google. When I was a child, it seemed the only way to find information about something was to consult the encyclopedia or ask an adult who might know. Since the Google search engine was developed, a person can now research about anything by entering a few key words for the search engine. Of course, humans have loaded the Internet with its encyclopedic contents, but the array of information is infinite. Google often adds the internet encyclopedia, Wikipedia, to the search if it contains

## My First 83 Years

information on the subject of your interest. Although the information found in Google searches is not always accurate, it is sophisticated enough to have become the country's quickest and fastest online encyclopedia. I find it useful most every day.

Netflix. Long ago you could make home movies if you were affluent enough to afford a movie camera. Now you make movies with your smart camera. If you wanted to see a Disney movie, you went to a movie theater if there was one near your town. Along came the invention of the DVD that contained movies. You could see movies at home by buying or renting a DVD at a store for that purpose or by picking one up at the local library. Now DVDs are not as much in demand because it is possible to subscribe to online entertainment viewing such as Apple, Disney, and Netflix. Now in my studio I have a TV set up opposite my treadmill that allows me to watch a Netflix movie while I'm getting my daily exercise.

Microwave oven. When I was young, my mother cooked all our meals on a wood-burning stove. Then electric stoves and gas stoves became sophisticated and more affordable. Still there was a lot of time and effort in making a dinner on a stove. When the microwave oven was invented, it opened up a lot of new possibilities. When my stepfather died, my mother was almost ninety. She did not need to be cooking laborious dinners for herself, since she was managing to live alone in her own house

## My First 83 Years

quite nicely. On our Tuesday shopping day at Market Basket, she always brought home frozen dinners that she could zap in her microwave oven in a matter of minutes. Her favorite was Lean Cuisine shrimp scampi dinners. I've heated frozen dinners in our microwave oven when Shelley was away and I didn't feel like cooking dinner on the stove and dirtying pots or pans. I also use it most days to heat a cup of water in two minutes for my morning tea.

Mobile phone and Caller ID. When I was seven and our family moved into my grandparents' old summer house, a now antique crank telephone was attached to our wall at the bottom of the stairs. If my mother wanted to make a call, she had to take the bell-shaped receiver of its hook and listen to see if anyone was talking on our "party" line. If not, she cranked the handle, which usually reached the operator to complete the call. It was awkward to know that a neighbor could listen to her conversation, or vice versa. It was a relief when dial phones were invented. When away on his weekly sales trips during the week, my father often got drunk and called and said he was coming home to kill us all. Then Mom sat on the stairs with the phone and attempted to dissuade him. But sometimes he arrived late at night and assaulted Mom. I used to dread these calls, watching Mom cry as she sat on the stairs with the phone in her hand, not knowing if he was actually coming or not. Years after my father's

## My First 83 Years

death, the sound of the phone still startles me. I guess my brain thinks he's calling from the grave and threatening again to come home and kill us. Now a modern phone displays a caller ID when it rings. When I don't recognize the caller, my brain seems to decide it's either telemarketing, scams, or Dad's incarnation that now goes by the name Donald Trump. Thus, I don't have to answer the phone if I don't know the caller. I have found a modern mobile phone helpful in certain instances: once when I had a flat tire in the hospital parking lot and was able to call AAA service, and a few times when the dentist office, because of COVID, said patients had to call from their parking lot upon arrival and not come in until the receptionist called back and said they were ready.

Home printer and copier. As a writer, I often need to get a paper printout of something I've written. When I need to print a document from my computer to create a paper copy, I have a difficult time remembering what I did in this respect before the invention of home printers and copiers. I think paper documents that I'd typed on a typewriter and needed to be copied had to go to a commercial copy center, where you paid to get copies made.

Amazon and other online shopping. When I was young, I noticed that my mother subscribed to catalogs that came in the mail. I think her favorite was Sears & Roebuck. She often charged a lot of Christmas gifts at Sears and then tried to pay part of the bills

## My First 83 Years

that came in the mail each month. As an adult, I didn't pick up her habit and didn't much enjoy shopping malls and the multitude of stores where you could wander around to find the latest popular gadget or present. Of course, there wasn't much choice until Amazon came along and I discovered the art of "online shopping." I usually have something in mind as a present and can often find one with just a few typed words in the Amazon online catalog. That I can buy an item there and charge it to my Amazon credit card, makes it easier for an old foggy who becomes a bit anxious in a store like Walmart, where patrons are whipping their shopping carts around while gazing longingly at merchandise in aisle 3. And now you're supposed to use the self-checkout invention, where you swipe your credit card and hope the machine is not stealing any extra money from you.

Laparoscopic surgery. During the 1960's and 1980's, laparoscopy evolved from a purely diagnostic procedure into an independent surgical approach. When a routine colonoscopy revealed I had a cancerous tumor that would require surgery, possibly laparoscopic surgery, Shelley drove us upstate for an appointment with a well-known seasoned surgeon (SS). In the examining room a testy nurse said the SS needed to see the tumor for himself. Shelley said, "You already have photographs of the tumor. Why does my husband need another invasive procedure?" The testy nurse said, "The sigmoidoscopy is

## My First 83 Years

non-negotiable.” After I finished prepping in the toilet, testy nurse instructed Shelley to leave the room. The SS arrived finally with several medical students and instructed me to adopt an awkward kneeling position on the footrest at the end of an examining table (butt up, head down). It was a good position for prayer, but I was too anxious to ask God why I was kneeling so close to the floor without even a prayer mat. So while I received the scope with the requisite amount of wincing that comes from having no sedative and no prayers, the SS explained in hushed tones to the students about the tumor. One of the young female students rubbed my back. When the exam was over and Shelley returned, the SS said the rate of survival for my stage of cancer was 87 percent. Good chance to beat the odds. When I asked about laparoscopic surgery (the least invasive type), the SS said not for men. “The male pelvis is much smaller than a woman’s.” Huh? But then the SS was probably leaving the hospital in a few months anyway. He didn’t say retire, but that’s what I thought he meant. One of his competent colleagues would slice my pelvis wide open, probably while the SS was vacationing somewhere in the Caribbean. Saying the SS was condescending, Shelley contacted a Boston surgeon recommended by a woman in our town. In this surgeon’s examination room, I felt no relief. The city, the hospital’s crowded corridors, the sirens — not the atmosphere for a man who’d once lived in Boston but fled to the country long ago. But when a smiling little woman with a long

## My First 83 Years

skirt and white doctor's coat entered and immediately cupped her hands around one of mine, my heart eased. Dr. Lilliana said, "I know you don't want to do this again, but I would like to see the enemy. I promise I'll be gentle. Then we can form a plan to defeat the enemy." After her exam, I sat at the end of the examining table and breathed deeply. She rolled her stool up against my knees and cupped my hand in hers again. "I know you're scared but try not to worry. You're going to be okay. We're going to defeat the enemy." Weeks later when we returned to schedule the surgery, she said she'd be performing it with laparoscopes and robotic arms, proving she was an expert on the "smaller" male pelvis. Apparently I wouldn't be sliced wide open after all.

CT scanner and MRI. The CT scanner was introduced in the Mayo Clinic in 1973. The MRI was introduced in 1977 and became available in hospitals in the early 1980's. Months before my colorectal surgery, I'd had an MRI to get the full picture of the tumor and surrounding area. After the surgery, I had a CT scan about every six months for a few years to ensure that the cancer had not returned. Then I began having the CT scan on an annual basis, which only confirmed my inguinal hernias with loops of the small bowel. Shelley emailed friends whenever follow-up CT scans and colonoscopies indicated a good outcome. Many wrote notes of love and encouragement. I wrote them my thanks. How



## My First 83 Years

fortunate, I thought, that I'd received mercy from so many and had begun to write my way toward healing. Often I looked up from my computer, glanced out the window at a bright yellow goldfinch at the bird feeder, and knew how grateful I was to be seeing the world in new colors.

## My First 83 Years

# What was your first boss like?



I've had a few first bosses, which doesn't make much sense until you understand that I've had quite a few different careers — janitor, handyman, innkeeper's assistant, inspector of women's brassiere straps, factory worker, draftsman, computer magazine editor, troubleshooter of water stills and demineralizers, mechanical engineer, sales engineer, and a long career as a software technical writer.

I've had a weaving mill boss say he could groom me to become overseer of the weaving mill where they wove women's brassiere straps. (You had to make sure the rubber strands had no breaks when the strap came off the loom.) Another first boss always said because any trip to California would include sales as well as technical service, he'd have to go. I'd have to fly to Albany and Buffalo instead. A manufacturing supervisor at Honeywell did not like the pace of my device troubleshooting and said I'd better

## My First 83 Years

get with it, because he was going to the top and didn't care whose back he had to climb over to get there. An IBM training manager said I wouldn't make a good sales engineer and that he would give me ten weeks severance pay. When I interviewed for my first job as a software technical writer, my prospective first boss said I should ask personnel for a higher salary than what I'd listed on my résumé. He was an interesting guy, and his name was Bob Bailey.

When Shelley moved to Boston to pursue her master's degree at BU, I followed her and took temp jobs. During that time, I also took a free Massachusetts course in computer programming that met each evening and Saturdays at a nearby vocational high school in Chelmsford, where she and I were then living. But after completing the course, my spring job interviews for a low-paid, entry-level programmer position turned into a competition with every spring college graduate. With my writing background, the course managers said I should try to sell myself as a software technical writer.

When I arrived at LTX in Norwood for my first interview, I had no technical writing samples to offer. So I pulled out my hardcover Annapolis Misfit and laid it in on the personnel manager's desk. She seemed impressed and sent me down the hall to meet with the technical writing supervisor, Bob Bailey. On my way to his office, she must have called Bob and said

## My First 83 Years

enthusiastically that she was sending him a novelist, mechanical engineer, and recent computer programming graduate. Bob was bubbly when I arrived.

In Bob's office, he seemed immediately ready to hire the maverick that I appeared to be, instead of some experienced tech writer. He asked if I was willing to take a test that he gave to all applicants. One of their engineers would explain one of their products and I would have some time to write it up after he left. So I agreed and sat with a hardware engineer while he explained the concept. After he left, I realized I hadn't understood much of what he'd said. No sense trying to fake it. I went to Bob's office and explained that I was a software technical writer and had not understood much of what the hardware engineer had talked about. I said the job was not for me. Bob said he'd made a mistake and suggested I return the next day to talk with a software guy and try a write-up based on that discussion. I said I would, and I did. Bob liked the results and asked when I could begin work with them. We agreed on the following week. Bob said, "When you go back to personnel, ask for at least twenty-five thousand. I think you're underselling yourself."

During my time at LTX Corporation (1983 to 1986) in Norwood, I created various manuals that documented syntax and explanations of the LTX programming languages and computer operating systems for the ATE hardware that their customers

## My First 83 Years

used. Mostly, Bob was a consistent source of joy and entertainment. He was a short panda bear in his mid-thirties with a dark mustache. Bob's boss was a West Point graduate who'd gone into business and dictated that Bob wear a nice suit to work. The trouble was that Bob ate with us writers in the company cafeteria and talked with food in his mouth. If we ate anything with red sauce on a particular day, Bob somehow managed to splatter it on his white dress shirt. Because he lived nearby, Bob would then rush home to change his shirt. Although we writers liked Bob Bailey, we didn't let him know we'd nicknamed him B-Square (his initials) when he wasn't around. When Bob asked if I was interested in management someday, I think he had no inkling that when times got rough for the company, middle managers like him would be among the layoffs. I had said at the time I was not interested in management, only the technical work. When time came for the LTX layoffs, Bob was one of the first to go. The West Point guy then became manager of the writer's and wanted to double my salary when I said I intended to leave. But I said I'd already received a sizeable offer from Digital Equipment Corporation and that they were closer to New Hampshire, where my wife and I planned to move back to my old childhood house.

Shelley and I returned to New Hampshire the summer before Jesse was born. Her Caesarian section occurred late on a Friday

## My First 83 Years

night at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, and she was still groggy the next morning. So I held Jesse most of Saturday and Sunday until the nurses took him away each night. I hated leaving the hospital Monday morning for my job at Digital Equipment in Littleton. Fortunately, my first boss there was a woman — Kathleen Warner. On her advice, I rushed back to the hospital Monday afternoon with the news that Kathleen's own husband didn't help with the kids. She said he usually walked down the street to a friend's house when her kids acted out. Kathleen said I should stay at the hospital and learn how to wash the baby. And so I did.

## My First 83 Years



# Tell me about a time you got in trouble at work.



When I graduated from college, IBM hired me and then fired me eight weeks later. At the same hour an IBM manager was telling me that I was a piece of crap, Lee Harvey Oswald was shooting President Kennedy. I was more upset about JFK's death than another bump in my checkered past.

As a proven misfit, I'd had considerable anxiety about going to work for IBM. Years ago my grandfather had been acquainted with Tom Watson, the founder of IBM. Since my grandfather had noted that Tom Watson was a teetotaler, I assumed their relationship had not been an intimate one. And I suspected that Tom Watson, Jr., who ran the company now, would not be throwing any keg parties for me and the other trainees at IBM's Detroit training center. What's life after college without a beer or two.

## My First 83 Years

For the next eight weeks I'd be living with a group of IBM trainees in a company-paid hotel with efficiency suites. IBM paid a good salary and a meal allowance that I saved by cooking my own meals. In my free time I visited new car showrooms and fell in love with a red British sports car called a Triumph Spitfire. I thought life was good until I learned the affable manager who'd hired me in Lansing had transferred to a new IBM location and that his replacement was coming to Detroit to take me to lunch. The new manager knew nothing about me, so I thought his intent was to size me up. Unlike the manager who'd hired me just after my Michigan State graduation, this tall one had the sour look of a man with hemorrhoids. His questions to me seemed obligatory rather than arising from any genuine curiosity. Our conversation seemed stiff and awkward, causing me to worry about this situation. I tried to suppress the anxiety, but this man had disdainful eyes. I didn't trust him.

I studied hard until the IBM training managers told our class what the IBM rules were. Sales engineers should drive a GM car because General Motors was IBM's biggest customer. If we took a customer out to lunch, we should not drink alcohol. If the customer coerced us into having a drink, we should call the office after lunch and say we were going home because we'd had a drink. One slouch-shouldered manager said we should stand up straight, always wear a dark suit, and take notes in class.

## My First 83 Years

When I heard the last rule, I deliberately left my pencil untouched on the desk while the others picked up their pencils and opened their notebooks. My mind drifted off.

The rules pissed me off. It felt as though I were back in first grade. When IBM interviewed a prospect, I thought they should give the candidate an “IBM Regulations” handout that let a contrarian like me know that authoritarian organizations like IBM have a rule book that must be considered a person’s bible of life.

I thought, To hell with it. I’m not about to live my life by Old Man Watson’s rules.

I bought the red Triumph Spitfire, a two-seat convertible that gave off a growl when I accelerated. I drove through the streets of Detroit with the top down and the breeze across my face. People noticed when my red car growled. I wouldn’t be squeezing many GM customers into this car unless someone wanted to sit on someone’s lap.

As if the rules from the slouch-shouldered manager weren’t bad enough, I was having trouble with a female trainee who wore wool suits and walked with a side sway, like a penguin. She had brassy orange hair and heavy orange lipstick. Orange was a good color only on fruit. She liked to drink in the evening at one of Detroit’s jazz joints with a small group of us men. Maybe

## My First 83 Years

because I was one of only two single men in the training class, she always sat next to me. When she'd had enough beer, she leaned over and aimed her orange lips toward me. I turned away discreetly, disappearing to the men's room when she became too insistent. I did a solo dance on top of a table, because the band was on top of the bar and the IBM trainees had dared me to do it. The dance got me away briefly from the protruding orange lips.

Friday was the last day of training class, and a secretary told me I needed to meet with the head of the program. It was a sunny November morning, almost noon. I was looking forward to driving my Spitfire back to Lansing. I came into an office with glass windows that overlooked the city. The manager told me to have a seat.

The manager said, "We've evaluated the work of all the trainees in the program. The trainees who've been at IBM longer than new hires like you obviously have an advantage because they already understand IBM products and services. We appreciate the effort you've put in while you were here, but in the end we decided your talents aren't really suited to our work."

While he went on blah blah blah about six week's severance pay and expenses back to Lansing, I felt suddenly pissed off.

I said real loud, "You mean I'm fired? You mean to tell me this training program was nothing more than a trial period?"

## My First 83 Years

He glanced nervously at his open door. "Please keep your voice down." He jumped up and rushed to close the door.

"If I'd known this training stint was nothing more than a trial, I'd have never taken this job. You don't judge a person in eight weeks."

He returned to his desk. "We try to make a fair evaluation on what a trainee's prospects will be for a long career with IBM. And we're not saying you don't have talent, just that it doesn't seem to be what a sales engineer needs to be successful with IBM."

What he was really saying was, to succeed in IBM's business, you must abide by their rules. What they didn't want was a nonconformist, but he wasn't honest enough to say I was fired because I'd purchased a British sports car, drank beer, and danced on a table in a bar. I felt like saying, "You're a lying sonofabitch." Instead I said, "I haven't changed in eight weeks. I'm the same person your manager evaluated then. Does this have anything to do with the new manager in Lansing?"

"Not at all. Lansing makes its evaluations, we make ours. We just feel you'll have more success somewhere else."

Guys who used the proverbial "we" really pissed me off, but I had nothing more to say. I felt I should be happy to be out, but it would have been better to leave on my own terms. I wanted the

## My First 83 Years

satisfaction of telling those stuffed shirts to shove it. I wished I hadn't felt rejected again.

I got up and left his office. People in the outer offices were rushing around with worried looks, talking in hushed tones. One woman was crying. I asked a secretary about the commotion. She said, "President Kennedy's been shot. They think he's dead."

I went to find a TV. I saw people crying, heard frightened voices, as though a nation were coming apart. I didn't have the luxury of feeling sorry for myself, for being rejected by IBM, when everybody was mourning the fallen hero.

I packed my bags, drove to the Michigan State campus in East Lansing, and talked about the President's tragedy with Jake, my former housemate, who had taken my spot at the big house where I'd stayed during my last months at MSU. I crashed in a sleeping bag on the floor of Jake's bedroom, where I had nightmares about a man chasing me with a gun. I could never see the face of the man with the gun, so I always assumed it was my father. But Jake suggested maybe the faceless man symbolized my fear of death. I said I wasn't afraid to die, but thought maybe I was.

I called my mother and said I'd be home for Thanksgiving, things hadn't worked out at IBM. I asked if I could stay with her and my stepfather until I found a job in Boston. Mom said, "Of

## My First 83 Years

course.” She was glad I’d be working closer to home.

On the drive out of Michigan, I had time to think about another failure. I didn’t know why I was seduced by big names like Mobil and IBM. If I’d had any conviction about my character, I would have known that selling for IBM wouldn’t have been much different than the time I tried to sell encyclopedias. Selling anything required a lot of bullshit.

The snow began blowing off Lake Ontario. I was somewhere between Hamilton and Buffalo. Trailer trucks passed me and threw up a wall of wet snow that thumped the side of the little red car and covered my windshield. I was driving blind, I was going to die. I exited the highway in Buffalo and found a motel. In my room, I was shaken. Jake had been right. I was afraid to die.

I thought life could be brief. Look at President Kennedy. What if I were to die young? What were the things I’d regret missing while I was alive? I’d regret that I never had a beautiful woman who was meant to ride in my Spitfire with the top down and the wind blowing our hair. I’d regret that I never got to lie on the beach in Nice or Cannes and drink French wine. I’d regret missing the German beer festivals and the Coliseum in Rome and the Parthenon in Athens. I’d regret never reaching Florence to see Michelangelo’s statue of David.

## My First 83 Years

I decided I was going to do those things before I turned thirty. It made sense to have a plan for each decade of your life. Living and dying with regrets made no sense. I slept well, maybe because I had a plan to accomplish something.

In the morning the motel parking lot was plowed, and I brushed snow off the Triumph Spitfire. I pulled away from the motel, quickly finding the entrance ramp to the New York State Thruway. I pushed the accelerator hard. The engine growled as I sped east into the rising sun.

...

Almost three years later, I arrived at Kennedy International Airport on a flight from Boston and was soon sitting on an Icelandic Airlines plane bound for Luxembourg. The plane was full, and I sat next to a young Frenchman who asked about my destination. I related my plan to visit a pen pal in Germany and travel to the Volkswagen factory in Wolfsburg to pick up the new Beetle that I'd purchased through the Europe by Car organization after selling the Spitfire to a kid from Wakefield. I spoke of visiting a cousin in Oslo, a student in Berlin, and my sister's pen pal in Frankfurt. "After my visits I'll just be driving around Europe for a year. I need time to get involved in people's lives, not just see tourist sites. I'd like to know what it's like to live in countries that aren't as violent as the U.S."



## My First 83 Years

I heard a whining sound, and then the first engine roared. I took a deep breath, felt the turmoil in my stomach. As the plane moved onto the runway, I smiled through tight lips. I thought about my stepfather's departing words of wisdom about my leaving employment as a technical service representative for a small Boston company: "Anyone who quits a good engineering job to go running around Europe for a year ain't too smart in my book."

And my reply to him: "Guess I ain't too smart then."

## My First 83 Years

# Who is the wisest person you've known? What have you learned from them?



I would like to say the wisest person I've known was a woman whom I will call Mrs. Horawitz, not because she had the wisest outlook on life but, as a writing teacher, she knew I would become a writer. She initiated my love for a family of authors who would move me with their collective wisdom and ability to express their thoughts in writing.

My time with Mrs. Horawitz began shortly after I'd completed a vagabond year in Europe. I was twenty-seven. Her brain had all the knowledge about writing I wanted to possess. I'd enrolled in her "Writing and Publishing" course, which was held in a Harvard University classroom one evening each week. Mrs. Horawitz was middle-aged and pear-shaped and candid about how few people ever made a living at writing. She'd begun

## My First 83 Years

writing when her psychiatric practice became too depressing, seeing only the problems of humanity, seeing only the worst of life. Her doctor-husband provided the family support. She could afford to write short stories for women's magazines. She said writing was fun, but the pay was lousy.

She knew all about point of view, building a story toward a climax, and that John O'Hara's stories were models for good dialogue. She had us read an O'Hara book called *Assembly*. She said an almost perfectly constructed novel was Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny*, and I was enthralled when I read it. What I didn't like about her class were assignments to write about mundane events, like describing a waiter or waitress in a restaurant.

But Mrs. Horawitz wanted the class to describe people we'd never met. When I asked how you could know what went on in the minds of people you'd never met, she said the key to writing fiction was being able to use your imagination. A fictional character might blend the physical characteristics of an anonymous person with the emotional makeup of an intimate acquaintance.

When Mrs. Horawitz returned my writing, she said she thought I would become a writer. She asked what country I came from. I said the United States; I was born in New Jersey. She thought I

## My First 83 Years

had an accent. I had no accent. What could Mrs. Horawitz be hearing? Maybe she was Jewish and heard ghost accents from those with German surnames. She was friendlier with me when she knew I was born in New Jersey. She said I should visit her on Cape Cod next summer, show her my writing, and meet her daughter. Maybe Mrs. Horawitz was a matchmaker. But I wrote a novel instead.

Years later as I was nearing retirement from a career as a technical writer, I dreamt once again about writing something that challenged the creative part of my brain. I'd become fascinated with Frank McCourt's voice in his memoir *Angela's Ashes*. I began reading other memoirs — any with a captivating voice. It was probably Anne Lamott's nonfiction that I blame for making me think writing about my family would not send me to Hell. It was her personal stories and self-deprecating voice that made me conclude she was probably the wisest writing teacher in my experience.

Lamott's book *Bird by Bird* stands as the one that allows me to find my voice and write with a certain abandon. I think the most important thing Anne Lamott said to me was this:

“We write to expose the unexposed. If there is one door in the castle you have been told not to go through, you must. Otherwise, you'll just be rearranging furniture in rooms you've

## My First 83 Years

already been in. Most human beings are dedicated to keeping that one door shut. But the writer's job is to see what's behind it, to see the bleak unspeakable stuff, and to turn the unspeakable into words — not just into any words but if we can, into rhythm and blues. You can't do this without discovering your own true voice, and you can't find your true voice and peer behind the door and report honestly and clearly to us if your parents are reading over your shoulder. They are probably the ones who told you not to open that door in the first place. You can tell if they're there because a small voice will say, 'Oh, whoops, don't say that, that's a secret,' or 'That's a bad word,' or 'Don't tell anyone you jack off. They'll all start doing it.' So you have to breathe or pray or do therapy to send them away. Write as if your parents are dead."

But Koren Zailckas, author of the best-selling memoir *Smashed*, said, "I don't know where the idea originated that memoir writing is cathartic. For me, it's always felt like playing my own neurosurgeon, sans anesthesia. As a memoirist, you have to crack your head open and examine every uncomfortable thing in there... Ultimately, I think a memoir leaves its author with more terror than comfort, more questions than closure."

If Mrs. Horawitz had made this clear, I might have refrained from cracking my head open and exposing my family these years later. But she'd wanted to teach the great American novel, and

## My First 83 Years

I'd accomplished only an obscure novel. She'd never mentioned memoir's fascinations and its discomfort level.

I never understood the wisdom required to raise a child until Jesse was born. Abraham Lincoln had said, "A child is a person who is going to carry on what you have started. He is going to sit where you are sitting, and when you are gone, attend to those things which you think are important...the fate of humanity is in his hands."

And so began my fascination with authors who were wise to the problems of raising children. I didn't see how Jesse's passion for jumping off high places and running as though his pants were on fire was going to further the state of humanity.

In their book *Your Three-Year-Old, Friend or Enemy*, Louise Bates Ames and Frances Ilg say, "Three is a conforming age. Three-and-a-half is just the opposite. Refusing to obey is perhaps the key aspect of this turbulent, troubled period in the life of the young child. It sometimes seems to his mother that his main concern is to strengthen his will, and he strengthens this will by going against whatever is demanded of him by that still most important person in his life, his mother. Many a mother discovers that even the simplest event or occasion can elicit total rebellion." Better understanding of his turbulent cycles gave Shelley and me insight into normal periods of turmoil, making

## My First 83 Years

us feel less like failures. We smiled and commiserated with one another, saying, “How many months until equilibrium again?”

Popular children’s book author Margaret Wise Brown said, “In this modern world where activity is stressed almost to the point of mania, quietness as a childhood need is too often overlooked. Yet a child’s need for quietness is the same today as it has always been — it may be even greater...In quiet times and sleepy times a child can dwell in thoughts of his own, and in songs and stories of his own.”

Anne Lamott’s book about writing, *Bird by Bird*, mentions writing about a person whom we love and events with them that change us. In the book, she says, “...there is still something to be said for painting portraits of the people we have loved, for trying to express those moments that seem inexpressibly beautiful, the ones that change us and deepen us.”

Anthony Wolf says in his book *Get Out of My Life, but First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall*, “If establishing a sense of one’s own independence is the main job of the adolescent, then letting go of their children is the main task of the parents of adolescents... Gradually, whether teenage children seem ready or not, they must be allowed to take over the control of their own lives. But the deepest impulse of their parents screams out against this duty... Still, parents must let go, and, to make



## My First 83 Years

matters even trickier, they must do so while setting limits and making demands. And often hardest of all for parents of the basic belligerent teenager, love must still be given.”

In *The Wonder of Boys*, Michael Gurian says, “Sports activities provide a place for emotional development, a place to be empathic when need be, a place to find that one ‘best friend’ everyone looks for, a place to find a group with whom to talk, in that veiled way boys often talk. Sports activities are partially responsible for making boys into men. They give boys a frame in which to develop into manhood. If they are handled by effective mentors, the sports activities will teach a boy that growing up means equal parts playfulness and responsibility.”

Is it wise to write about my family? Did I gain enough wisdom from these authors to write responsibly about how it all transpired?

Mother Teresa said, “Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.”

I guess that is the wisdom I try to bring to my writing...that humanity is in a constant search to find great love.

Surprisingly, children sometimes express wisdom about love. When Jesse was small and I was putting him to bed one night, he gave me a long, hard hug.

## My First 83 Years

He said, “You like long hugs instead of short hugs because you get more love with long hugs.”



Kurt and Jesse hugging after he flew us to Maine

# Who inspires you?



**T**here is that one person who has often compelled me through life to be different and do better than I am currently. I have been inspired repeatedly by her amazing empathy toward others as she has traveled through life. She has been, and still is, an amazing mother to Jesse. I am lucky to have had her as my life partner for the past 40 years.

Shelley's toughest challenge was guiding me through my cancer diagnosis and recovery. If not for her, I doubt I'd be here now. Perhaps her love inspired me to survive.

"Whatever it is...it has to come out of there." Doctor Jennifer is talking to Shelley in hushed tones as though whatever-it-is should not be heard by other patients in the recovery area. I'm waking up from a routine colonoscopy. In my haze I turn my head enough to see the frown on this spindly woman. Even in the fog of anesthesia, I sense Doctor Jennifer is going to begin using the C-word. A more pervasive fog descends as Shelley drives us

## My First 83 Years

home. The mist of fear makes me blind to the colorful trees of autumn.

She is with me again the next day when another doctor performs an endoscopy to take photographs of the tumor, and the day after that when a technician performs a CT scan that reveals hernias in addition to the tumor. Since I have no visible hernia, I find it distressing to learn that my athletic body of seventy-five years seems to be going into the trash can all at once.

On the referral of Doctor Jennifer, Shelley drives us two hours upstate for an appointment with a well-known seasoned surgeon (SS). In the examining room a testy nurse says the SS needs to see the tumor for himself.

Shelley says, "You already have photographs of the tumor. Why does my husband need another invasive procedure?"

The testy nurse says, "The sigmoidoscopy is non-negotiable."

After I finish prepping in the toilet, testy nurse instructs Shelley to leave the room. The SS arrives finally with several medical students and instructs me to adopt an awkward kneeling position on the footrest at the end of an examining table (butt up, head down). It is a good position for prayer, but I'm too anxious to ask God why I'm kneeling so close to the floor without even a prayer mat. So while I receive the scope with the requisite

## My First 83 Years

amount of wincing that comes from having no sedative and no prayers, the SS explains in hushed tones to the students about the tumor. One of the young female students rubs my back. When the exam is over and Shelley returns, the SS says the rate of survival for my stage of cancer is 87 percent. Good chance to beat the odds. When I ask about laparoscopic surgery (the least invasive type), the SS says not for men. "The male pelvis is much smaller than a woman's." Huh? But then the SS is probably leaving the hospital after December anyway. He doesn't say retire, but that's what I think he means. One of his competent colleagues will slice my pelvis open, probably while the SS is vacationing somewhere in the Caribbean. I leave with doubts and an appointment for a full-body MRI. On the drive home, Shelley says, "I didn't like him. He was condescending."

Not wanting to admit my growing anxiety, I say, "He's supposed to be the best in the state."

"It didn't even sound like he'd be the one doing the surgery."

Shelley contacts our neighbor, Kitty, who puts her in touch with a woman in our town whose husband died shortly after his surgery with the same SS and his team. When this woman contracted cancer a couple years later, she rejected the SS and chose a team of surgeons at a large Boston hospital. So Shelley sets up a surgical appointment for me there with a well-known

## My First 83 Years

doctor who also teaches at Harvard. Soon we are in Boston.

In the examination room, I feel no relief. The city, the hospital's crowded corridors, the sirens — not the atmosphere for a man who once lived in Boston but fled to the country long ago. But when a smiling little woman with a long skirt and white doctor's coat enters and immediately cups her hands around one of mine, my heart eases. She says, "I know you don't want to do this again, but I would like to see the enemy. I promise I'll be gentle. Then we can form a plan to defeat the enemy."

So the gown, the toilet, the prep procedure again. But this time no kneeling in a humiliating position, no medical student observers, and no banishing Shelley from the room. I lie on my side on the examining table and at some point Doctor Lilliana says to me, "If you look up at the monitor, you can see the enemy." I do so with no real enthusiasm for another candid picture of my bowel. After she removes the scope, I sit at one end of the examining table and breathe deeply. She rolls her stool up against my knees and cups my hand in hers again. "I know you're scared but try not to worry. You're going to be okay. We're going to defeat the enemy."

Ten days later I'm back at my local clinic to see about radiation and chemotherapy to shrink the enemy before surgery. Doctor Jamison has a habit of twisting his body and looking away when

## My First 83 Years

we talk, as if the answers are out in the atmosphere. He sends me to his radiation team, women who have me change into the johnny and lie down beneath the Zap-a-Tron while they mark my pelvis for the radiation gun and while I hope they refrain from zapping anything down there except the enemy. Later Shelley and I meet my oncologist, who has a reputation for being intelligent, good with patients, but condescending with nurses. He says I can take my pre-op chemo as pills at home but that the post-op chemo will be through infusions here at the clinic. Shelley is dubious about the need for post-op chemo, but Doctor Nickerson says standard protocol is to do it that way for Stage-2 cancer. He says, "You're in good shape for your age, and you don't smoke. You should tolerate the chemo well." I think Shelley and the doctor might lock horns, but she saves her grumbling about him until the ride home, suggesting oncologists whom friends have said were smart and empathetic. But he has a soft voice and smiles despite seeing so many cancer patients. He presents logical reasoning behind treatment protocols.

To complicate matters during this time, my mother stops eating much and is sleeping more during the daytime (often in her clothes in bed). Shelley thinks she's nearing the end. As caring for her becomes more complicated and my energy is being compromised by daily radiation treatments, Shelley calls Home Healthcare to Mom's house. They recommend Hospice. Just

## My First 83 Years

before Thanksgiving, my sister, Karla, flies in from Colorado to help with Mom, who keeps fighting to get out of bed. As she weakens, Mom asks why she feels so bad. Shelley asks her why she thinks she feels bad.

Mom says, "Because I'm old and dying."

Shelley says, "Your spirit is strong, but your body is very tired."

Shelley and Karla have been taking turns sleeping at Mom's house. Shelley is there when, after reaching a hundred a few months earlier, Mom dies in her sleep in the pre-dawn hours of December 2nd. She calls me around 7 AM. As I bump around Mom's house later, I think Shelley has more perseverance and love than anyone I ever knew.

After weeks of daily radiation zaps and chemo pills to shrink the enemy, Shelley drives us back to Boston in early December. I feel the weight in Doctor Lilliana's examination room of having to make a big decision. Soft-spoken once again, she presents two surgery options: reversal surgery (two surgeries that leave the anus intact but often produce an unpredictable colon in older patients) and colostomy surgery (a permanent hole at the waist with a bag attached). I tell her I've already researched both options and pretty much decided that I don't like the idea that an unpredictable colon would force me to be forever anxious about diet and access to the nearest toilet.



## My First 83 Years

She says, “I think you’ve made the best decision.” She says we should schedule surgery, which she’ll perform with laparoscopes and robotic arms, proving she is an expert on the “smaller” male pelvis. After guiding us to her assistant to set up a surgery date, Doctor Lilliana grabs my hand again and smiles. “You’re so cute.” Then she hustles away to other patients.

I don’t believe “cute” really describes a small, anxious man, but her remark makes me feel as though she sees more in me than a damaged patient. Actually she is cute too, and I love her despite the knowledge that she will soon be cutting me up.

Two weeks before my surgery, Shelley drives us to Boston and the hospital again to meet with a consulting nurse who will instruct on how to prepare for surgery and a stoma nurse who will mark my skin for placement of a surgically-created hole in my abdomen where poop will leave my body after Doctor Lilliana removes part of my colon. The stoma nurse uses her magic marker to draw the X-target three inches to the left of my navel and instructs me to keep that area dry until surgery. I wonder again how something so foreign can actually be happening.

I try to console myself with the knowledge that famous people have had stomas. The stoma nurse points out photographs on the wall in their hallway outside the examining rooms: President Eisenhower, actress Loretta Young, football player Jerry Kramer.

## My First 83 Years

Later I read about Napoleon Bonaparte, who is often pictured with his right hand in his shirt, a method some say he developed to conceal his goat bladder ostomy bag. But famous company does not mean I can shed the feeling my body will soon be broken. I will need to hide my ostomy bag under long jerseys and sweatshirts.

In early February, Shelley and I check in to a hotel near the hospital, where I begin drinking nasty solutions to clear my colon. Early the next morning we walk to the hospital. Soon I'm flat on a cart outside the operating room, being prepped by some guy who says he climbed the same mountain on which Shelley and I were married thirty-five years ago. I tell him the wedding party drove to the top. He asks me if it's okay for him to insert an epidural (which from my recollection was used to relieve Shelley's pain during childbirth). Who wants pain? Go for it, I tell him.

Eight hours later I share a hospital room with a frail, bearded man who looks older than me and has some mysterious virus that is causing an open sore on his leg and making him seriously ill. While Shelley is at my bedside every day, the bearded man has no visitors until a woman who says she is a professor at the college where they both teach. According to ongoing medical discussions at his bedside, his open sore could be contagious. So I avoid our common toilet (by virtue of my catheter and ostomy

## My First 83 Years

bag). I avoid shaving until the head nurse says I'm beginning to resemble an old man. Succumbing to the criticism, I ask a cheerful student nurse to hold a pan of water so I can shave without entering the contagious toilet to which the bearded man has been shuffling. Even so, I fear I'll probably leave the hospital with the deadly virus. But when I leave five days later, I conclude maybe being cute wards off the deadly virus.

A few days after returning home, a Home Health Care nurse arrives to inspect a drain in one of the four small sutures across my abdomen and a suture in my rear. Then a wonderful physical therapist arrives to help alleviate the rear-end muscle spasms that are inhibiting urination. A social worker arrives to see if I'm depressed and urges us to update our advance health directives, perhaps in case bending over for more rear inspections sends me into cardiac arrest.

Weeks later I have minor surgery to insert a port into my chest, and then chemotherapy drugs are dripping into the port every few weeks. Halfway through my treatments, a hospital chaplain stops by my seat in the chemotherapy room and starts talking to Shelley and me. He says he writes a column for a local newspaper. A few days later he emails me his article "Writing is Healing." He writes, "I had a strange and disturbing thought. It originated from reading a compelling book, *Writing as a Way of Healing*, by Louise DeSalvo. She shares many wonderful

## My First 83 Years

perspectives on how writing heals. It's not only the act of writing that heals, it's the memories. Not as in remembering someone's name, but in recalling events. Medical staffs term it narrative medicine."

So I continue scribbling stuff at home, mostly about raising Jesse who, as a child, asked so many questions about life and God and death that I was never sure how to answer.

Once I finish chemotherapy, I begin to feel stronger after a couple weeks. I'm walking a mile with Shelley each day and performing yard work. Despite my improvement, I can't shake the feeling of being broken. The numb toes and fingers from the chemotherapy, a nagging open sore on one toe, a bulging hernia that will need surgery, and daily visits to my stoma are constant reminders that my body, and perhaps my mind, will never be whole again.

I begin the process of healing in the chemotherapy room, observing others who are struggling, asking my empathetic nurses about their lives and families. Some of these guardian angels have stories that move me. Many have cancer in their family. All seem to take comfort in making a connection with me beyond the manipulation of the chemo bags. If other oncology patients are not waiting to check in, the nurse scheduler with the authoritarian voice leaves her booth to hug Shelley and me.

## My First 83 Years

I join the online Inspire network, where cancer survivors express their fears, questions, and stories. I find comfort and useful information in the discussions of these survivors as they speak to solving day-to-day problems associated with recovery. Some even provide humor. One woman announces her 34th anniversary with a stoma named “Sam.” Another counters that she has spent 38 years with “Helen.” One contributor describes a cookout in which his “Chief” is known to most participants except a new guy who declares in some random discussion involving beer that everyone has an asshole. The man with the Chief says he does not have one. The new guy expresses disbelief, as in, “What you been smoking?” An offer of a hundred dollars is extended to new guy if he will put his hand down Chief’s pants and find anything to stick his finger in. After much laughter from the cookout crowd, new guy stutters “ttthat’s nnnasty,” jumps in his pickup truck, and drives off. Crude humor? Definitely. But I suppose every cancer survivor needs a coping mechanism.

Shelley is my coping mechanism, having been with me through all of it. She is a stellar example of love when a husband is at his worst. She emails my progress to friends and tells of those who are praying for me. Her friend Joan sends me a napping blanket similar to the one she used years ago during her recovery from breast cancer surgery.

## My First 83 Years

And yet, I feel broken. In his book, *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stevenson writes, “I guess I’d always known but never fully considered that being broken is what makes us human. We all have our reasons. Sometimes we’re fractured by the choices we make; sometimes we’re shattered by things we would never have chosen. But our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis for our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing.” I must try to see this view.

Shelley emails friends whenever follow-up CT scans and colonoscopies indicate a good outcome. Many write notes of love and encouragement. I write them my thanks. Knowing my interest in birds, Shelley’s mom sends cards with bluebirds and cardinals, noting her love for me and those of her friends who have me in their prayers. Jesse tells his friends that his dad is beating cancer.

How fortunate, I think, that I’ve received mercy from so many and have begun to write my way toward healing. Often I look up from my computer, glance out the window at a bright yellow goldfinch at the bird feeder, and know how grateful I am to be seeing the world in new colors.

Perhaps because of the trauma I suffered in childhood, I have had a penchant for sarcasm (“an excellent blade to carry when life is beating you up,” says author Laurie Halse Anderson).

## My First 83 Years

Maybe someday I'll learn to be as loving and empathetic as Shelley.

On my birthday in 1999, Shelley gave me a small fabric holder for the prayer cards that she had made for me. One of the cards had the following prayer: "O Mother/Father God, may my heart be opened. May I be given the courage to see as you would have me see and to listen as you would have me hear. May I know the blessing of your Spirit, the guidance of your presence, the comfort of your peace.



Jesse's curiosity was inspiring when he was young

## My First 83 Years



The day Jesse flew his dad to Maine was inspiring even at 82



# If you could choose any talents to have, what would they be?



I feel connected to Mango, my neighbor's orange-and-white cat, which often greets me when I cross the road to my mailbox. We are both old-timers with battle scars. He vocalizes his pleasure when I scratch his head and run my fingernails down his spine. He often tries to block me when I try to walk back up my driveway to the side door. He reminds me that I sometimes wish I'd had the talent to become a veterinarian.

When I was youngster, I thought I had the talent to become a professional baseball player. I was athletic and very competitive. I admired small baseball players like Phil Rizzuto, who was a shortstop for the New York Yankees. My grandfather even took me to Yankee Stadium to see Rizzuto play. But as I matured, I realized to my dismay that a small country boy was not going to

## My First 83 Years

grow big enough to become a professional athlete.

What I didn't recognize at the time was my natural connection with animals.

Growing up, I never understood why the cats in our house seemed to gravitate toward me rather than my sisters. At one point, when I was a teenager, the cat population at our house had risen to twenty-one. My mother and sisters had become addicted to the cuddly things and allowed feline sex lives to run rampant without any thought to giving them away or getting them spayed. Some adult cats became fed up with overcrowding and headed for the woods. And though some died, there always seemed to be a pregnant female ready to replenish the supply. One round-bellied cat rejected the towel-lined carton my mother had placed near the warmth of the wood stove and insisted on sleeping at the foot of my bed until, in the dark of the night, she gave birth there to the first of four, carried it to my pillow, and caused me to wake up screaming because I thought there was a mouse in my ear.

For a time, at the request of my sisters, there was also a rabbit in the house. As it nosed its way slowly around the living room, our kittens enjoyed perching on the arm of a large stuffed chair and then leaping down onto the rabbit's back, causing the rabbit to leap into a state of confusion. I felt a bit sorry for the rabbit and

## My First 83 Years

its being outnumbered by kittens. I didn't think the poor rabbit should be subject to that kind of anxiety.

I suppose, because there were so many cats, there was no room for a dog. Or I didn't ask for one. It wasn't until I went away to Annapolis and my divorced mother married a man named Ed, who had a dog, that a canine entered the house. But six months later the dog, Davey Crockett, took revenge on the neighbor who had been arguing with Ed when he keeled over with a heart attack and died. Davey Crockett then went and killed some of Henry's chickens, and so my mother gave Davey to one of Ed's relatives.

It wasn't until I was thirty that I owned a dog. My first wife, Lexxie, tricked me into taking a stray beagle that was hanging around. It was the smell of hot dogs that drew the male beagle into our summer yard. Without pausing to see if this was friendly territory, he headed straight for the barbecue. I said, "Get the hell out of here."

He wagged his tail as though he thought I loved him and went directly to Lexxie, who broke off a piece of hot dog and fed him from her palm.

"Don't feed him," I said. "He'll start hanging around."

## My First 83 Years

“I can’t resist those sad eyes. What’s wrong with a little treat?” She fed him more. “The poor thing acts starved.”

“Animals always act starved. I used to bring home sunfish I caught in the lake and feed them to my sisters’ cats over there in the barn. A dozen cats leaping all over me for a few fish. They weren’t hungry, they were competitive. One female ate a fish while pinning the head of another cat against the barn floor. Don’t think my mother didn’t feed those cats plenty of cat food. She did. Competition just brings out the worst in animals.”

“He doesn’t have a collar.”

“Probably one of Henry’s hounds.”

“I don’t think so. Henry’s dogs are skittish, and they carry their tails low. This one came in here with his tail stiff and high, like he owned the place.”

The dog left the same way, as soon as the hot dogs were gone, even though Lexxie rubbed his ears and coaxed him to stay. He put his nose to the ground and followed the road to the lake and cottages with barbecues.

The next day Lexxie and I discussed the dog with Henry across the stone wall that separated our houses. “Sleeps with my dogs mostly,” Henry said. “Begs food down to the girls’ camp dining hall. If he belonged to one of them summer people, he’d have a

## My First 83 Years

collar. I figure he come up here with some hunter and got himself lost.”

“Why don’t you keep him?” I asked.

“Got too many to feed now.” Henry grinned, showing his one lone tooth. “Why don’t you take him back to the city?”

Lexxie nodded as if she were considering it. “There’s something endearing about him — maybe the mystery about where he came from. Or maybe his total trust in strangers.”

“Good-lookin’ dog,” Henry said.

“An apartment’s no place for a dog,” I said. “Besides, Lexxie wants a golden retriever.” And I didn’t want a distraction to finishing the novel I was working on.

But as the summer waned, Lexxie said the dog was probably feeling anxious about where his next meals would come from. The girls’ camp had closed and most of the summer cottages would soon be closed up for the season. She said we should bring him with us and give him to her friend who worked at an Animal Rescue League in Cambridge. So she loaded the dog in my old VW on our last summer weekend. At the end of our trip, she walked the dog around the grounds of our residence, an old Victorian house in Melrose, before leading him upstairs to our third-floor apartment.

## My First 83 Years

I thought the dog would be a distraction while I made my first attempt at writing a novel, a partly autobiographical affair about plebe year hazing at Annapolis and getting expelled. But the dog stayed for a day, then another day, and then a week. While Lexxie went off to a secretarial job each day and I worked on the novel, the dog slept under my writing table, nudging my feet now and then. I was confused about why I liked the warmth of his chin on my feet. I thought he might be helping moderate the anxiety I was feeling about the traumatic circumstances of my departure from Annapolis.

So Pup Dog became my dog. A few years later, after Lexxie and I had separated, I was living alone in my childhood house in New Hampshire with Pup and another hound name Droopy. The two dogs came home one day with their muzzles filled with porcupine quills. I was able to pull Pup's quills with only an occasional whimper from him. But Droopy snapped at me when I tried the same with him. So I had to drive Droopy to a distant veterinarian to have him anesthetized while the vet pulled the quills. Before I left, the vet gave me some medication that would knock Droopy out if it happened again and save me a long drive to his office. It happened again. I knocked Droopy out and pulled his quills. I worried when it took Droopy a long time to wake up from the anesthesia.

## My First 83 Years

In my elder years, I've watched a lot of shows on TV in which the veterinarians pull quills and perform complicated surgeries to fix animals. I admire their talent and dedication. Perhaps my favorite is Doctor Jeff, Rocky Mountain Vet. "Jeff Young has 80,000 friends in Denver, Colorado. That's about the number of clients - people and their pets - he serves as the popular owner/lead veterinarian of Planned Pethood Plus, one of the busiest animal clinics in the U.S. This poignant series reveals some of the riveting cases that Dr Jeff and his team of 30 veterinary experts respond to with precision, compassion and speed in an often tense, chaotic atmosphere. The staff juggle routine pet visits with several dozen daily crucial surgeries and emergencies. For animals in need outside of the clinic, Dr Jeff finds time to take his services on the road, visiting farm and ranch animals in far-reaching communities and reservations within Colorado, neighboring states and beyond." Doctor Jeff and his team even go to rural parts of Mexico to perform free spays and other surgeries for people who cannot afford a vet.

I had first spotted the deer a few years ago from my studio window when she was feeding on some scrub and had a couple fawns bouncing around her. But she moved awkwardly with her right front leg drooping, not touching the ground. With only three functioning legs, she seemed unlikely to live through a harsh New England winter. I wished then that I'd had the

## My First 83 Years

veterinarian's talent to splint her leg.

I asked a neighbor about her, and he said he thought a hunter had wounded her the previous winter. Other friends who lived a mile away said they had seen her in their field. So even with the handicap, she seemed to have a decent range.

Somehow she lived through another winter and returned to my yard again for summer vegetation, but without a fawn. I decided to go outside and approach her. Maybe we could be friends. Seeing me, she lurched away a short distance and then looked at me. I was surprised how fast she had moved on three legs. I moved a bit closer. She jumped away a safe distance and looked back. I stayed still and met her gaze. I thought her eyes displayed a spark of intelligence that I couldn't decipher. I wanted to be closer, but as soon as I moved, she lurched over a wall and was gone.

Another year passed, and she was again feeding in my backyard, this time with a fawn that came within ten feet of my studio window. When I stood to get a better look, the youngster raced back to its mother. I thought I should write about an injured deer's perseverance in overcoming her handicap. Her resilience to overcome the broken leg gave me hope about my own medical problems. Sometime the following summer, a movement in the corner of my eye made me glance up from my computer into our



## My First 83 Years

back yard. Eight young deer were eating grass in the sun. The scene reminded me that I had not seen my broken doe of the previous summer. It occurred to me some of these young deer may have been her offspring and that their memory of the grass and my wife's edible flowers may have drawn them to return even though their mother was no longer alive. I would now have to fight my own brokenness without her inspiration.

If a cat or a dog or a deer looks into my eyes, I want to know how I can help them. If I'd had the talent to be a veterinarian, I would have done more.



Mango on our front porch

## My First 83 Years



I had a beagle once named Pup Dog that I really loved



Mama Turkey in our yard with her babies

# What are your favorite memories of Jesse growing up?



**B**athing Jesse when he was an infant and our laughter during that time.

Reading him a story book in the evenings and settling him in bed for the night. After the story, he'd request that I stay for fifteen minutes and, when I'd say the time was up, he'd usually say, "Stay for just two more minutes."

There was a time I had him in a backpack, his head against my neck, while I viewed a complex painting at the Clark Art Institute. The painting, *The Women of Amphissa*, depicted a gathering of gossamer-gowned women in a marble courtyard. I was aware that a well-dressed matron stood at my right elbow, examining the same painting. I felt Jesse lean forward, as if to get a better view. He said, "Meowwww." "You have to be quiet,"

## My First 83 Years

I whispered. “Meowwww.” I knew the matron would suggest that I take him outside. Art connoisseurs thought unruly children should be banned from art museums. But this woman bent closer to the painting and said, “Isn’t that remarkable. He sees the leopard skins some of the women are resting on.” I bent closer and said, “I didn’t see that.”

The first time we climbed Mt. Monadnock, Jesse was three and insisted he was going all the way to “the top,” bounding from rock to rock along the wooded path. I had to create Top One and Top Two that day so he would agree we could have our picnic lunch on the bare ledges just above the tree line (Top One was about halfway to the Top Two peak) and then return.

His curiosity and endless questions. Where do you go when you die? What’s God? Do cats and mice go to the same heaven we go to?

While down-hill skiing for the first time at Temple Mountain, we spent the first half hour on the beginners slope. Then he said, “I want to go on the chair lift.” While Shelley took a lesson, he and I rode up on the chair lift. I gave him instructions...how to slow down, how to turn. He spent a lot of time in the snow. We went up again and down again, Jesse still a rolling snowball. At lunch in the ski lodge, stripping off his wet clothes, he said, “I don’t want to ski anymore. I want to play those video games over

## My First 83 Years

there.” We said he didn’t have to ski, but no video games this day. He whined, we persisted. Later he changed his mind and put on the skis again. Then, as if by some miracle, he skied down the mountain twice without a spill. Near the end of our run, the three of us stopped to rest. Jesse watched a snowboarder hit a mogul at 50 warp speed and leap high into the air. “I’m going to do that someday,” he said, foreshadowing the reckless acrobat who was determined to leap over everything. I knew God was torturing me, just didn’t know why.

The days when I worked at home and was there to watch him get off the school bus.

Watching and sometimes coaching him in school-boy soccer and baseball.

I once read a newspaper article that said, “Some employers welcome résumés listing activities such as hang gliding, kayaking and rock climbing. Such interests indicate a person is likely to be an individual thinker, with a certain level of endurance and interest in pushing himself or herself. It also shows the person is likely to have a mechanism for de-stressing.” Even if this were true, I wanted to protect Jesse from serious injury without being a smothering helicopter parent. But because Shelley and I recognized early that we’d given birth to a risk-taker, we suspected raising Jesse would

## My First 83 Years

probably lead to emotional turmoil and indelible memories involving risky adventures. And so it did.

My conditions for fulfilling Jesse's dream about a dirt bike were top grades in school, evidence of maturity, and that Shelley agreed to it. I was certain she'd say no. My mistake. She met a kind and intelligent woman, Janie, who said that, after a long reluctance on her part, she and her whole family (husband and three sons) were all involved in dirt-bike racing. The first dealer we visited had Jesse's coveted Kawasaki KX60 in stock but said that dirt bike was too dangerous for a beginner. He recommended the Honda XR70R but said he probably couldn't get one until the end of August. Jesse was glum. His dream Kawasaki had been shot down and summer would be over before he could ride. I called other dealers. Our closest dealer said he had two Honda XR70s in stock that were spoken for — waiting for the customer's credit to clear. I suggested that we order one from them. Jesse agreed. While he was at a friend's house the next day, I called the dealer to see about ordering. "You're in luck," the dealer said, "that customer's credit fell through. Those two XR70s are available." Within an hour, Shelley and I were there buying one. "We'll bring our son up tomorrow morning on the pretense of ordering the XR70. We'll spring the surprise on him then."

## My First 83 Years

When we arrived the next morning, we introduced Jesse to the dealer and talked about ordering an XR70. The dealer asked him if he'd like to sit on one that they had out back. In the sun in front of the workshop, he sat on the shiny red dirt bike. Perfect fit. A mechanic and another employee were hanging around, watching. "Should we order one?" I asked him. He climbed off, smiled, nodded. I turned to the dealer and said, "Just out of curiosity, who are the folks who bought this bike? We know a lot of people in the area." The dealer shuffled some papers he was carrying and said, "Well, the owner's papers here say this one was bought for Jesse Schmidt."

Jesse looked at me. I pulled the bike key from my pocket and placed it in his hand. "Really?" he said.

I nodded. "It's really your bike."

He sighed, looked back at the shiny Honda. The employees who'd been hanging around were all grinning. Seeing a dream come true was a popular event.

Shelley and I didn't quite know what Jesse looked like after that. Mostly he was covered with a red, white, and black zig-zag-striped helmet, goggles, red riding togs, and black boots. He grooved a track around our house where no grass would ever grow again, although he claimed that it would, even if he had to seed it in the spring. He coerced his family and

## My First 83 Years

godmother, Kitty, to help him build a dirt-bike course in what used to be Kitty's bramble field, marking it with bamboo poles and orange tape between poles. He coerced me into helping him build a jump there. He coerced Shelley (twice) and me (once, because it was his birthday wish) to attend day-long dirt bike races in which Janie's boys were racing. There was a cold rain that day, everyone covered with mud, especially the racers. By mid-afternoon, I was asking to go home. Shelley, Jesse, and his buddy insisted on staying. Outvoted. When I became tired of standing on a corner where racers sprayed mud on spectators, I sat beneath Janie's RV awning and petted their spaniel, which was tied there. Later that day, Jesse said, "Dad, do you think I could race some day?"

I said, "Not unless you can find an adult to take you. I don't want to spend the rest of my summers at dirt bike races." Going deaf, I should add, and worrying about whether he's going to get run over.

He said, "Maybe when I'm older."

As a consolation, I drove him and his buddy and their Hondas twice to a large sandpit where other dirt bikers practiced.

Many would say agreeing to a dangerous sport like dirt bike racing was a clear sign of mentally deranged parents. But because Jesse had met all the prerequisites (saving half the cost



## My First 83 Years

of a Kawasaki KX85 and getting A's in school), it was difficult to say no to a kid's passionate dream. A couple years later, we sold his Honda and hauled a new Kawasaki dirt bike home in our little trailer. According to Jesse, this was the happiest day in his life. We couldn't arrange for race-bike lessons before the first New Hampshire Challenge series race in mid-May, but Jesse argued that, except for the increased power, it wasn't that much different from the Honda XR70 he'd been riding for two years on the track he'd built in Kitty's field. "Just stay behind the other riders and learn to ride the track," everyone advised him on the first race day. But he would be racing his KX85 over a jump called the Intimidator, and my anxiety level was rising. In the last race of the day, he was well behind everyone. Good. One more lap and this ear-blasting day will come to a safe and merciful end. Then he zoomed to the crest of a jump and, instead of nosing down, sent the nose of his KX85 straight toward the sky. The crowd gasped. In mid-air he pushed away from the green monster that was beginning its tail-first descent. The bike landed vertically on its rear tire, bounced, and flipped. He crashed feet first, rolled, bounced up, and shook his head. Standing near the scene, his friend's dad rushed to check if he was still lucid and then restarted his bike. Someone in the crowd near us said, "He's not going to ride again, is he?" But Jesse was determined to finish the last lap.

## My First 83 Years

Among other riders who saw the crash, Jesse was the crash celebrity that day, except for one expert who said he'd seen "a lot worse than that." I hated the environment: swirling dust, rancid porta-potties, father's berating six-year-olds for not following their instructions, little kids crying beneath their big helmets. Too many adults trying to relive their childhoods.

It was difficult to have faith that Shelley and I were doing the right thing for Jesse by allowing him to perpetuate his motocross obsession to the exclusion of any enthusiasm for college. When a friend called one day to say Jesse had crashed his dirt bike while practicing at a sandpit and that an ambulance was taking him to the hospital, my fear was off the charts. The report that he was conscious as he was being loaded into an ambulance did nothing to dampen the agony I felt as Shelley and I headed for the hospital. He could lapse into a coma and be brain-dead before we arrived. I was certain there were no angels to protect a child with indulgent and incompetent parents. How could a kid with a professional motocross helmet fall into some sand and knock himself out? Apparently it was possible if you went flying over the handlebars, according to the young woman who'd run over to make sure he hadn't swallowed his tongue. That the helmet had a hairline crack, that the doctor in the ER made clear his disdain for dirt bikers, all caused me to believe I lacked a genuine faith that God would save my child from destruction.

## My First 83 Years

“Will I need surgery?” he asked at beginning of his sophomore year at Keene State College. We thought his painful back might have been the result of flying off high mounds on his dirt bike during summer motocross races and the shock to his spine on hard landings. By mid-October Jesse couldn’t continue his commute to the college from our home, unable to drive or sit for three classes in a row. He found comfort only while flat on the living room sofa with his head propped up enough for schoolwork on his laptop computer. Or fully reclined in the passenger’s seat of whichever driver was transporting him to a doctor’s appointment or a class where an assignment was due. During the weeks after a diagnosis of a herniated disk in his lower back, Shelley negotiated unsuccessfully with pain clinics to get him in quickly. Finally a fourth clinic gave him same-day service. But the epidural didn’t work. On a cold December day, Shelley and I drove Jesse to a big hospital two hours away, waited during his late morning surgery, and drove him home that afternoon, “I feel better already,” he said. “The doctor said I should be good enough by summer to get back on the dirt bike.”

But Jesse decided to give up dirt bike racing. He announced his intention to pursue a dream of becoming a Formula One race car driver. “It’s a lot easier on the body,” he said. While earning money as a part-time computer technician and completing his Computer Science studies in college, he began saving to buy a

## My First 83 Years

used car that he could race.

To celebrate his twenty-first birthday, Jesse asked us to travel with him to the Skip Barber Racing School for three days at Lime Rock Park in Connecticut. Since he was paying an outlandish amount from his savings for this deal, Shelley and I agreed to cover lodging and meals. Our bed-and-breakfast had four cats that strolled across the breakfast table and a large dog that kept sticking its nose into my crotch. At the race track, six of Jesse's eight classmates were about thirty, one his age, and one older man. Two were women, one of whom had three kids. All eight seemed to be there for the rush of driving a race car. I'm not sure how he learned to maneuver corners at top speed and gear down quickly after blazing down a straight-away at 120 miles an hour, but he was the only one to never spin-out on a turn. Perhaps it was his dirt bike experience or the race simulator in his bedroom. Instructors and classmates often applauded his technique. So began his dream of living in Europe as part of the race circuit there.

I had silent doubts about the new direction of Jesse's racing career. During my European vagabond days, I had seen a Formula One driver die in a fiery crash at the Grand Prix in Monaco. But racing had boosted his confidence in things that mattered. Moreover, he knew professional race car drivers needed sponsors with deep pockets and that his parents could

## My First 83 Years

provide nothing beyond a college education. So he seemed in touch with reality.

One year later, just before beginning work on his master's degree in Computer Science, Jesse and a dedicated friend loaded a red Mazda Miata onto a trailer and towed it to the New Hampshire Motor Speedway for an event sanctioned by the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA), causing Shelley and me anxiety tremors in which the imagination sees speed demons crashing in various airborne configurations. It was an older Mazda sports car that he'd purchased for \$2500 and worked on with his friend during the spring and most of the summer, converting it from a used street car to an SCCA regulation Spec Miata while slowly depleting his savings. Because the Miata's engine had over 140,000 road miles on it, there was a chance that, once he revved the engine to warp speed, it would die on practice day and spare his parents the prospect of his bumping fenders at 100 mph for two days.

The day that Shelley and I arrived, the stadium bleachers that holds 100,000 during NASCAR races were empty, but scores of SCCA members, crew, and family were camped throughout the infield. Jesse's old engine lacked the power to pass other Miatas on the straight-aways, but his driving skill allowed him to catch some on the corners. In his best race, a driver came up too fast behind an older, slower driver, spinning both of them in front of

## My First 83 Years

high-flying Jesse, forcing him onto the grass and his parents into a new and more troubling anxiety. Silently I cursed the times that my now-deceased sister had introduced him to racing by bringing NASCAR tapes to our house when she visited. I silently hoped she had taken on the task of being his guardian angel.

At day's end, for a contribution to a leukemia fund, visitors drove their cars onto the track and followed a pace car (no passing allowed). Shelley drove and talked with Jesse up front about the dynamics of the track. I used the back seat to spread out and relax for the first time that day. For me, being on a race track in a Toyota RAV4 was less a rush and more likely a vision of all the trouble that lay ahead.

But there would be many more favorite memories after he'd "grown up," and those too would become the diamonds of my mind.

## My First 83 Years



Jesse the racing man

## My First 83 Years



Jesse in a motocross race



# What is your best advice when it comes to raising children?



**C**hildren are naturally curious from birth. As such, I guess my best advice is to nurture each child's curiosity as he or she matures.

I thought loving Jesse meant learning how to respond to his questions with love and compassion. I felt troubled sometimes that I didn't have answers that might satisfy him, especially about God and death. His questions led to parent-child discussions, which led to a better understanding of Jesse, his mind, and his talents. Writing down these questions and discussions led to memories that I am grateful to have preserved. Rabbi David Wolpe, the author of *Teaching Your Children About God*, says, "When a child asks a question about God, they are not coming to you as a blank slate. They already have thoughts. It's

## My First 83 Years

more valuable to evoke what they think than it is to insert something and pre-empt their own thoughts.” Writing about his thoughts and questions led me to a better understanding not only of him but also of myself.

### Trying to Find the Answers for a Five-Year-Old

Trying to answer Jesse’s questions when he was five years old often made me feel as though God were torturing me. Sometimes his questions seemed more like a test than child curiosity:

#### 1. What’s the F-word?

At the supper table one night, Jesse said, “You should never say the B-word or the F-word.” I knew the B-word was butt. To my knowledge, however, he had never been exposed to the F-word. “What’s the F-word?” I asked. “Guess,” he said. “It has four letters.” Shelley and I made a number of foolish guesses, such as fool, food, fair, fire, fort, and so forth. Jesse kept giggling and shaking his head, until finally he got down out of his chair and whispered the F-word in my ear. I said, “Who told you that word?” He said, “Mama did.” I looked at Shelley as if she were keeping secrets. “It was carved in the edge of a table at McDonald’s,” she said. “He was sounding it out. What was I supposed to do?”

#### 2. How did Mrs. Brnger know I was afraid to use the bathroom?

## My First 83 Years

Jesse began kindergarten with great anticipation of riding the school bus. Upon arriving home, he dashed for the bathroom. Shelley and I determined he wasn't using the kindergarten bathroom during those three hours. When I asked him about it, he said he was afraid to use the bathroom. "It's too deep," he said. I asked him what "too deep" meant? "It goes way in." "Would you go if somebody else went with you?" I knew the style at his former day care had been community pee sessions with the door always open. "Yes, if Kagan could come too," he said, naming his day-care buddy. "Do you want me to send a note to Mrs. Brnger [his teacher]?" "No." "You're going to have to use the bathroom sometime." "I know." "How about trying it tomorrow?" "No, not tomorrow." Early the next morning I called his teacher and explained the situation. She understood. He could go in with his friend until he got over his anxiety. Some kids were afraid they couldn't get out, she said. The first thing Jesse asked Shelley when he got off the bus was, "How did Mrs. Brnger know I was afraid to use the bathroom? Did you send a note?" Shelley said no. He dropped the subject. After arriving home that evening and learning about his question, I said to him, "I called Mrs. Brnger this morning to see if it was okay for you and Kagan to go to the bathroom together. She said it was okay. Did she talk to you?" "Yes, she took me aside and said I could go with Kagan." "Did you go with Kagan?" "Yes." "Everything's okay now?" "Yes, I can go with Kagan whenever I

## My First 83 Years

want.” “Are you going to use the bathroom tomorrow?” “If I’m not too busy.”

### 3. Don’t they feel a little embarrassed doing that?

In January during the ice skating championships, Jesse saw a commercial on TV for Hanes underwear — some female models parading across the screen in bra and panties. Up until this time he’d understood the word model to mean model car, model train, model boat (things not real). We giggled at the commercial, and I said it seemed pretty silly for models to be running around on TV in their underwear. He said, “Yes, but they made them look very real.” Oh, he thinks the models are robots. “Those are real women,” I said. “The word model can also mean someone who shows off new clothes for TV, magazine, and catalog ads.” He nodded. “Don’t they feel a little embarrassed doing that?” “I don’t know. But Hanes pays them a lot of money to do that, so maybe they’re not embarrassed anymore.” Later I kidded him about his own Hanes underwear (he doubted me until I showed him the labels). He asked if I wore Hanes underwear, and I said only my undershirt was a Hanes. When I wanted to get him laughing, I sang the Hanes commercial, “Wait till I get my Hanes on you.”

### 4. What are you afraid of?

## My First 83 Years

I always sat on Jesse's bed each night for seventeen minutes after the end of his story time. I think it was originally fifteen minutes, but he kept begging for "just two more minutes," so it became seventeen. Sometimes he used that time to bring up any anxieties. Just as the swimming season began, he had a nightmare that he was drowning. He'd dreamt we were swimming in Laurel Lake at our usual spot, where the water was not over his head. In his dream, the water was suddenly over his head and going into his mouth. He said I'd saved him. "I'm scared of having another nightmare tonight," he said. I told him all kids his age had nightmares, that a bad dream could be a picture of something you were particularly afraid of. "What are you afraid of?" he asked. I said falling from a great height. He asked what on the ground was I afraid of. "People with guns." He said, "Me too. But not the police." I said sometimes I dreamt I was falling but always woke up before hitting the ground. I said I never died in a dream, and I didn't think other people died in their dreams either. One night, he said, "I can't go to sleep. I have bad thoughts on my mind." "What kind of bad thoughts?" "Storms." "Thunderstorms?" We'd seen TV reports of harsh storms in other parts of the state. "Tornados and hurricanes too." I said it was unlikely we would have those kinds of storms where we lived. "And there won't be any thunderstorms here tonight," I said, crossing my fingers. "The weatherman said so." I asked him to think about something positive, like our

## My First 83 Years

impending first trip to Water Country, and I let him go to sleep with the light on.

### 5. Mama, are you upset?

Shelley accompanied him when Jesse joined the “Tiny Tigers Karate Class.” There, six boys and two girls dressed in little white uniforms, learned a variety of kicks and punches and blocking maneuvers that could eventually lead them to expert status (black belt). Each week Rick taught the kids a new way to handle a bully without getting into a fight: walk away, make friends with the bully, agree with everything the bully says, or get an adult to help resolve the situation. Shelley was banging around the house one hot July day, trying to get rid of some leftover anger she was feeling toward a school principal who’d said the school would not need her occupational therapy services next year. Jesse said, “Mama, are you upset?” When she explained about this difficult woman, he said, “When I get my black belt, I’ll smash her face in!” Shelley reminded him that karate was used only to defend yourself, that sometimes adults could not work things out through discussion, that physical violence wasn’t the answer. “Remember,” Shelley concluded, “Rick said never to use a punch to hurt someone.” He said, “Unless you have to. And when I get my black belt, I’m going to smash her face in.”

6. Why was he so angry?

My sister called to say our father had died. He was seventy-eight. His second wife had died eleven years earlier, leaving him alone in a trailer park with a black Labrador retriever named Ebony. Although I'd made several attempts at reconciliation over the years, his continuing anger and alcoholism had driven me away for good before Jesse was born. And there was the rumor that he kept a gun in his trailer mainly because the outside world had always seemed a threat to him. When I mentioned his death in our household, Jesse asked why he had never met my father (his "other grandfather"). I said, "Because my father was a very angry man, and I didn't want you to meet someone like that. He said, "Why was he so angry?" I said I didn't really know, and Jesse dropped the subject. I was glad he hadn't pursued his usual inquisition on complicated matters. I still struggle with my father's ghost sometimes, especially as I try to avoid volatile men. It still haunts me to admit my father never loved me, that he was too busy admiring himself to be concerned with the feelings of my sisters and me. I vowed that if I ever became a father, I would love that child with all my heart. And from the moment Dr. Vivian cut open Shelley's abdomen and lifted him into our lives, I was in awe of this child. A nurse had cleaned him, outfitted him with a soft blanket and knit cap, and placed him in my arms. Holding him then had

## My First 83 Years

seemed magical and spiritual, as if loving a baby was the most powerful emotion on Earth.

### Trying to Find the Answers for an Eight-Year-Old

By the time Jesse turned eight, his questions had become more sophisticated:

#### 1. Do you have to be married to have a baby?

Once in the month of July, Shelley, Jesse, and I spent three vacation weeks in Colorado, visiting my sister and her family, hiking in the Rockies, and rafting down the Colorado River. We also visited a home that included a teenage girl with a new baby. After the trip, I took a four-week leave of absence from my technical writing job to spend the rest of the summer at home with Jesse. We began building a tree house using four trees as the corners. Up in the trees one day, helping me screw down the floor, he said, “Do you have to be married to have a baby?” I suspected he was thinking of the teenage mother in Colorado. “No, but it’s a good idea to be married.” He began asking questions that required some knowledge of sex. So here it was – time for the dreaded sex talk. I put down my tools and asked him what he already knew about sex. “Kagan just said we were like the animals, but I didn’t understand it.” So we talked. Soon he lost interest, and we worked on the tree house again.



## My First 83 Years

### 2. Are you afraid of anything?

Jesse had many questions about his night fears: fire and wind. When the wind blew in the giant pine tree outside his window, he had trouble falling asleep. He called for one of us. As I sat on his bed, trying to talk it out, he said, "Are you afraid of the wind?"

"No. In fact, when I was a kid, I used to sleep on the screen porch during summer storms. The wind in the pine tree didn't bother me that much. I just buried my head underneath the covers."

"Are you afraid of anything?"

"Yes. I'm afraid of people with guns and truck drivers who drive on my tail."

"You could always let the trucks go by."

"I could. You know, I'm also afraid to die."

"I'm not afraid to die. There will be so many people I know in heaven when I get there."

"That's true, but we'll have to make the trip alone, and that's a little scary...like if we sent you alone on the plane to Indiana to visit Grandma and Grandpa."

## My First 83 Years

“I wouldn’t be afraid then, because the airline would have flight attendants to watch me the whole way.” I hope God has flight attendants too.

3. Dad, when can I read the book you wrote?

Having outgrown children’s books like *Go, Dog. Go!*, Jesse learned how to read chapter books in third grade. His teacher gave his reading group some book report assignments. Shortly after he’d read a couple assignment books, he said, “Dad, when can I read the book you wrote?” I explained that I’d written the book for teenagers and that he’d understand it better in a couple years. “I’d like to try to read it now.” A few days later, after supper, he said, “Where’s your book?” I told him it was in my bookcase, and he retrieved it. He asked questions about the cover, read the novel’s title page, read the dedication page, and said, “Who’s Alexandra?” I said she was my ex-wife. “How many ex-wives do you have?” HOW MANY?? Is this kid a lawyer? “Just one.”

“Why do you have an ex-wife?”

“Because we didn’t get along very well. So I got divorced and eventually met Mama.”

“Where does she live?”

“I don’t know. Last I heard she lived in Washington state.”

## My First 83 Years

He proceeded to read the first two pages of Annapolis Misfit out loud, while Shelley and I winced at some of the teenage slang. He then inserted a book marker, closed the book, read my name on the book jacket, and said, “Are you famous?”

“No. Some authors who sell a lot of books are famous, but most authors are not.”

“Is your book in the library?”

“It was there the last time I was at the library.”

So that’s what he told his teacher the next day — that his father had a book in the library. He said to me, “Mrs. Coleman would like to borrow a copy of your book.” I asked if he told her it was a book for teenagers. “I told her it was for ages thirteen and up.” So I gave him a book to take to his teacher. When he returned from school, I asked if his teacher had had any questions about the book.

“Yeah.”

“Did she ask you who Alexandra was?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her she was one of your ex-wives.”

## My First 83 Years

One of many. Maybe a dozen. “I only have one ex-wife.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said.

### 4. What’s a condom?

Life never seemed good on the TV news. During a news story about the legality of schools making condoms available to students, Jesse said, “Dad, what’s a condom?” Act calm, the experts said. As my explanation progressed, I said, “To prevent disease or to prevent a woman from becoming pregnant.” A slow nod from the boy. I said, “Kids in high school get interested in sex but are usually too young to get married.” A blank look from the boy. I said, “Don’t use that word at school though. It’s kind of a sensitive word.” He nodded again, still watching the TV, and then said, “Dad, have you seen this commercial? It’s really funny.”

### 5. Is Aunt Donna going to die?

When my sisters and I were kids, we rode our neighbor’s hay wagon and played hide-and-seek with their three kids in the hay stacked in their huge barn. My sister, Donna, helped water their horses by riding them bareback to a nearby brook. One day a skittish horse reared up, slipped in some mud, and went over backwards, pinning Donna underneath. The horse broke her thigh bone, putting her in traction and then in a long cast for the

## My First 83 Years

summer. This seemed like the worst thing that had ever happened to her, until she was diagnosed with lung cancer. When things became bad for her that June, Jesse asked me the toughest question of the year: “Is Aunt Donna going to die?” I’d just returned from the hospital, where Donna had lapsed into a coma the night before, and I was sitting in bed with Jesse after our nightly story. The rest of the family was still with Donna.

“Yes, I think she’s going to die.”

“Will I ever see Aunt Donna again?”

“Probably not until you get to heaven.” I explained that her cancer most likely had come from smoking cigarettes.

“I’m never going to smoke,” he said.

Donna and Jesse had a special relationship. She had no children. And because her nieces and one other nephew lived in Colorado, Jesse was the only child she saw on a regular basis. She loved shopping for presents for him on his birthday and holidays and then seeing his eyes light up when he opened the brightly colored packages. But Donna’s greatest gift to him was NASCAR races, which were unavailable on our TV then. She recorded them from her cable service and brought these racing thrills for him whenever she came. I suppose it was Donna’s NASCAR recordings that made Jesse say his future was going to be auto

## My First 83 Years

racing. Periodically he said, “Why can’t I race go-karts?”

Donna died a few days later at the young age of fifty-three. The next day a mourning dove hovered outside one of our windows, as if trying to enter the porch where we’d always slept as kids. A day later while riding my bike, a butterfly smacked me in the face. Later a dragonfly accosted me while I was kayaking in the middle of the lake where we’d both learned to swim, nestling beneath my eyeglasses against my eye, as if to say, “I’m here, big brother, and I’m trying to help you see something.” Was Donna really trying to tell me something, or was she just teasing me with a smug expression that said she had God on her side now? Was she telling me she was Jesse’s guardian angel and that I need not have anxiety about his future? I felt like an eight-year-old asking tough questions and receiving ambiguous answers. Years later, when I observed Jesse revving his race car’s engine for the first time, I said a prayer. I know you are here, Sister. You were the one who started all this.

# What is the farthest you have ever traveled?



When I was twenty-six, I flew via Icelandic Airlines from New York to Luxembourg with a brief stop in Iceland. This may not have been the farthest distance-wise, but it was the beginning of a year-long road trip through Europe. If I drew lines through all the roads I traveled during that year, it would total up to the longest and farthest trip of my life.

The trip began with a visit to my pen pal in Germany and a train excursion to the VW factory in Wolfsburg to pick up a new Volkswagen Beetle. Then I drove to Jutland and took a ferry to Oslo to visit my step-cousin and her family. I traveled to Sweden then and Copenhagen and back to Germany. After spending Christmas with a rowdy bunch of foreigners at a Swiss chalet in Leysin, I was off to Zermatt and then Austria and Munich, where I spent some rowdy weeks at the famous Fasching Festival. After visiting a Vienna family at the beginning of March, the VW

## My First 83 Years

headed south for warmer weather in Greece, Italy, Monaco, and the French Riviera. During the final two months, I attended a bullfight in Barcelona, Spain, visited an American contact in Madrid, left my VW in Marseilles for shipping to New York, and stayed for awhile in London with an Australian pilot whom I'd met at the Swiss chalet. Finally, I hitch-hiked through Great Britain and Ireland before taking a student ship from Northhampton to New York. My two sisters met my ship at the dock and rode with me in the VW back to New Hampshire.

Traveling a great distance is not a significant accomplishment until you factor in the people that you meet along the way. To the souls of strangers is probably the farthest one can travel. Following is a part of this trip from the spring and summer of 1967.

### Athens

The Athens youth hostel is cold and dirty and filled with young hitchhikers — mostly American, Canadian, and British kids. And there are no toilets in the modern sense of the word, just open basins with raised foot pedestals on either side of a hole. I think maybe the Greeks should go to Germany or Switzerland to learn how to build a sanitary toilet. My romantic notion of Greece is suffering until I hear a familiar voice call my name.



## My First 83 Years

Mike Simonds has just arrived and is eager to explore Athens with me. Mike and I met at a Munich guest house earlier, attended some Fasching festival parties together, and decided to connect again in Athens. Mike is a skinny American guy with thick glasses. He flashes his ever-present grin.

The next day Mike and I visit the Acropolis. The sun on the white marble columns of the Parthenon makes it seem like a sacred place. Later, as we walk through Plaka, the old section, with its narrow streets and Greek music floating from each café, we spend time eating mousaka and drinking wine in a restaurant where a few Greeks and tourists are dancing on tables.

The next afternoon we set off in my VW, looking for Lili Paganelli's address. In Vienna, her cousin Stavros had said I should visit her because she likes to practice her English. We find the address, park the car, and ring the doorbell of a modern-looking apartment building.

A heavy-set woman answers. When I ask if she speaks English, she shakes her head. I hand her the introductory note from Lili's cousin. She reads it and shouts something in Greek. She smiles, motions for us to come in. As we step through the threshold, a young woman with large dark eyes enters the room. She smiles. "I'm Lili. Would you like to sit and have coffee?"

## My First 83 Years

I say, “Yes, thank you. Your cousin thought you might like to practice your English with some American tourists.”

She says, “Yes. I do like to speak English.”

Lili’s mother serves pastry and Turkish coffee. Lili says, “I study at an American school in Athens. I would like to be a secretary at one of the English-speaking embassies.” She has a lot of questions about the States.

Lili has a classic Greek face and a radiant smile but is slightly thick in the body. Lili seems shy for twenty-one, but I remember reticence seems natural for young women who live at home.

The next day Mike and I drive to a dirt street in nearby Pireus where the single-story houses resemble mud-baked cubes. Yani Simineodas invites us in, and his mother serves us wine while I tell him how I met his Israeli friend, Ilan Joffe, in Copenhagen. Yani is in his last year at Athens University as a civil engineering student. He has short brown hair and squinty eyes that seemed more Anglo than Greek. His soft-spoken English is rough but understandable. Tomorrow night Yani, his brother, and a friend will take us to a Greek café where the locals dance. I’m excited. Maybe Yani will teach me.

The next night at an out-of-town roadside café, Greeks are dancing and breaking dishes on the floor. Mostly men, mostly

## My First 83 Years

solo, only one or two lithe and flowing women. The bouzouki band plays with an intensity that seems to bring out the wild side of each dancer. Dip, turn, hoopah! Yani and his brother encourage Mike and me to go up in front of the band and give it a try. Mike and I suggest that Yani and his brother go first.

Yani shakes his head. He leans toward us so we can hear him over the loud music. He says, "I do not dance."

Yani's brother and the friend shake their heads too.

Mike and I drink more retsina, and I can tell by his silly grin that he's thinking what I'm thinking. Why should we let this raucous night pass without imitating the Greeks for one night?

Mike pushes his chair back from our table. He walks to the front with that silly grin of his and is alone on the dance floor. The bouzouki players think they see a tourist in this skinny guy with the pale complexion and thick eyeglasses. The band plays the bouzoukis harder than I've ever heard anyone play a string instrument. Mike dances his solo like an injured stork. The audience appreciates the obvious tourist. Big applause. We congratulate Mike as he returns to our table.

I go up next and am alone with the Greek rhythm and intensity. For once I have no fear, as if maybe I've consumed just enough Greek wine to lose those inhibitions that tend to plague me. I feel

## My First 83 Years

the music. I make dips and spins and movements I've only observed but which suddenly seem ingrained in my heart. I remember how Anthony Quinn did it when he starred in the movie, *Zorba the Greek*. When he dipped forward, when he dropped down, he extended his arms and snapped his thumb and fingers. Maybe I'm not really in my body. I'm surprised when the music stops. I could have danced forever.

If I can live my life like the dance, maybe I can embrace the future without inhibition.

### Dubrovnik

I'm driving on a barren road with two pale Oxford University students, Lynn and Anna, who want a ride from Athens to Dubrovnik on the Adriatic coast of Yugoslavia and are willing to help pay for gas. Once I turn the car toward Peć in the mountains, the route degenerates to a dirt road.

In Peć, after a tourist agent puts us up in an abandoned agricultural school for the night, we spend another exhausting day in the mountains, finally reaching the outskirts of Dubrovnik about midnight. I drive along a dark residential street that parallels a trolley line, squinting for any street sign that points to Lapad. I see the lights of an isolated café and three young men sitting at a round table in front. I roll down my window and shout, "Do any of you speak English?"

## My First 83 Years

The men rise and approach the car. One of them says, “Yes, we speak it. Where do you go?”

“Lapad.”

The speaker has a rough face and a square jaw. His rumpled slacks and T-shirt give him a disheveled look. He grins and sticks his head against the window to scrutinize the women. The other two circle the car, making me nervous.

The speaker says, “Lapad. You are here. Where do you go in Lapad?”

“How do I get to the International Center?”

The speaker uses a long-nailed finger to scratch his messy mop of brown hair. “International Center does not open until May.”

“Is there another place?”

“My mother. You stay with her. She has an extra room. You take your first left and go to the top of the hill. She lives next to the International Center. I meet you there.”

I start the car, and the speaker sprints off. By the time I drive up a short hill, he’s standing in front of a stucco bungalow with red roof tiles. The house is dark.

We get out of the car. The speaker says, “My name is Misha.”

## My First 83 Years

I shake his hand and introduce us. I point to an unmarked gate and a high wall that seems the perimeter of an estate. "Is that the International Center?"

Misha nods, walks to the iron gate and shakes it, causing a dog to bark. He shakes it again, and the agitated dog barks louder. "See? It's closed."

"If your mother has room for the women, I can sleep in my car."

Misha walks to his mother's front door and plucks a key from the sill above it. He motions for us to come inside. As we do, a light comes on. A slight, round-shouldered woman appears in her nightgown. Misha speaks with her. Then he says to us, "Friends of mine are welcome here any hour of the day or night."

Anna and Lynn bring their belongings inside, while I fold down the VW's back seat to make a flat space to spread my sleeping bag.

Misha disappears into the dark. I settle into the back of the VW.

In the morning Misha kicks the car tires and tells me to wake up. I follow him inside. He says, "My mother's already at work, and my sister's at school."

Anna and Lynn are up. Misha finds dry cereal in his mother's cupboard and milk in her refrigerator. We have breakfast at his

## My First 83 Years

mother's kitchen table. Then I drive the four of us a couple miles from Lapad into Dubrovnik.

Talking like a tour guide, Misha walks us through the cobblestone streets of old Dubrovnik, a quaint walled town and one-time fortress beside the sparkling Adriatic Sea. Then Misha and I help Anna and Lynn board a bus heading north. Misha says to me, "If you stay in Dubrovnik for a while, you can stay with my mother."

"I'd like to stay for a few days if it's okay with her."

Misha introduces me to Vlaho and Rina, a married couple living in a makeshift apartment beneath the grandstand of a tennis stadium, and Darko and Ivica, who tend to socialize around a small dining table there. I enjoy learning about their lives until Misha borrows my VW and side-swipes a tourist bus, crunching the left front fender. Vlaho says he has friends who can fix the fender. But the work drags on while I transport the friendly Slavs to various destinations in a car with a missing fender. I suspect banging out a fender and repainting it can take weeks and might be a deliberate plan to keep my car available for transporting stolen building materials at night from government construction sites at Lapad's seaside hotels. ("It's not stealing," Misha and his friends say. "It's socialism. What belongs to one belongs to everybody. We take only a little for Vlaho's apartment and

## My First 83 Years

Darko's house.”)

I've sent a telegram to the youth hostel in Italy, where the German mother I'd stayed with in Munich was scheduled to meet me before the car accident. Hilde finally arrives in Dubrovnik by ferry and bus. Rina and Vlaho give us their apartment for a few days, but Hilde is sad that we are with strange people and not alone on our planned vacation together. I ask Vlaho to have the sanded fender reinstalled so that we can leave.

It might have been more romantic for Hilde and me if it had not rained in Zagreb and Venice and on our all-night drive to sunny Naples. But she seemed happy to leave Dubrovnik to the quirky thieves. After a week together, I drove her to the train station in Rome so that she could travel back to her home and two young daughters in Munich.

### Monaco

It wasn't until I arrived in the area from Italy that I even knew the famous Formula One race through the streets of Monaco was about to take place. The last thing I expected to see was the death of a race car driver. If I had known this would happen, I would have avoided the race. Tragic events like that always made me dwell on my own mortality.



## My First 83 Years

Before I reached Monaco, I drove my VW Beetle to Florence to see Michelangelo's statue of David. At the Academia rotunda, I walked around the statue for a long time, trying to memorize it. I'd reached a goal that touched some deep place, not like the Greek dance, more like an awakening.

...

Le Relais International de la Jeunesse was a seaside youth hostel in a villa on Cap-d'Ail between Nice and Monaco. Women slept inside the four-story villa, and men slept on cots in a huge tent sheltered by olive trees and separated from the Mediterranean by a rock seawall. In a common dining room, you could have cheap French suppers with wine. Along the seawall was a coastal path that allowed you to walk into Monaco without much effort. For travelers looking for an affordable paradise on the French Riviera, their search ended at this convenient spot.

I explored Monaco with two Danes and a giant American named Roger. The streets of Monaco were filled with Formula One race cars preparing for the Grand Prix.

The next day I watched the race with an American girl, sitting on top of a wall that overlooked the hairpin turn and harbor. We saw a driver zoom out of the tunnel and into a short, shallow S-shaped turn called a chicane. There he hit a light pole, flipped over, and seemed trapped under the flaming car. By the time

## My First 83 Years

rescuers extricated Lorenzo Bandini from the car, I was certain he must have burned to death.

I thought then that life could be brief. What if I were to die young? What were the things I'd regret missing while I was alive? I'd regret that I never got to lie on the beach in Nice or Cannes and drink French wine. I'd regret missing the beer festivals in Germany and the Coliseum in Rome and the Parthenon in Athens. I'd regret never reaching Florence to see Michelangelo's statue of David. But with the exception of lying on the beach in Nice, I had visited my list of places. I thought having accomplished most of that goal should have been comforting and good reason to put worries about mortality in some obscure closet. Why then was I still fearful of dying young?

I drove into Nice and was immediately disillusioned that the beach was not the smooth white sand that I'd imagined. For a few days I slept in my car at night and spent sunny days on the beach of smooth, round stones. Then the weather turned cold and I began to feel sick.

I returned to the hostel at Cap-d'Ail and huddled beneath a blanket on my tent cot for four days, getting up only to run to the toilet, eating only when the lady who ran the hostel had her son Béb  bring me hot soup. I was not sure why she called her teenager "Baby," but he was a nice kid who always asked in

## My First 83 Years

limited English if I was okay.

When I felt better, I walked the seaside footpath into Monaco and wandered around near the Monte Carlo casino. All the hoopla surrounding the Grand Prix race had disappeared. A policeman asked me for my passport and whether I had any money. He seemed surprised that I was a disheveled American with American Express travelers' checks and was not there to rob the casino. I didn't explain about Italian thieves stealing some of my clothes and that was why my only remaining trousers were wearing through. He just nodded approvingly when I showed him the traveler's checks. I went to the Oceanographic Museum. When I came out, another policeman asked to see my passport and proof of my wealth. I thought my being sick for five days must have made me appear like a shriveled vagrant.

I retraced my path to the hostel and inhaled the sun and the Mediterranean as some sort of healing potion. The next day I drove to Nice, ate in an inexpensive cafeteria, and drove to the top of Mt. Alban, where I slept in my car. In the morning from this wooded hill I observed the city of Nice— the endless curve of the Promenade des Anglais with its grand hotels, palm trees, and early traffic. I sat on the hillside among wild flowers and wrote in my journal how Nice seemed softer from this high perspective, about the sounds of the city, about sunlight making the beach

## My First 83 Years

seem like an infinite white strip.

Later I drove to a section of the beach opposite the Negresco Hotel and joined two British boys I'd met in Monaco. They were with a teenage British paratrooper, an English girl, and a young Danish woman named Ulla. The Dane and I would soon begin an unusual relationship in which we divulged our secrets on an instinct of mutual trust. Traveling with Ulla to some of her more distressing memories was one of the farthest journeys I'd ever been on.

# How has your life turned out differently than you imagined it would?



I don't remember any youthful thoughts on how my life might turn out. Like most young men, I developed certain goals: get a college degree, find a well-paying vocation that made me happy, maybe get married. Because of my childhood turmoil, I didn't give much thought to having a family some day. But I did have a starter marriage to a beautiful woman who wanted children but was an alcoholic. Because I'd known only a volatile alcoholic in my father, I was naïve about the more subtle form of drinking. Had I known this and that fetal alcohol syndrome was possible in an unborn child, I would not have married then.

One year after our divorce, I formed a permanent bond with a kind woman who wanted a child "some day." But during the ensuing years, Shelley needed multiple surgeries for

## My First 83 Years

endometriosis and ectopic pregnancies and was told by her doctors that her chances of bearing a child were slim. So it seemed as though having our own family was off the drawing board. But then by some miracle, Jesse was conceived and born when I was forty-seven and Shelley was thirty-six. By this time, becoming a parent at this advanced age was not something I'd ever predicted. The challenge of raising Jesse with the love I'd missed from my father was a part of life that I would figure out how to face with joy and trepidation. Earlier in my life I had never considered how difficult or rewarding it would be to raise a child.

My search for a meaningful career began with a vagabond trip through Europe when I was twenty-six. I thought how unhappy I'd been as a mechanical engineer since graduating from college three years previously. I wandered on a blustery Denmark beach. I considered whether I had any natural talent, trying to remember what had come easy in grade school. I had not been exceptional at math, and yet I'd somehow ended up as an engineer just because that was the mandatory curriculum at Annapolis. I didn't want to waste the three years of credits I'd accumulated there and were transferable to Michigan State University when a sudden turn took me there. And people said there was security in engineering and that I'd have few financial worries with a BSME degree.

## My First 83 Years

I recalled my love for words and sentences in school. This led to the thought of a writing career. Returning from Europe a year later, I took another engineering job near Boston to replenish my savings and enrolled in an adult “Writing and Publishing” class that was held a couple nights a week in a Harvard classroom.

During the next six years, I got married, divorced, and wrote a novel. After thirteen publishers rejected it, Crown published Annapolis Misfit as a young adult novel, a first-person vernacular similar to J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*. I had accomplished a goal but was disappointed with the lousy compensation that my writing teacher had predicted for writers. I knew I had to find a better way to earn a living if I wanted to have a family some day. I was already thirty-five, divorced, and working odd jobs at the Fitzwilliam Inn. For awhile, the dream of publishing another novel was coupled with mundane subsistence work such as college janitor, factory worker, innkeeper’s assistant, and finally proofreader/editor of a small computer magazine named Kilobaud.

After meeting Shelley at the Fitzwilliam Inn and deciding I’d like to have a family with her before I was old and gray, I followed her to Boston while she worked on her Master’s Degree at BU. I did temp jobs for awhile and hunted for a way to find a new career. After taking a free Massachusetts course in mechanical drawing, I found a job with GTE in their drafting room. But

## My First 83 Years

drawing lines all day was too boring to be a career. I then took another free Massachusetts course in computer programming that met each evening and Saturdays at a nearby vocational high school in Chelmsford, where Shelley and I were then living in the home of another couple, who'd rented us a room over their garage. But after completing the course, my spring job interviews for a low-paid, entry-level programmer position turned into a competition with every spring college graduate then. With my writing background, the course managers said I should try to sell myself as a software technical writer, which meant explaining in books what a programmer could expect when he or she typed in a programming command. And so began a career that would support my family well for many years.

When Jesse was born, I was still a technical writer but able to do it part of the time from our home in New Hampshire instead of commuting every day to the company in Massachusetts that employed me. Tech writing was not particularly fun, but I was good at it and gained a decent reputation. And I enjoyed the times when I was home when Jesse began school and got off the bus. I'd always listen at 3:00 p.m. for the rumble of the school bus and move to a window where his friends on the bus couldn't see me. My eyes would light up as he crossed the road in front of the bus and came up the driveway. When he walked through the door, I'd hug him for the one exhilarating moment that



## My First 83 Years

reminded me why loving this child was the most important thing I would ever do.

Earlier I thought I believed nothing in my life would be more important than writing. But then Shelley's love and Jesse's love changed all that. They showed me the value of a life that I could never have believed when I was younger.

My love of reading and writing persists, particularly memoirs. I guess I have no further career ambitions than to end my life as a writer with good memories of also being a competent husband and father. I guess I once had fantasies of being a famous novelist. But eventually I learned that the joy of writing was more fulfilling than any recognition, although I always get a little boost when someone says they like what I've written. One woman wrote the Boston Globe that she cried when she read my article "Taking Flight" about my Cessna 172 flying excursion with Jesse around my 82nd birthday.

Other elements of my life that I did not envision when I was younger involved taking on the role of caretaker for my aging mother for the last 12 years of her life, when she reached one hundred. With my good health through life, I never thought serious illness would find me. But at seventy-five, cancer did. And at eighty, a heart attack and blocked bowel required a stent in one of my arteries and a couple hospital stays.

## My First 83 Years

I never thought I'd be living in the house where I grew up, the place that contained so many of my traumatic memories. I was seven when my family moved from the city into my grandparents' old summer house. The gray clapboard house sat high on a field-stone foundation. Its slate hip roof, open front porch, and screened side porch were features of an old New England style. It had windows that rattled when the wind blew, a wood stove and hand-pump in the kitchen, and an outhouse that was part of a shed connecting the house to a barn. My parents were too poor to renovate it for winter weather. Somehow we survived there for many years until my parents divorced and moved away to new lives, leaving the house mostly abandoned except for summer visits.

Years later, while Shelley and I were still in Boston, she was miraculously sustaining a viable pregnancy (our last chance) and ready to quit her occupational therapy position at the Massachusetts Hospital School. We moved back to New Hampshire in 1987, the summer before Jesse was born. An artesian well and a modern heating system for the house were completed before his birth in October. A new bathroom, asphalt roof to replace the leaky slate, insulation, new double-pane windows, huge south-facing bay window in the dining room, and conversion of the screened porch to an enclosed sun room would come later. Converting the shed and outhouse into a guest

## My First 83 Years

bedroom and writing studio would follow too. I've often thought my new writing spot over the old outhouse was a symbolic location. Finally, there was the conversion of the old rickety barn into a solid two-car garage.

Shelley and I have now lived in my grandparents' old house for thirty-five years, made more renovations, and raised a child here. Shelley has planted many flowers around the house, and we still have a huge pink bush that was small when my grandmother planted it. The tiny blue spruce given by a friend when Jesse was born is now fifty feet high. Often as I pass through a room in the old house, I feel the presence of those I have loved and who have loved me. I can still visualize my grandmother teaching me how to play a card game, Canasta, in the dining room at the refurbished table that is now located on the sun porch.

Although the old house has seen both joy and sorrow, I know that the place where I grew up is the spot on Earth where I am most at peace in my old age. Predicting this outcome as a young adult would probably have been inconceivable then.

## My First 83 Years



Shelley on the Girls Camp road

# What was your first date like with Shelley?



Forty-eight years have passed since our “first date,” making it difficult to remember details from that long ago. Shelley had just turned twenty-four that December. I was just about to experience my thirty-fifth birthday. I was living alone in my childhood house.

Our first meeting was kind of a screwy date in that I thought I would be sizing up the bartender’s two housemates at a Sunday afternoon concert at the Fitzwilliam Inn, where I also worked as the innkeeper’s assistant. Suanne, our part-time bartender, said I should be at the concert Sunday and meet Susan and Shelley, with whom she lived in a red, rented house half-way up the hill leading out of Troy. They were both dance therapy students in a Goddard College graduate program and met frequently with a Goddard field coordinator at various venues in Keene. What I did not know at the time was that Suanne had meant this as a first

## My First 83 Years

blind date, sort of, and had specifically picked me out for Shelley.

The innkeeper's wife was a voice teacher at the New England Conservatory of Music and, each Sunday in February, had one of her students give an afternoon concert there in the large parlor, where there was grand piano. A young jazz pianist, Jeff, was playing the afternoon that Suanne introduced me to Susan and Shelley. After the concert, the two women joined Jeff and me for a drink at a small table in the inn's small cocktail lounge, where there was a nice fire burning in the fireplace. I was attracted more to Shelley than Susan, but Shelley seemed to converse more with Jeff, and because of the seating arrangement, I seemed to converse more with Susan. Before we all said goodbye for the evening, Susan said she would be away on a trip for the week but that maybe we could get together when she returned.

Afterward Susan told Shelley that, if she wasn't interested in me, she was "going after him." But a day or two later, Shelley stopped by the Inn on her way back from a distressing day at a VA hospital in Massachusetts, where she was doing field intern work for her master's degree. I was just going off duty while Suanne had arrived to tend the bar. Shelley told Suanne that the locked wards at the VA were just horrible and that she'd been locked in with the patients during her stay. She needed a hug, and so Suanne and I fulfilled her request. Then I joined Shelley for a drink and conversation at a small round table in front of the

## My First 83 Years

flaming fireplace. After awhile I asked her if she wanted to follow me to Laurel Lake for a short visit to my house to see where I lived and meet my dog. In her old VW Beatle she followed my rusted Fitzwilliam Inn station wagon, which I'd purchased from the Inn's owner. On the way she wondered why she was following this strange writer guy, who used to be in the military, along a dark lake road to an unknown destination. She had only been in New England a few months, having moved here from Ohio, and was unfamiliar with most of the area. At my house, Shelley was most interested in all the books in my bookcases, and so we discussed this book and that book and a few that we had both read. At the door when she was about to leave, we kissed. I had the feeling then that Shelley was someone special. When I said I'd like to get together with her on the weekend but that I would be at a March 1st birthday get-together with my family in Derry (my sister Donna and I shared the same birthday three years apart), Shelley suggested that I stop by their Troy house for a drink on my way home.

At the women's house on Sunday evening as I was returning from my mother's house in Derry, Shelley served me some wine (I think) and told me that she and her housemates had recently climbed nearby Gap Mountain, which was little more than a medium-size hill and, in early March, still had a little snow on the ground. I said I'd lived in this area most of my life and never

## My First 83 Years

thought of climbing Gap. Having Mt. Monadnock nearby always had seemed to make it the hike of choice in the summer and autumn. She said that the advantage of Gap Mountain was that it was a shorter hike that did not consume an entire day like hiking Monadnock. She asked if I wanted to hike up Gap with her next weekend.

And so on a sunny Saturday that was warm for March, we hiked up a trail off Gap Mountain Road halfway between Troy and Fitzwilliam. I was surprised that a young Ohio woman was introducing me to a beautiful trail in my own neighborhood. She had said that, although she and Susan had recently arrived from the Midwest, Susan was a real go-getter when it came to finding interesting venues in unfamiliar territory.

At the top, I took off my shoes and danced in the snow like a photo I'd seen recently of Robert Kennedy running barefoot in the sand with his dog. I felt joyful. I told Shelley I wanted to marry her, which, in retrospect, was a bit premature. But Shelley pointed out that I was still recovering from a traumatic divorce and she was still working on her master's degree in dance therapy. Also, our part-time subsistence jobs (she was waitressing at a road-side café in Marlboro) would be a shaky way to begin anything of that magnitude.



## My First 83 Years

So it was another six years before we got married in an outdoor ceremony in Miller State Park on top of Pack Monadnock Mountain. It wasn't the same as our Gap Mountain date, but it had a road to the summit, allowing those with non-hiking shoes to participate in our special day.



Perkins Pond and Mt. Monadnock from Gap Mountain

## My First 83 Years

# What things matter most to you in life?



What matters (or what mattered) most in my life depends how I was thinking at different stages of maturity. The things that mattered most to me when I was young were not the same as they are now in old age. So, what matters most became a progression.

Early in my life, it was important for me to find the best fishing spot along the shore of Laurel Lake, and then it was essential for me to achieve good grades in school, and then it was vital (according to my mother) that I go to college to provide life-long security, and then it was necessary to graduate from college with an engineering degree that (according to my mother) would provide a job with life-long security.

When my engineering job didn't produce much happiness, my most important desire became the quest for adventure, more

## My First 83 Years

specifically to become a vagabond in Europe for a least a year, to discover less violent societies, to determine what made Europeans happy, to have time to consider what I could do differently in my life that would bring me intellectual and emotional satisfaction. Europe, with all its fascinating characters, is where I latched on to the idea of becoming a writer and publishing a novel.

For awhile, writing the novel became almost an obsession. And that was my focus until I became distracted by love and marriage. But neither publication of a novel nor the complexity of being married to an alcoholic turned out to be what I had dreamed they would be. Sometimes what matters most at a given time turns into a disappointment and a false prophecy of happiness.

In midlife I needed to find a career that would be somewhat satisfying and earn enough money to support a family. I had married Shelley, and we wanted to have a child. So I took some free Massachusetts courses in computer programming and used my writing/technical background to find work as a software technical writer — first for LTX Corporation and then the well-known Digital Equipment Corporation.

I was forty-seven when Jesse was born. I realized then that raising him would take more love than I'd received as a child. I

## My First 83 Years

discovered that raising him in a loving home mattered more than anything else. Perhaps Dorothy Law Nolte's poem, "Children Learn What They Live," says it best:

If a child lives with criticism, he learns to condemn

If a child lives with hostility, he learns to fight

If a child lives with ridicule, he learns to be shy

If a child lives with shame, he learns to feel guilty

If a child lives with tolerance, he learns to be patient

If a child lives with encouragement, he learns confidence

If a child lives with praise, he learns to appreciate

If a child lives with fairness, he learns justice

If a child lives with security, he learns to have faith

If a child lives with approval, he learns to like himself

If a child lives with acceptance and friendship, he learns to find love in the world.

I'm eighty-three now and have many idiosyncrasies that seem to matter every day. Although these things might not seem the most important in the scheme of life, they tend to give me a sense of purpose and continuity. For example, on a cold day it

## My First 83 Years

matters that I wear warm sweatpants. I also do better mentally when my day has a lot of sunshine and follows a particular routine where I don't have to figure out what I'm going to do next. It is important for me to have mental stimulation each day through writing and reading (and sometimes TV). It seems important each day to keep the birdfeeders filled and be considerate of my health by what I eat and by not engaging in stupid endeavors. Hugs and snuggling time with Shelley is at the top of my "most important" list as is communication with her as my best friend.

Finally, God matters most at this stage of my life. Before breakfast, I thank God for another day. I now think about His guidance in the years prior to my death and how grateful for all the love and help that He has given me. Each morning, I write five things for which I'm grateful. Some things are repetitive, others come from new thoughts. For example, I am always grateful for God's love and family love. Other things like sunshine and a warm writing studio depend on the day. After that, I read two short prayers that Shelley typed on a bundle of laminated prayer cards that she gave me to carry in a knitted pouch a long time ago.

O Mother/Father God, may my heart be opened. May I be given the courage to see as you would have me see and to listen as you would have me hear. May I know the blessing of your Spirit, the

## My First 83 Years

guidance of your presence, the comfort of your piece. Amen

O Mother/Father God, Thank you for this night of sleep. May my dreams be put to good use. Please be with me this day and may I be with you. May my work be your work — my love, your love. Amen

## My First 83 Years



# What simple pleasures of life do you truly enjoy?



**M**ost of my simple pleasures occur during the course of a normal day. For example, Shelley and I hugging one another for awhile in the morning as we are waking up, or periodically during the day. In my recollection, my mother and father never hugged me as I was growing up, and I didn't understand the comfort of hugging until Shelley appeared. Her friends were always hugging one another, and then, Oh, God, they were hugging me. At first I thought all this hugging was a bit overdone, but eventually I actually enjoyed someone's warm embrace, particularly Shelley's. So I hugged Jesse through the years as much as he would allow. Shelley and I still enjoy our long morning embrace.

With respect to food, at breakfast I am particularly fond of orange juice and melon that has mild sweetness, such as honeydew. At lunch I enjoy Market Basket chicken salad with

## My First 83 Years

celery chunks on Dave's plain rolls, Cape Cod "Aged White Cheddar & Sour Cream" potato chips, and watermelon. Four days a week, I look forward to a glass of coke with ice during lunch. Each Friday night I look forward to one bottle Heineken beer with pizza. As I grow older, I enjoy Shelley's homemade brownies with the thick chocolate candy icing, dark chocolate pieces by Dove, and a chocolate chip cookie. An occasional treat is apple pie with fresh apples and less goo filling.

I always enjoy having Jesse, Ling, and Wonder visit and, when they are here, giving Wonder head scratches and watching her eyes roll toward mine. It's always a pleasure to watch the birds at our feeders or drinking from the birdbath (or even sometimes splashing in it as they take a bath). I find it uplifting to hike in nature on a warm, sunny day.

I've always enjoyed reading and still do. I look forward to the daily arrival of the Keene Sentinel newspaper, not so much for its entire content, but particularly for the "Dear Abby" columns that detail all the various ways that people express their problems. Part of my anxiety about whether there is a heavenly afterlife revolves around the question of whether I would have to meet my father again there. A middle-aged Baptist woman wrote Dear Abby and said, "I believe when I die I will go to heaven. My problem is, if going to heaven means being reunited with my parents and other family members, then I don't want to go! The

idea of spending eternity with them is more than I can stand, but I don't want to go to hell, either. Any thoughts?" Dear Abby replied, "Yes. When you reach the pearly gates, talk this over with St. Peter. Perhaps he would be willing to place you in a different wing than the one your parents and other family members are staying in. And in the meantime, discuss this with your minister." I thought St. Peter should have a talk with Abby about blowing off this woman's dilemma with the facetious quip about requesting "a different wing." That was like getting healthy food tips from Paula Deen. I also enjoy reading books each day and usually look forward to my snack time in the late afternoon when I can curl up on the love seat with the memoir from an author who has led an unusual life or has grown up with problems similar to the ones of my experience.

With respect to TV, I enjoy trying to out-guess the contestants on *The Price is Right*, *Wheel of Fortune*, and *Jeopardy*. But even more, I like hearing the short snippets of the contestant's personal lives and observing their on-air behavior. I also enjoy many of the *Masterpiece* who-done-it mysteries. PBS in Boston has a program called "Stories from the Stage," in which three individuals, in turn, tell of a certain event in their lives that changed them. With respect to commercial TV programs, I like having a remote button with which I can mute irritating commercials quickly (most of them are too loud, most

## My First 83 Years

advertisers thinking you've gone to the kitchen to escape their voice, which is sometimes true when I forget to use the mute button).

I love relaxing on the dining room love seat, especially when the sun beams in on it in the morning and I can spend a few minutes meditating there with the sun on my face. I also enjoy reading there in the late afternoon while having my daily tea and snack. The large south-facing window through which the sun shines provides a view of Shelley's gardens, our birdfeeders, and backyard. Where the window is now, there used to be a large floor-to-ceiling hutch for dishes, silverware, etc. When Shelley and I were first married, she said let's have a big window there. What foresight she had.

I look forward to a 20-minute nap between 3 and 4 o'clock in the afternoon. I might sleep longer if I didn't put a 20-minute timer next to my ear.

I appreciate a hot shower and other modern conveniences that most people take for granted. In this house growing up, my younger sister, Donna, and I adapted well from the conveniences of a city apartment to the country that first winter. For our baths, Mom pumped water into pots that she heated on the wood stove. Then she poured warm water into a round metal wash tub that sat in the middle of the kitchen floor. In the cold outhouse,

## My First 83 Years

we did our business fast. And we read comic books while on kid chairs that we dragged onto the one heat register in the living room. Only my father complained. He left each Monday to sell beer in his suit and camel-hair topcoat and homburg hat. On weekends he complained about everything from shoveling snow to splitting wood. When he got the car stuck in the driveway, he said, “Goddamn fucking snow.” Our neighbor, Henry Whipple, had his dad pull the goddamn fucking car out with his horses. My other sister, Karla, a bump in my mother’s belly that winter, had to learn with these living conditions from the beginning. We lived this way for the next ten years.

I enjoy watching movies while exercising on my treadmill. This entertainment provides a diversion from the boredom (and sometimes discomfort) of this type of exercise. Playing tennis used to be more fun, but even then, it wasn’t a winter sport.

Sometimes I enjoy leafing through my mother’s 30 or more family photo albums, which she created through the years, pasting names and dates throughout. She was an inveterate photo-taker and left quite an interesting photo legacy.

I am thankful for my writing studio that Shelley had constructed over the old outhouse when the shed was remodeled into a guest bedroom. It has a view of the back yard and woods beyond, where I’ve seen deer and other wildlife at unexpected times.

## My First 83 Years

Perhaps most of all, I enjoy writing, the compulsion to fool around with words and express my thoughts and emotions on some topic that has moved me in the past (or still moves me). It is in this way that I feel as though I am making some sense of the world and my life within it. Getting positive comments from people who have read my essays and knowing that my words and thoughts have made an impact on them gives me a joyful feeling also.



When Jesse first started driving. Gulp!

# How is life different today compared to when you were a child?



When I grew up in our town in southern New Hampshire, we usually received an abundance of light snow. So much so, that we kids skied all winter down my neighbor's hill and sledded at thrilling speeds down the precipitous Sandy Hollow Road (no salt was spread on the roads then). When I first had a driver's license at sixteen, the snow banks had been plowed so high on the sides of our snow-slick country road that I jumped into my mother's old Dodge. On a straight-away, I jammed the brakes and yanked the steering wheel hard left, causing the car to spin until it hit the snow bank. When I repeated my spins, I felt an astonishing exhilaration. Today there seems to be a tendency for a few inches of snow, then freezing rain, which, when accumulating on their branches, brings down a lot of trees. Or this year, one giant storm with heavy, almost-unplowable snow that damaged trees

## My First 83 Years

and power and telephone lines. Outdoor temperatures are higher now.

I lived my childhood with a loveless tyrant who sometimes phoned from his weekly sales route to say he was coming home to kill us all. But the phones had no identification window then, so my mother didn't know it was him until she picked up the receiver. The sound of the phone still startles me. I guess my brain thinks Dad is calling from the grave, probably still angry with me for ending all communication with him when it became apparent he would always have retribution on his mind. He once called the Boston apartment where Shelley and I were living just to say he loved us, but by the time Shelley finished talking with him, he was ranting about her keeping her surname when we married instead of adopting mine. She told him not to call again. Now our phone displays a caller ID when it rings. When I don't recognize the caller, I figure it's telemarketing, scams, United Healthcare (offering their home visits), or Dad. So I avoid the phone as much as possible.

Of course, phones were hard-wired into a wall then, preventing the current trend of carrying a mobile phone with you at all times, except maybe in the shower. People these days don't like to miss a phone call. Now that there are "smart" phones, a person carrying one can see the world through a tiny screen, which may be better than the wider, natural view...assuming you



## My First 83 Years

are not in the bathroom.

As a child, the terms mainframe computer, home computer, laptop, and smart phone were not in the general vocabulary. Early mainframes may have existed, but I'd never heard of them. If I did hear anything of the sort, it was probably IBM computer, which was some mysterious secret located far away. But the electronics that aid (or replace) the human brain today, did not exist in my adolescent world.

When it snowed our first winter in New Hampshire, my father invariably got our old Pontiac stuck on Quarry Hill. There were only rear-wheel drive cars then, and they were not very good on snow-packed roads. Mom, pregnant with Karla in her belly and wearing an old fur coat she'd had since college, pushed while Dad sat behind the wheel and spun the tires. I felt bad about Mom in the cold and wanted to help her push, but she refused to let me. I thought Dad should do the pushing and let Mom do the tire-spinning. This went on for years, even when my father bought a Studebaker, but this rocket-nose car also had the engine weight in the front and not much over the rear driving wheels in back. Thus, no matter how far he backed up to get a fast start up a snow-covered hill, the car always fish-tailed like a whip into a snow bank. My sisters and I began calling the car Stupid Baker as we backed down another hill to try again. My father told us to shut up. We never did buy a 4-wheel drive car,

## My First 83 Years

although when my parents divorced, my stepmother did convince him to buy a station wagon. But by then he lived in the city and didn't have to climb country roads anymore.

I listened to baseball games on a radio with my father when I was young. When Dad was away on his weekly sales trips, my mother listened on the same radio to Patti Page singing "The Tennessee Waltz." When our family received a Sears Silvertone black-and-white TV from Santa Claus one Christmas, I watched cowboy dramas like "The Lone Ranger." On some rare occasions, we got to see a movie in a movie theater. One of my grandfather's once took me to a kid's Saturday matinee in Nutley, New Jersey, where I think most of the movie then was kid's cartoons. Now movies can be watched at home on a big screen television (first it was VHS tapes, then DVDs, and now Netflix streaming). Today's inventions have brought all the video possibilities a few feet from my easy chair.

As a child, I cannot remember seeing wildlife in our back yard except for an occasional squirrel. Animals were in the woods behind our house, and I rarely saw anything significant there either when I walked the old logging trail. But now I draw many colorful birds to my yard with feeders, which a bear has tackled occasionally in his quest for sunflower seeds. The birds shied away from the feeders when a wild bobcat sat under the feeders not long ago. It was probably a good thing that the turkey flock

## My First 83 Years

did not come tramping through when the bobcat was there, although I have seen a female turkey fending off our neighbor's cat, Mango, with a lot of aggressive wing-flapping. Deer, foxes, coyotes, and ground hogs have also appeared occasionally. The deer, in particular, enjoy eating some of flowers and other foliage that Shelley has planted. Yesterday I watched my neighbor's other cat, Moxie, stalk a skunk from his house to out front yard and finally to our back yard. Moxie's sense of smell must not be as sensitive as mine.

I never heard of mass shootings when I was young or that idiots could own military style guns. My father inherited a .22 rifle and a 12-gauge shotgun from my grandfather, and on a couple occasions Dad and I tried to hunt as the local farmers did. But we were unsuccessful, and as soon as my parents divorced, I sold the guns. Today idiots own guns that are automatic weapons of destruction and a form of lethal insanity.

When I was a child, government was considered a good thing. Today politics is a form of power insanity.

Newly invented materials such as fiberglass are now used to make many things previously made of wood (like my first skis) and plastic, although plastics have stuck around and become a form of environmental insanity.

## My First 83 Years

As a child, the first thing I cooked was a large pot of maple tree sap, boiling it on our wood stove until it became maple sugar candy. Now I use a microwave oven to heat frozen muffins for breakfast, heat water for midmorning tea, and sometimes cook a Lean Cuisine frozen dinner when Shelley is away. Sometime after my family moved into the house with the wood-burning stove, we added a gas stove that made cooking easier for my mother. Today the microwave oven and other electrical kitchen gadgets make cooking dinner an easier task than chopping wood and continually feeding a hot wood stove.

My mother had a box camera called a Brownie, which she used to take tons of photos of her kids every year. This involved creating an image on film and then taking the film to someone who transformed that image into a photograph that you could hold in your hand and then paste, as she did, into at least 30 photograph albums during her lifetime. Now one can take photographs with a more sophisticated camera or a smart phone and see them instantly on the device or at home on their computer screen. Photograph images can even be sent to friends electronically via email.

When I wanted some information as a kid, I looked in the encyclopedias that my mother had purchased for the family. I thought these books were magic in that they held so much extraneous wisdom. Now we have quick electronic searches for

## My First 83 Years

information on the Internet and online encyclopedias like Wikipedia. I like the faster speed of info research but miss the feel of the large book in my hands. And an encyclopedia didn't have any information about sex.

When I was growing up, the topic of sex was more-or-less taboo. My mother never talked to me about sex except in the subtlest terms, and that wasn't until I entered high school. She used the word trouble instead of sex or pregnant. She said things like, "It's too bad Mary Bronson and John What's-His-Name got in trouble. They'll have to get married. Now they'll never go to college, and they were such bright kids." As though sex got you pregnant and killed your brain. I knew what Mom was really telling me was she intended for me to go to college. She didn't want me screwing up a chance for a higher education like those other kids who had been invading one another. Today sex talk and videos are everywhere, every day, even beginning as early as elementary school.

When Jesse was going to school in Fitzwilliam, the administrators sent home a notice that they'd be having a speaker and a video on sex education for fifth and sixth graders. If you didn't want your child to participate, you signed a slip and sent it back. Shelley and I figured Jesse was mature enough to participate. When the big day arrived, he came home and looked at Shelley as if he's seen a ghost instead of a video. He asked her,

## My First 83 Years

“Why would anyone...if they’re not going to have kids?”

Shelley asked about the video.

“They were showing us things they shouldn’t have been showing us.” Apparently the movie was about changing bodies: breast development in girls, pubic hair, and so forth.

When I arrived home, their discussion was still going. He said, “Why do we have to know all this now?”

Shelley said some kids were sexually active at twelve and some girls could have a baby at twelve.

In a joking way, I said, “Guess I should have signed that form allowing you to be excused from Sex Ed class.”

“Don’t I wish!” After a moment, he added, “Well, at least I got something out of it.” He held up two samples of Zest deodorant body wash and a pamphlet picturing a tough football player over the caption, Craig “Iron Head” Heyward asks, “Is Body Wash for men?” I think he smelled like a man after his shower that night.

## Do you have any particularly vivid memories of your grandparents?



**G**race Gardner and Oren Oliver Gallup (called “Grandma” and “Grandpa”):

On my third birthday, Mom was in the Presbyterian Hospital in Newark, New Jersey, giving birth to my sister, Donna. My father was sneaking a woman into our Newark apartment (according to a friend who told Mom later). I was in my maternal grandparents’ New York City apartment. Grandma photographed me staring at three candles atop a chocolate cake. The next day she guided me to a barbershop for a first haircut that sheared off the blonde curls that Mom so cherished. (Grandma would later tell Mom, “You have your girl now. It was time for Kurt to look like a boy.”)

## My First 83 Years

Grandma parted her black hair in the middle of her scalp and tied it into a bun in back. She wore simple dresses, square-heeled shoes, and a tight smile to hide her crooked teeth. In New Hampshire during the summer, she fashioned a pole rod to help me catch fish off the Holmes sisters' dock. I spent quiet time with her, learning a card game called Canasta. I cried the first time that she won, not realizing she had allowed me to win for what she considered a reasonable amount of time.

When I was seven, my family left our city apartment in New Jersey and moved to my grandparents' summer house in New Hampshire. Mom wanted to raise her children in the tranquility of this beautiful region, where she and her sister had spent so many childhood summers. Grandma continued to spend summers with us; Grandpa commuted occasionally by steam train from New York City to Fitzwilliam Depot.

When I was eleven, Mom put me on a plane to New York City so I could spend my spring school vacation with Grandma and Grandpa. The first thing she and I did together upon my arrival was to have a Canasta battle. Then on Monday she took me to the Central Park Zoo and on Tuesday to Radio City Music Hall, where we saw dancing girls called Rockettes and a romance movie. A Canadian Mountie was kissing some woman hard on the lips and singing to her. Grandma was wiping her eyes with a tiny white



## My First 83 Years

handkerchief. We also took long walks along Riverside Drive. As her first grandchild, I seemed to bring her a joy that I never understood at the time.

Sometime during my vacation week, Grandpa and I took the subway to Yankee Stadium. Grandpa parted his white hair in the middle with precision but often had smudges on his wire-rimmed eyeglasses. I liked his soft voice, easy grin, and the smell of his cigars. As manager of his own export company, Grandpa said he'd been to almost every country in the world, even Russia. There was something about the swaying and squealing of the train, something about all the strange-looking passengers, something about the city smells that made the subway seem magical. Inside the stadium, Grandpa bought a round Yankee patch made of felt that Grandma sewed onto my jacket later. Other days Grandpa took me to the Hayden Planetarium and to his city office at the Export Managers Club of New York, where he gave me foreign stamps for my collection.

Three years later, Grandpa phoned to say Grandma had died, although no one had told me she was even sick (she was seventy-one and had apparently hidden her cancer). I felt sad that she would never read the letter that I was writing to her in anticipation of another April school vacation with them. But I was glad Grandpa still wanted me to visit him in New York City. The first morning there he made me pay attention to the

## My First 83 Years

subways as we made our way to his office. The second morning we had breakfast early, and he reminded me how to get downtown. When he left, I was alone in the apartment, looking out the window across Morningside Park, wishing Grandma was still here for a game of Canasta. Later in the morning, I walked to the subway station, rode the rumbling train downtown, and entered a busy elevator in Grandpa's building. Getting there alone made me feel grown-up. Each afternoon Grandpa took me on another adventure, including a Yankee game. One evening he took me for cocktails with a fancy woman with long red fingernails, although I had to drink Coke and ignore their flirtation. I had the feeling that Grandpa might have known this woman intimately while Grandma was still alive.

Years later, when he was in his seventies and had lost his second wife (Helen Devlin had been his office manager and in love with him for years), Grandpa flew with Mom to my graduation ceremony at Michigan State University. He had tears in his eyes then, perhaps because he thought of me as the son he'd never had. Shortly before he died, he gave me his IBM Selectric typewriter, on which I proceeded to write my first published novel, Annapolis Misfit. I thought Grandpa had brought me good luck.

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## My First 83 Years

Paul and Helena Schmidt (called “Papa” and “Mama”):

My paternal grandfather, Paul Curt Schmidt, immigrated to America from Germany around 1900 and worked as an aeronautical engineer for some years before returning to Germany to get married. While there, World War I broke out, and so he was stuck there until the war ended. My father was born there and was three when the family finally returned to America around 1920 and settled in New Jersey, where Papa Schmidt resumed his career as an engineer at the Wright Aeronautical Corporation, helping design modern airplane engines.

On our Christmas visits with my German grandparents, Mama Schmidt always hugged me to her big belly so my nose almost stuck to her dress and prompted me to say “Ich liebe dich” (I love you). On every visit she joked about my time as an infant, when I’d said “swigadette” for the cigarette she was smoking. I think she was the dominant force in their marriage. Papa Schmidt was a quiet man who disappeared after supper about the same time my cousins and I heard “Santa” clomping around on their roof. I adored Papa Schmidt, because he was kind and gentle and once led me by the hand as we walked to a Saturday kids’ matinee at a Nutley movie theater, something my father never did. And I loved the smell of his pipe. My relationship with him was fairly brief, because this grandfather died a year after we moved to New Hampshire, when I was only eight.

## My First 83 Years

Mama Schmidt lived a long while after that, mostly with my Aunt Isolde and Uncle Dick in White Plains, New York, until their health began to decline. Then Big Mama moved in with my father and stepmother, Connie, into their Manchester apartment. I was twenty-one at the time and moved in with them too so that I could walk to my new waiter's job at the Carpenter Hotel (I had no car). But a few weeks later, I got into a fight with my father and called him an ass. Connie, Big Mama, Dad, and I were playing a card game called Hearts and drinking wine. My father held his cards close to his chest. He finished his wine and then drank out of my glass. I asked why he didn't get up and pour himself more wine instead of drinking out of my glass. He said I should shut up and be grateful for everything he was doing for me. I'm living in his apartment, drinking his wine, and acting like a spoiled twerp. Connie and Big Mama both offered to get him more wine. I said it wasn't polite to drink from someone else's glass without asking. He said I was a goddamn lying cheating ungrateful son-of-a-bitch. He said I cheated at Annapolis and tried to deny it. I was a goddamn lying bastard fucking cheating ungrateful twerp.

If I hadn't had fire roaring from my ears, I would have laughed in his face. Instead, I rose from the kitchen table and said, "You're an ass. I don't have to listen to your crap anymore."

## My First 83 Years

As I moved to the phone, he screamed from the doorway that he could beat the hell out of me, pretending to let Connie and Mama hold him back. The expression on Mama's face may have indicated her ignorance of the Frankenstein she had created, or that these tantrums were the angry core of his alcoholism.

I told Connie and Big Mama they could let him go, because I'd be glad to give him a chance to fight me. But he confined his rage to the verbal assault, releasing streams of poison once reserved for my mother. (I suspected because he had to be civil with Mom now, his vitriol had been building toward the next logical target. I'd predicted he would be pissed off when I got tossed out of Annapolis, because I knew he'd been living a vicarious midshipman's life through me in contrast to his life as a beer and later meat salesman.) I called my mother and was packed by the time she and my stepfather arrived.

In the car I told them I was through with my father. "I predicted he would explode again. Connie and Mama feed his illness by condoning his sick behavior. And another thing...I saw one of his pay checks on top of a bureau. He's under-reporting his income and cheating you out of child support money for Karla."

In her typical don't-make-waves voice, my mother said, "Oh, well. It's probably difficult having Mama live with them in a small apartment. Just try to forget about it."

## My First 83 Years

For lack of transportation I quit my waiter job and found work in a shoe warehouse along the Merrimack River in Manchester. Mom's job of matching IBM punch cards to customer orders for sweaters at the Darlene Sportswear's warehouse was also in a nearby brick mill building, and we had the same hours. Together we drove from Derry to Manchester each morning. My job was to push a long, tall cart around the warehouse, move shoe boxes from the shelves to the cart, and roll the cart to a central location when the order sheet was complete. Like other guys in the warehouse, I challenged myself by seeing how many boxes I could balance in one hand while going from the shelves to the cart. I achieved a stack of fourteen before a tip and a crash sent boxes and shoes spinning across the warehouse floor. If I didn't return all the shoes to their correct boxes, someone's feet were in for a unique experience.

That spring Michigan State University sent a letter confirming it could finish educating a misfit. My problem was I didn't want to be a mechanical engineer but couldn't afford to waste three years of credits I'd accrued at Annapolis.

I never saw Mama Schmidt again, and so my last memory of her is the look of horror on her face as she watched my father's alcoholic tirade. Later when I asked my cousin, Laurie, what Mama had been like when she lived with them, she said she thought Mama Schmidt was a closet alcoholic. She said Mama

## My First 83 Years

drank wine slowly most of the time, even when she was at the ironing board, ironing clothes.

Grandpa Gallup was the last of my grandparents to die. He was 82 then. Because he was having trouble living independently, Grandpa had given up his Long Island, New York, home and had been living in New Hampshire with my mother and stepfather, Bing. Having been very independent his entire life and a world traveler, he seemed reluctantly confined whenever I visited but always perked up a bit during our conversations. On any given day, the happiest he seemed was when he was reading his New York Times or sipping his evening drink. A little alcohol always seemed to agree with him.

## My First 83 Years



# What have you changed your mind about over the years?



I once believed that, when my father was gone, he would no longer influence my life. But now I believe he'll haunt me forever. If my father were alive today, his hero would be Donald Trump. Their personalities were identical — soulless men compelled to inflate themselves and blame their troubles on those fuck-ups who are screwing up the world order. Both believed it was their birthright to pursue any woman, and, like Trump, the truth was whatever Dad said it was. Also, Dad always had to win. If not, he usually had a Trump tantrum. In M. Scott Peck's book, *The Road Less Traveled*, he writes: "When those with character disorders are in conflict with the world, they automatically assume that the world is at fault." Even after losing the Presidency, Trump is still accosting me on TV, my father reincarnated.

## My First 83 Years

I once believed that a nut-case could never become President of the United States. But when Richard Nixon became President, I began to doubt that. But then I decided Nixon was flawed but not nuts. George W. Bush gave me some doubts too, but then I decided he was just weak. It took Trump to make me believe that a psycho could be elected, which made me doubt the sanity of those who believed he was a savior rather than a cruel narcissist with an obsession to become King of the United States for life.

When I was a child attending Sunday school in our town, I believed heaven was a wonderful place. Now I have anxiety about a heavenly afterlife and whether I would have to meet my father again there. A middle-aged Baptist woman wrote Dear Abby and said, "I believe when I die I will go to heaven. My problem is, if going to heaven means being reunited with my parents and other family members, then I don't want to go! The idea of spending eternity with them is more than I can stand, but I don't want to go to hell, either. Any thoughts?" Dear Abby replied, "Yes. When you reach the pearly gates, talk this over with St. Peter. Perhaps he would be willing to place you in a different wing than the one your parents and other family members are staying in. And in the meantime, discuss this with your minister." I thought St. Peter should have a talk with Abby about blowing off this woman's dilemma with the facetious quip about requesting "a different wing." That was like getting healthy food tips from

## My First 83 Years

Paula Deen. And yet...

When I was young, I believed I'd always be healthy...not prone to disease. But cancer at 75 and a heart attack at 80 forced me to change my mind. I'd failed to see what being old might entail. Many who'd written me notes of love and encouragement as I recovered from cancer and colorectal surgery sent uplifting messages of sympathy about my heart attack. I wrote them of my experience and gratitude, realizing that they had all probably experienced brokenness too. I thought my connection to humanity was stronger than before and began writing about it. I recalled an early spring morning when there had been fresh snow on the bushes and I'd been startled by eight bluebirds that had squeezed onto the edge of my small bird bath. A spiritual congregation! I thought how grateful I was to still be seeing a world in new colors, one that I was only beginning to understand.

For most of my life, I felt I was too strong-minded and strong-willed to become depressed. But after the heart attack, I did begin feeling as though life was a struggle. I wondered why none of the doctors had asked about my emotional state. I read it was common for heart attack patients to feel anxious, depressed, and somewhat broken. I learned also that cardiac doctors don't deal with the emotional heart, just the physical heart. So I began to question whether the medical community was capable of

## My First 83 Years

healing me.

I once believed that the Republican Party was a responsible vehicle of government. In fact, when I was in high school and had not adopted any party affiliation yet, I thought President Eisenhower, a Republican, was a war hero and an ideal person to lead the country. When I became one of New Hampshire's two representatives to Boys Nation in Washington, D.C., I was thrilled at the possibility that I might meet him in person. On the day of our White House tour, the American Legion chaperones for our Boys Nation group said we would not meet the President. Big disappointment. Eisenhower was recuperating from abdominal surgery. The tour ended, and someone told us to wait on the White House lawn. Someone said Ike was coming out after all. The group formed a semicircle. I couldn't see over everyone. A chaperone noticed my problem and led me to the front on the far left-hand edge. Ike came out smiling and said how we represented the best in the country. He moved forward to the center of the semicircle and shook hands with John Lee Frye. Then Ike stepped back and scanned the front row until his eyes locked on mine. He walked directly to me, stuck out his hand, and said, "You're a small fellow. Where are you from?"

I shook his hand and said, "New Hampshire, sir."

Ike said, "I've been to New Hampshire a few times."

## My First 83 Years

I knew Ike enjoyed fishing, so I said, “You should bring your fishing rod next time you come. I caught a five-pound smallmouth bass once.”

Ike said, “Sounds like you’re a good fisherman.”

I smiled. Ike said good luck and began shaking hands with guys next to me. I leveled my camera for two close-ups of him. It was hard to believe the President had picked me out because I was the smallest kid. I thought maybe he did it because he was only a few inches taller than me. When I’d seen him on TV, he’d seemed tall. But Ike had empathy for small boys, and now something good had come from this handicap. Only a few more guys in the front row got to shake his hand before Ike waved and retreated to the White House. What I couldn’t know then was that someday I would have the same colorectal surgery as Ike. I wish Republicans today were as kind as Ike was then, but all they seem to desire is more guns.

When I was young, I assumed freedom and democracy would be with us forever. But the “January 6th Riot” at the Capital made me change my mind about that. I hope our democracy survives the current trend where individuals believe that gaining and holding power is such an aphrodisiac that they must have it at all costs. Nothing is guaranteed.

## My First 83 Years

As I grew up and times were chaotic in my family, I thought God was a nonexistent influence in my life. How could He allow so many bad things to happen in our house? How did He influence our father to threaten us instead of loving us? But as I've aged, I've become more aware that God does not directly control human lives. He just helps us find the faith to overcome the problems and the love to enjoy our new families.

I once thought publishing a novel and becoming well-known as a writer would be the ultimate joy. After returning from a one-year vagabond trip through Europe at the age of twenty-seven, I embarked on a challenge that would become more daunting than the European odyssey or the engineering degree I'd earned four years earlier. I had decided to become a writer and publish a novel. But if I wanted to write full-time, I'd need to replenish my savings.

I found an industrial engineering job at a Honeywell manufacturing plant located in old brick buildings along the Merrimack River in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and a modern apartment in Stoneham with another Honeywell engineer named Frank. Then I enrolled in a "Writing and Publishing" course, which was held in a Harvard University classroom one evening each week. The teacher, "Mrs. Horawitz," was middle-aged and pear-shaped and candid about how few people ever made a living at writing. She said she'd started writing when her

## My First 83 Years

psychiatric practice became too depressing, seeing only the problems of humanity, seeing only the worst of life. Her husband was a doctor who provided the family support. She could afford to write short stories for women's magazines. She said writing was fun, but the pay was lousy.

I didn't care about the obstacles. She knew all about point of view, building a story toward a climax, and that John O'Hara's stories were models for good dialogue. She had us read an O'Hara book called *Assembly*. She said an almost perfectly constructed novel was Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny*, and she advised the class to read it. What I didn't like about her class were assignments to write about mundane events, like describing a waiter or waitress in a restaurant.

When Mrs. Horawitz returned my writing, she said she thought I would become a writer. She asked what country I came from. I said I came from the United States, born in New Jersey. She thought I had an accent. What could Mrs. Horawitz be hearing? Maybe she was Jewish and heard ghost accents from those with German surnames. She was friendlier with me after she knew I was born in New Jersey. She said I should visit her on Cape Cod next summer, show her my writing, and meet her daughter. Maybe Mrs. Horawitz was a matchmaker too.

## My First 83 Years

After six rocky years in which life kept intervening and thirteen publishers rejected my manuscript, Annapolis Misfit was published finally as a young adult novel by Crown Publishers. The book had good reviews from organizations like Publishers Weekly, Kirkus Reviews, Booklist, and the American Library Association. Two local newspapers interviewed me, took photographs of me on my front steps (one with my hound dog), and produced in-depth write-ups of my road to publication. I felt overjoyed at accomplishing this goal but disappointed with the lousy compensation that Mrs. Horawitz had predicted. I knew I had to find a better way to earn a living as a writer. By the time I was married and Shelley and I had a son, I had established a well-paid career as a software technical writer with two hi-tech companies.

Although it was exciting seeing my name on the cover of a hard-bound novel and having readers tell me they enjoyed my fictional version of the Annapolis adventure, these had not become the joy I'd originally envisioned. The joy had been in the writing itself and not whether or not it was recognized.



# Has anyone ever rescued you, figuratively or literally?



When I was seventy-five, three women rescued me from death: the Explorer, the Warrior, and the Lover.

“Whatever it is...it has to come out of there.” Doctor Jennifer, the explorer, is talking to Shelley, my wife and lover, in hushed tones as though whatever-it-is should not be heard by other patients in the recovery area. I’m waking up from a routine colonoscopy. In my haze I turn my head enough to see the frown on this spindly young woman. Even in the fog of anesthesia, I sense Doctor Jennifer is going to begin using the C-word. A more pervasive fog descends as Shelley drives us home and tries to calm my anxiety. The mist of fear makes me blind to the colorful trees of autumn.

## My First 83 Years

Shelley is holding my hand the next day while another doctor performs an endoscopy and takes photographs of the tumor. The day after that, a technician performs a CT scan that reveals hernias in addition to the tumor. Since I have no visible hernia, I find it distressing to learn that my athletic body seems to be going into the trash can all at once.

On the referral of Doctor Jennifer, Shelley drives us two hours upstate for an appointment with a well-known seasoned surgeon (SS). In the examining room a testy nurse says the SS needs to see the tumor for himself.

Shelley says, “You already have photographs of the tumor. Why does my husband need another invasive procedure?”

The testy nurse says, “The sigmoidoscopy is non-negotiable.”

After I finish prepping in the toilet, testy nurse instructs Shelley to leave the room. The SS arrives finally with several medical students and instructs me to adopt an awkward kneeling position on the footrest at the end of an examining table (butt up, head down). It’s a good position for prayer, but I’m too anxious to ask God why I’m kneeling so close to the floor without even a prayer mat. So while I receive the scope with the requisite amount of wincing that comes from having no sedative and no prayers, the SS explains in hushed tones to the students about the tumor. One of the young female students rubs my back.

## My First 83 Years

When the exam is over and Shelley returns, the SS says the rate of survival for my stage of cancer is 87 percent. Good chance to beat the odds. When I ask about laparoscopic surgery (the least invasive type), the SS says not for men. “The male pelvis is much smaller than a woman’s.” Huh? But then the SS is probably leaving the hospital after December anyway. He doesn’t say retire, but that’s what I think he means. One of his competent colleagues will slice my pelvis open, probably while the SS is vacationing somewhere in the Caribbean. I leave with doubts and an appointment for a full-body MRI. On the drive home, Shelley says, “I didn’t like him. He was condescending.”

Not wanting to admit my growing anxiety, I say, “He’s supposed to be the best in the state.”

“It didn’t even sound like he’d be the one doing the surgery.”

At home I go online and review the bland biographies of those colleagues of the SS who might become involved in my case. I want a Super Surgeon, not one of the Seasoned Surgeon’s henchmen. What to do?

Shelley contacts our son’s godmother, a retired nurse, who puts her in touch with a woman in town whose husband died shortly after his surgery with the same SS and his team. When this woman had contracted cancer a couple years after her husband’s death, she’d rejected the SS and chose a team of surgeons at

## My First 83 Years

Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. So Shelley sets up a surgical appointment for me there with a well-known doctor who also teaches at Harvard. My loving wife seems determined that I survive. Soon we are in Boston.

In the examination room, I feel no relief. The city, the hospital's crowded corridors, the sirens — not the atmosphere for a man who once lived in Boston but fled to the country long ago. But when a smiling little woman with a long skirt and white doctor's coat enters and immediately cups her hands around one of mine, my heart eases. Doctor Lilliana, the warrior, says, "I know you don't want to do this again, but I would like to see the enemy. I promise I'll be gentle. Then we can form a plan to defeat the enemy."

So the gown, the toilet, the prep procedure again. But this time no kneeling in a humiliating position, no medical student observers, and no banishing Shelley from the room. I lie on my side on the examining table and at some point Doctor Lilliana says to me, "If you look up at the monitor, you can see the enemy." I do so with no real enthusiasm for another candid picture of my bowel. After she removes the scope, I sit at the end of the examining table and breathe deeply. She rolls her stool up against my knees and cups my hand in hers again. "I know you're scared but try not to worry. You're going to be okay. We're going to defeat the enemy."

## My First 83 Years

Ten days later I'm back at my local clinic to see about radiation and chemotherapy to shrink the enemy before surgery. The radiation doctor has a habit of twisting his body and looking away when we talk, as if the answers are out in the atmosphere. He sends me to his radiation team, women who have me change into a johnny and lie down beneath the Zap-a-Tron while they mark my pelvis for the radiation gun. I hope they refrain from zapping anything down there except the enemy. Later Shelley and I meet my oncologist, who has a reputation for being intelligent, good with patients, but condescending with nurses. He says I can take my pre-op chemo as pills at home but that the post-op chemo will be through infusions here at the clinic. Shelley is dubious about the need for post-op chemo, but Doctor Nickerson says standard protocol is to do it that way for Stage-2 cancer. He says, "You're in good shape for your age, and you don't smoke. You should tolerate the chemo well." I think Shelley and the doctor might lock horns, but she saves her grumbling about him until the ride home, suggesting oncologists whom friends have said were smart and empathetic. But he has a soft voice and smiles despite seeing so many cancer patients. He presents logical reasoning behind treatment protocols. So I decide to stay with Doctor Nickerson.

My mother stops eating much and is sleeping more during the day. Because we live near her, I've overseen her livelihood for the

## My First 83 Years

past twelve years. But now she seems to be nearing the end. As caring for her becomes more complicated and my energy is being compromised by daily radiation treatments, Shelley takes the responsibility of having Home Healthcare come to Mom's house. They recommend Hospice. Mom dies at home on December 2nd at the age of one hundred. In the depth of another trauma, I feel a strange emptiness about Mom. I have no tears. When I'd told her shortly before her death that I was being treated for colon cancer, she'd said "You'll be fine," which had been her reaction to all the trials of our lives, even the long years that she'd suffered my father's physical and verbal abuse and allowed him to threaten to "kill the kids."

Back in Boston, I feel nervous in Doctor Lilliana's examination room again. She presents two surgery options: reversal surgery (two surgeries that leave the anus intact but often produce an unpredictable colon) and colostomy surgery (a permanent hole at the waist with a pouch attached). I've researched both options and decided I don't like the idea that an unpredictable colon would force me to be forever anxious about diet and access to the nearest toilet.

She says, "I think you've made the best decision." She says we should schedule surgery, which she'll perform with laparoscopes and robotic arms, proving she is an expert on the "smaller" male pelvis. After guiding us to her assistant to set up a surgery date,

## My First 83 Years

Doctor Lilliana grabs my hand again and smiles. “You’re so cute.” Then she hustles away.

I don’t believe “cute” really describes a small, anxious man, but her remark makes me feel as though she sees more in me than a damaged patient. Actually she’s cute too, and I love her despite the knowledge that she will soon be cutting me up.

My interaction with Doctor Lilliana confirms to me that the best person to perform cancer surgery is a well-regarded specialist of the opposite sex who thinks you’re cute. One who holds your hand and tells you not to be afraid. One who says your surgery will be easier because you’re not fat. One who says that robotic arms are the best tools for defeating the enemy. The greater the emotional investment the doctor has in you, the more likely he or she is to pull your mind out of its dark places.

In January, two weeks before my surgery, Shelley drives us to Boston and the hospital again to meet with a consulting nurse who will instruct on how to prepare for surgery and a stoma nurse who will mark my skin for placement of a surgically-created hole in my abdomen where poop will leave my body after Doctor Lilliana removes part of my colon. The stoma nurse uses her magic marker to draw the X-target three inches to the left of my navel and instructs me to keep that area dry until surgery. I wonder again how something so foreign can

## My First 83 Years

actually be happening.

I try to console myself with the knowledge that famous people have had stomas. The stoma nurse points out photographs on the wall in their hallway outside the examining rooms: President Eisenhower, actress Loretta Young, football player Jerry Kramer. Later I read about Napoleon Bonaparte, who is often pictured with his right hand in his shirt, a method some say he developed to conceal his goat bladder ostomy bag. But famous company does not mean I can shed the feeling my body will soon be broken. I will need to hide my ostomy bag under long jerseys and sweatshirts.

In early February, Shelley and I check in to a hotel near the hospital, where I begin drinking nasty solutions to clear my colon. Early the next morning we walk to the hospital. Soon I'm flat on a cart outside the operating room, being prepped by some guy who says he climbed the same Pack Monadnock Mountain on which Shelley and I were married thirty-five years ago. Good omen. He asks me if it's okay for him to insert an epidural (which from my recollection was used to relieve Shelley's pain during childbirth). Who wants pain? Go for it, I tell him.

Eight hours later I share a hospital room with a frail, bearded man who looks older than me and has some mysterious virus that is causing an open sore on his leg and making him seriously



## My First 83 Years

ill. While Shelley is at my bedside every day, the bearded man has no visitors until a woman who says she is a professor at the college where they both teach. According to ongoing medical discussions at his bedside, his open sore could be contagious. So I avoid our common toilet (by virtue of my catheter and ostomy bag). I avoid shaving until the head nurse says I'm beginning to resemble an old man. Succumbing to the criticism, I ask a cheerful student nurse to hold a pan of water so I can shave without entering the contagious toilet to which the bearded man has been shuffling. Even so, I fear I'll probably leave the hospital with the deadly virus. But when I leave five days later, I conclude maybe being cute wards off the deadly variety.

A few days after returning home, a Home Health Care nurse arrives to inspect a drain in one of the four small sutures across my abdomen and a suture in my rear. Then a wonderful physical therapist arrives to help alleviate the rear-end muscle spasms that are inhibiting urination. A social worker arrives to see if I'm depressed and urges us to update our advance health directives, perhaps in case my bending over for more rear inspections sends me into cardiac arrest.

Weeks later I have minor surgery to insert a port into my chest, and then chemotherapy drugs are dripping into the port every few weeks. Halfway through my treatments, a hospital chaplain stops by my seat in the chemotherapy room and starts talking to

## My First 83 Years

Shelley and me. He says he writes a column for a local newspaper. A few days later he emails me his article "Writing is Healing." He writes, "I had a strange and disturbing thought. It originated from reading a compelling book, *Writing as a Way of Healing*, by Louise DeSalvo. She shares many wonderful perspectives on how writing heals. It's not only the act of writing that heals, it's the memories. Not as in remembering someone's name, but in recalling events. Medical staffs term it narrative medicine."

So I continue scribbling stuff at home, mostly about raising a son who, as a child, asked so many questions about life and God and death that I was never sure how to answer.

Once I finish chemotherapy, I begin to feel stronger after a couple weeks. I'm walking a mile with Shelley each day, performing yard work, and joining my son occasionally on the tennis court as his doubles partner. Despite my improvement, I can't shake the feeling of being broken. The numb toes and fingers from the chemotherapy, a nagging open sore on one toe, a bulging hernia that will need surgery, and daily visits to my stoma are constant reminders that my body, and perhaps my mind, will never be whole again.

I begin the process of healing in the chemotherapy room, observing others who are struggling, asking my empathetic

## My First 83 Years

nurses about their lives and families. Some of these guardian angels have stories that move me. Many have cancer in their family. All seem to take comfort in making a connection with me beyond the manipulation of the chemo bags. If other oncology patients are not waiting to check in, the nurse scheduler with the authoritarian voice leaves her booth to hug Shelley and me.

The chaplain and I continue to exchange emails about angst and writing, mostly giving one another book recommendations. Oddly, we do not discuss prayer, which is probably a more private and solitary journey. I continue to thank God for each day, requesting that He be with me on my journey and asking Him not for some miracle but for enough mental fortitude to keep working on the reclamation of my body.

I join the online Inspire network, where cancer survivors express their fears, questions, and stories. I find comfort and useful information in the discussions of these survivors as they speak to solving day-to-day problems associated with recovery. Some even provide humor. One woman announces her 34th anniversary with a stoma named "Sam." Another counters that she has spent 38 years with "Helen." One contributor describes a cookout in which his "Chief" is known to most participants except a new guy who declares in some random discussion involving beer that everyone has an asshole. The man with the Chief says he does not have one. The new guy expresses

## My First 83 Years

disbelief, as in, “What you been smoking?” An offer of a hundred dollars is extended to new guy if he will put his hand down Chief’s pants and find anything to stick his finger in. After much laughter from the cookout crowd, new guy stutters “ttthat’s nnnasty,” jumps in his pickup truck, and drives off. Crude humor? Definitely. But I suppose every cancer survivor needs a coping mechanism. I name my stoma “Oscar,” after Oscar the Grouch on Sesame Street.

Shelley is my coping mechanism, having been with me through all of it. She is a stellar example of love when a husband is at his worst. She emails my progress to friends and tells of those who are praying for me. Her friend Joan sends me a napping blanket similar to the one she used years ago during her recovery from breast cancer surgery.

And yet, I feel broken. In his book, *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stevenson writes, “I guess I’d always known but never fully considered that being broken is what makes us human. We all have our reasons. Sometimes we’re fractured by the choices we make; sometimes we’re shattered by things we would never have chosen. But our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis for our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing.” I must try to see this view.

## My First 83 Years

Shelley emails friends whenever follow-up CT scans in radiology and colonoscopies with Doctor Jennifer indicate a good outcome. My explorer is smiling on these occasions now when I'm coming out of the fog of anesthesia. Many friends write notes of love and encouragement. I write them my thanks. Knowing my interest in birds, Shelley's mom sends cards with bluebirds and cardinals, noting her love for me and those of her friends who have me in their prayers. My son tells his friends that his dad is beating cancer.

How fortunate, I think, that I've received mercy from so many and have begun to write my way toward healing. Often I look up from my computer, glance out the window at a bright yellow goldfinch at the bird feeder, and know how grateful I am to be seeing the world in new colors. I think how fortunate I am for the three women who rescued me and the others who have been instrumental in my recovery.

...

A few years later, the pain in my chest begins on Sunday morning when I'm alone in the house. I have no one to say it's probably just anxiety, since I'm a worrywart and that diagnosis is the most logical conclusion. Even fully vaccinated, I still feel as though the COVID virus is out to get me. Stalking me. Trying to worm its way up my nose. My immunity to the deadly virus is

## My First 83 Years

wearing off, but I have a booster shot scheduled for Friday. Maybe I'll be safe again in five days.

Twenty minutes later, the chest pain disappears. During lunch I remind myself that Shelley has been away for exactly one month, another cause for anxiety. As a retired couple, we're accustomed to taking a walk at noon and having lunch together afterward. But she's had to visit her dying mother halfway across the country and is still tending to postmortem obligations there. Even as an antisocial writer who prefers to be alone, I realize her emails saying she isn't sure yet when she'll return are putting me on edge. Virtual hugs in an email just aren't doing it for me.

Shelley calls around 6 P. M., talks about the current problems her mom's death has left behind, and asks how I'm doing. I mention my morning chest pains that have gone away, and she makes some joke about my not having a heart attack. Not long after ending our call, the pain begins again, radiating through my chest a bit more forcefully than before.

I have to do something besides twist my head in knots. I decide to call Kitty, our friend and retired nurse who lives across the street. I explain the situation and ask if I should call 911. She says she can drive me to the ER at our local hospital, which is probably quicker than waiting for a rescue vehicle.

## My First 83 Years

The dark drizzle against her windshield and Kitty's occasional questions about how I'm feeling seem to make my chest pain more ominous during the next forty-five minutes, although it probably isn't intensifying as much as my anxiety.

Kitty drops me off on the pavement outside the double doors to the ER and goes to park the car. Per hospital regulations, I put on my COVID mask and open the outside door to find a man and woman seated in the shadows. The woman beckons. I say I have to go quickly, I think I'm having a heart attack. She hands me a hospital mask to replace my own. Emergency or no emergency, protocol must be followed.

I whip on through the inner door to a quiet waiting room with only one customer. At the receiving window I explain my concern to a kind-looking woman, who finds my name in their database and makes some quiet remark to a woman nearby. That woman then makes a quick exit from the rear of the receiving area, setting in motion a number of masked medical rescuers who immediately come bursting into the waiting area to escort me to the inner sanctum and lay me out on a gurney.

The following moments are a blur in which my life becomes a flurry of masked marvels who poke, jab, and attach me to an EKG machine. One of them confirms I'm having a heart attack. They give me stuff to thin my blood, bring down the blood pressure,

## My First 83 Years

and control the pain. The plan is for a helicopter to land and fly me to the mother hospital's main location, where they have the facilities to analyze and fix the problem. But when the chopper arrives overhead, it can't land in the fog and drizzle. It will have to be a long ambulance ride instead. The fixers have been notified and will be waiting for me.

The nurse briefs Kitty, who then calls Shelley. Kitty gives me her phone. What can I say other than I'm lying on a gurney, feeling little pain now, and waiting for transport. Shelley says she's so sorry not to be there for me. I give the phone back to Kitty, who moves away and tells Shelley she's confirmed that she and my son, Jesse, will have access to all information about my current medical procedures.

I'm skeptical about the rescuer who will drive me north while the New England Patriots are playing their biggest football game of the year against Tom Brady and his Tampa Bay Buccaneers. But when two men finally arrive and load my gurney into their truck-like vehicle, they say that transporting me is their responsibility and that they can listen to the game on their radio. All I can hear as their vehicle careens along is the thump of the tires, the whoosh of the wind, and a static-filled radio from somewhere up front. The burly attendant buckled in back with me says it's a close game. I apologize for screwing up their night and taking them away from the game. The burly guy says not to



## My First 83 Years

worry about it. It's their job to get me there safely.

When we arrive, the attendants roll my gurney onto a platform and then inside through a maze of corridors until we reach a place called the Cardiac Catheterization Unit. The "team" is ready to work. They position my gurney next to an operating table and, as I begin to push myself toward it, they stop me. They slide something under me and lift me onto the table. The ambulance attendants say goodbye. Someone sets up a blocking curtain that obscures my view of anything below my waist. My heart is above. What are they doing below? I'm only half aware of what's happening. The team are all in masks too and so I can't really see the nurse when she gets up close to give me instructions. I think they want me to stay limp and be quiet.

I hear the rescue team talking as they work below the curtain but I can't make out what they're saying, something about an artery. I look to the side and see a screen that seems to picture veins with blood flowing through them. Must be mine. Who else? The team discovers a blocked artery. Ninety-five percent clogged, I will find out later. The team works on me until midnight, inserting a stent to keep the artery open.

Afterward, I'm wheeled to a dark recovery room in the ICU, where a nurse keeps checking my blood pressure and who-knows-what-else. I guess I'm supposed to relax, but the

## My First 83 Years

gurney is hard enough to defy the discovery of a comfortable position. Jesse appears in the doorway and says, “Hi Dad. How are you feeling?” It is so good to see him. He and Ling have made a long drive from their home, but because only one visitor is allowed, she and their dog, Wonder, a rescued female Greyhound, have stayed at the nearby motel where they checked in. He says the hospital entry squad said he should have come earlier during visiting hours. He told them his dad wasn’t here earlier and that he needed to see him now. He and I talk small talk, which rescues me from my anxious thoughts. Then he says I need to sleep and that he’ll be back in the morning.

But I can’t sleep after he leaves. No matter what position, either my hips or my back are arguing with the hard slab on which I’m supposed to sleep. And periodically the nurse is either diddling with me or some monitor. And the light from the nurses’ station immediately outside my door, the voices there, are like having the TV on in your bedroom. Even when the nurse swings the door shut, it’s no use. If my heart keeps going, I’ll have a nervous breakdown by morning.

Somehow I survive until the morning shift wheels me from the ICU to a room on the cardiac floor and into a soft bed with a back that tilts up. I’m attached to many wires and tubes that feel like tentacles when I move. A young nurse named Jimmy is going to oversee my survival today. He gives me a menu and phone

## My First 83 Years

number for the cafeteria. I order French toast with syrup but, when it arrives, it seems too sweet. Maybe a heart attack wrecks the sense of taste.

I don't ask about taste when the team arrives. Doctor Young, who'd placed my stent late last night, prods me with his stethoscope. I say I feel hot sweats now and then, but maybe it's just anxiety. Two young interns nod as though anxiety is the answer. I think interns want to know about heart problems and not hot sweats. They linger near my bed, but a middle-aged, balding doctor hangs back and seems to observe. I think he is the cardiac surgeon in charge of my case. He must be satisfied that his minions are doing the job, because he just slips out of the room quietly when my exam is finished.

Jesse arrives, talks to Nurse Jimmy, sits in a chair next me. He writes down the number of the phone next to my bed so that Shelley can call me. After we run out of conversation, he takes out his iPad and begins studying for an upcoming test for his pilot's license. I turn on the TV, check out the news on CNN, and move on to the Price is Right and then Jeopardy. The prizes on Price is Right remind me that Jesse's birthday is in five days and I haven't gotten him much. An Amazon gift card, a subscription to Flying magazine, and money I earned from publishing an essay about fatherhood in The Boston Globe Magazine: "Do Your Eyes Light Up When Your Child Walks into the Room?" And, yes,

## My First 83 Years

my eyes did light up when he arrived earlier. How did he get to thirty-four so fast?

I hear the word “Shelley” from the hall and see Nurse Jimmy on the phone out there. I suspect he is being interrogated by his patient’s wife.

During the next two days I’m stuck in the hospital, hooked up to every possible monitor, with Jesse as my occasional visitor. Staying in a bed for two days is almost worse than the heart attack. I have to put on a mask and drag a portable monitor and a mound of wires around just to get in a walk. I have an interesting roommate, who, at eighty-two, is one year older than me and has been coming there off and on since his first heart procedure at forty-seven. His wife is a travel writer, and he supplies the photographs. When they overhear me tell Jesse I don’t have anything to read, they give me a paperback novel. Nice folks.

While I’m in the hospital, Jesse sits beside me and continues studying for his pilot’s license. When he drives me home Wednesday, I wonder why none of the doctors asked about my emotional state. I read it was common for heart attack patients to feel anxious, depressed, and somewhat broken. I learned then that cardiac doctors don’t deal with the emotional heart, just the physical heart.

## My First 83 Years

Now I'll have to consume a slew of medications and worry about my erratic heart.

After bringing me home, Jesse leaves for his house, which is a forty-minute drive, saying to call him if I need anything. I have a calm night and feel pretty good the next morning, and so I drive to a pharmacy to pick up my five new heart medications and do some grocery shopping on the way home. On Friday I drive to another pharmacy, the one where I'd made an appointment for my COVID booster shot. After the injection, I abide by their instructions to wait fifteen minutes there before driving home. I feel okay.

On Sunday Shelley arrives home, and it is a relief to have her with me again. During my chemotherapy days, her kindness and empathy had given me more insight into the depth of our love.

But I now feel broken again. What can I do to shake it? Maybe if I write about the many who have come to my rescue. Some say writing about trauma and recovery can be cathartic.

## My First 83 Years

# How has the country changed during your lifetime?



When I grew up in our town in southern New Hampshire, I had no thoughts of a mentally-ill person coming to our elementary school and blasting us kids with an automatic rifle. Now everyone seems to worship the gun, and in the hands of many more unstable individuals, our country has become a frightening place. Today most idiots own guns that are automatic weapons of destruction and a form of lethal insanity.

We usually received plenty of light snow the winter. Today there seems to be a tendency for only a few inches of snow, then freezing rain, which, when accumulating on their branches, brings down a lot of trees. Or this year, one giant storm with heavy, almost-unplowable snow that damaged trees and power and telephone lines. Outdoor temperatures are higher now. Our

## My First 83 Years

family didn't have the option of a home generator years ago. Now we do, and the electrical power can be off for days.

Many electronics that aid (or replace) the human brain today had not been invented yet. For example, the home computer, laptop, and smart phone were not available. Today, if someone uses a smart phone to record say a policeman kneeling on a man's neck, everyone can view it on TV later and either root for the policeman or the black man who is having trouble breathing. Cameras are so ubiquitous that a decent thief cannot even pull off a heist without seeing a video of himself later and wishing the hood he was wearing covered more of his face. This and more entertaining videos can be watched at home now on a big screen television (first it was VHS tapes, then DVDs, and now Netflix streaming). Today's technology has brought all the good and bad events of life just a few feet from an easy chair.

As a child, I cannot remember seeing much wildlife here where I grew up, even though I walked the logging trails nearby. But from this same house, I now entice colorful birds to our yard with feeders, which a bear has tackled occasionally in his quest for sunflower seeds. The birds shied away from the feeders when a wild bobcat sat on the ground underneath and, at a different time, when a hawk perched on top. Deer, foxes, coyotes, and ground hogs have also appeared occasionally. Once I watched my neighbor's cat, Moxie, and a deer circling one another in my



## My First 83 Years

back yard. Another time I watched Moxie stalk a skunk from his house across our front yard and to our back yard, with only a slight stink as it passed our kitchen window. Wild animals are coming closer to humans today.

When I was a child, government was considered a good thing. I knew the country was in capable hands with a President like General Eisenhower, especially when he shook my hand on the White House lawn as I participated as one of New Hampshire's two representatives to the 1956 Boys Nation. Presidents like Eisenhower and John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson worked well with Congress to get things done for the country. Recently, however, the United States elected President Trump, an accused rapist, who said on TV that he could touch a woman anywhere he wanted and who did nothing more for the country than put up a wall along part of the Texas/Mexico border and said the COVID was no big deal – a nothing virus that would be done in a matter of weeks and was not the kind of thing that one needed a vaccine for. He then planned a riot at the capital in order to stay in power when he lost the election to Old Man Biden, who is about my age. When that failed, Trump began his plan to be re-elected in 2024. If that happens, I'll probably have another heart attack, something I didn't worry about when I was young and the country was in the hands of sane politicians.

## My First 83 Years

My mother had a box camera called a Brownie, which she used to take tons of photos of her kids every year. This involved creating an image on film and then taking the film to someone who transformed that image into a photograph that you could hold in your hand and then paste, as she did, into at least 30 photograph albums during her lifetime. Now one can take photographs with a more sophisticated camera or a smart phone and see them instantly on the device or at home on their computer screen. Photograph images can even be sent to friends electronically via email.

When I was growing up, product cures for private bodily malfunctions (or just displays that enhanced the body) were not advertised on TV. Now almost anything is allowed: Adult Depend diapers for leaky bladders, cures for Peyronie's Disease (bent penis, showing bent carrots instead of the actual penis), soothing cream for a woman's crevices ("Even under the boobs," the TV saleslady says), bras, skimpy underwear, et cetera.

When our son, Jesse, was about six years old, he had a tendency to ask the meaning of certain words and misinterpret those that had a double meaning. In January that year, during the ice skating championships, he saw a commercial on TV for Hanes underwear — some female models parading across the screen in bra and panties. Up until this time he'd understood the word model to mean model car, model train, model boat (things not

## My First 83 Years

human). We giggled at the commercial, and I said it seemed pretty silly for models to be running around on TV in their underwear.

He said, "Yes, but they made them look very real."

Oh, he thinks the models are robots. "Those are real women," I said. "The word model can also mean someone who shows off new clothes for TV, magazine, and catalog ads."

He nodded. "Don't they feel a little embarrassed doing that?"

"I don't know. But Hanes pays them a lot of money to do that, so maybe they're not embarrassed anymore." Later I kidded him about his own Hanes underwear (he could hardly believe it until I show him the labels). He asked if I wore Hanes underwear, and I said only my undershirt was a Hanes. When I wanted to get him laughing, I sang the Hanes commercial, "Wait till I get my Hanes on you."

New technology introduced during my lifetime seems to have changed human behavior, mine included. These behavioral changes tended to make a difference:

Television. From a small black-and-white TV box to a large, flat-screen viewing theater with remote control devices to turn it on and off. Recording devices allow me to record programs that I don't have time to watch when they are broadcast but later at my

## My First 83 Years

convenience. I suppose one would see this change as better time management.

Computer/word processing. From a typewriter to a home personal computer (PC) running Microsoft word processing software. From having to use White-Out to paint over typewritten errors on paper to software inventions like “spell checker” that make correcting a typographical error just a couple flicks of the keys. Nothing need be printed on paper until the software determines that a piece has no errors. I suppose this has allowed for more writing, although compared with TV, less reading.

The Internet and Google. When I wanted some information as a kid, I looked in a volume of alphabetized books called an encyclopedia. Now we can do fast electronic searches for information on the Internet. For me, access to the outside world via email and Google became a valuable tool that I use every day. Since the Google search engine was developed, a person can now research about anything by entering a few key words for the search engine. Of course, humans have loaded the Internet with its encyclopedic contents, but the array of information is infinite. Google provides access to the internet encyclopedia, Wikipedia, if it contains information on the subject of your interest. Although the information found in Google searches is not always accurate, it is sophisticated enough to have become the country's

## My First 83 Years

fastest online encyclopedia.

The Internet and Email. From writing letters to friends and relatives to an email exchange. My letters home during my time as a vagabond in Europe took a long time to reach my mom, even by air mail. I wish I'd had email then. But the written word on paper seemed more intimate, and I still have those letters from Europe, because my mom kept them and gave them to me later. I have no idea where old emails go...only that I no longer have old ones to mull over and help me remember the past.

Netflix. Long ago you could make home movies if you were affluent enough to afford a movie camera. Now you make movies with your smart camera. If you wanted to see a Disney movie, you went to a movie theater if there was one near your town. Along came the invention of the DVD that contained movies. You could see movies at home by buying or renting a DVD at a store for that purpose or by picking one up at the local library. Now DVDs are not as much in demand because it is possible to subscribe to online entertainment viewing such as Apple, Disney, and Netflix. Now in my studio I have a TV set up opposite my treadmill that allows me to watch a Netflix movie or DVD while I'm getting some daily exercise. This is especially advantageous in winter in lieu of outdoor exercise (With achy joints now, I hire a neighbor to clear the driveway).

## My First 83 Years

Microwave oven. When I was young, my mother cooked all our meals on a wood-burning stove. Then electric stoves and gas stoves became sophisticated and more affordable. Still there was a lot of time and effort in making a dinner on a stove. When the microwave oven was invented, it opened up a lot of new possibilities. When my stepfather died, my mother was almost ninety and didn't have the interest or energy to be cooking laborious dinners for herself, since she was managing to live alone in her own house quite nicely. Her favorite microwave meal was Lean Cuisine shrimp scampi dinners. I've heated frozen dinners in our microwave oven when Shelley was away and I didn't feel like cooking dinner on the stove and dirtying pots or pans. I also use it most days to heat a cup of water in two minutes for my morning tea.

Mobile phone and Caller ID. A modern phone displays a caller ID when it rings. When I don't recognize the caller, my brain seems to decide it's either telemarketing, scams, or Dad calling from the grave to say he's been reincarnated as Donald Trump. Thus, I don't have to answer the phone if I don't know the caller. I have found a modern mobile phone helpful in certain instances: once when I had a flat tire in the hospital parking lot and was able to call AAA service, and a few times when the dentist office, because of the COVID pandemic, said patients had to call from their parking lot upon arrival and not come in until the receptionist

## My First 83 Years

called back and said to enter with a mask.

Home printer and copier. When I need to print a document from my computer to create a paper copy, I have a difficult time remembering what I did in this respect before the invention of home printers and copiers. I think paper documents that I'd typed on a typewriter and needed to be copied had to go to a commercial copy center, where you paid them to make the copies.

Amazon and other online shopping. When I was young, I noticed that my mother subscribed to catalogs that came in the mail. I think her favorite was Sears & Roebuck. She often charged a lot of Christmas gifts at Sears and then tried to pay part of the bills that came in the mail each month. I don't enjoy shopping malls where you can wander around to find the latest popular gadget or present. Of course, there wasn't much choice until Amazon came along and I discovered the art of "online shopping." That I can buy an item there and charge it to my Amazon credit card, makes it easier for an old foggy who becomes a bit anxious in a store like Walmart, where they are reducing the number of cashiers to cut costs. Now you're supposed to use the self-checkout machine, where you swipe your credit card and hope the store is not stealing any extra money from you.

## My First 83 Years

Laparoscopic surgery. During the 1960's and 1980's, laparoscopy evolved from a purely diagnostic procedure into an independent surgical approach. When a routine colonoscopy revealed I had a cancerous tumor that would require surgery, possibly laparoscopic surgery, Shelley drove us upstate for an appointment with a well-known seasoned surgeon (SS), who said he didn't do surgeries on men with a laparoscope because the male pelvis was smaller than those of a female. After a second opinion with Dr. Lilliana in Boston, she said she'd be performing the surgery with laparoscopes and the robotic arms that she managed as her own, proving she was an expert on the "smaller" male pelvis. Apparently I wouldn't be sliced wide open after all. The medical field was becoming so sophisticated that surgery like mine would probably be performed in the future by an AI robot that had been instructed to remove Section 42-C of the patient's colon...and stitch the fucking bowel back up afterward.

CT scanner and MRI. The CT scanner was introduced in the Mayo Clinic in 1973. The MRI was introduced in 1977 and became available in hospitals in the early 1980's. Months before my colorectal surgery, I'd had an MRI to get the full picture of the tumor in my colon. After the surgery, I had a CT scan about every six months for a few years to ensure that the cancer had not returned. Then I began having the CT scan on an annual basis,



## My First 83 Years

which only confirmed that I had inguinal hernias with loops of the small bowel. I suppose having a picture of the problem within my body made it possible for a diagnosis and repair that helped me gain more years of life than if the cancer had occurred years earlier without that technology. But the damaging effects of radiation, chemotherapy, and the cutting of essential nerves during subsequent hernia surgery, screwed up my body to the extent that I might have been better off to have checked out earlier...perhaps with a Big Mac and a Coke.

Experts say that humans in society today are living much longer than our ancestors. But they don't say in what condition. Gerontologists today say that society and our government is not doing what they should for the health and welfare of the aging population. Having been a caregiver for my mother for twelve years until she died at one hundred, and now reaching the "golden years" myself, I understand the dilemma better.

Even Shelley's mom understood the current dilemma of living longer. She said, "The only thing golden about the Golden Years is the color of your pee." A prescient woman.

## My First 83 Years



Shelley when I first met her a few years before the wedding

# What was one of the most romantic moments in your life?



Getting married on a mountaintop on a sunny day — July 25, 1981. This was a romantic event in a beautiful outdoor setting with a bunch of romantic participants and witnesses. The day began foggy at our Fitzwilliam house, but a phone call with the florist in Jaffrey ascertained that it was sunny with clear blue skies at the mountain site.

To accommodate older people who were not likely to climb a mountain to see Shelley and I say our vows, we had chosen Miller State Park because it has a paved road to the top of Pack Monadnock Mountain and parking at the top. We had chosen the privacy of a clearing located about a hundred feet away from the parked cars and which provided an expansive view of Mt. Monadnock.

## My First 83 Years

As everyone gathered at the site, Joanne and Shelley's brother, Craig, played lilting music on their recorders. Then Carl Sovel, the minister at King's Chapel in Boston and a summer resident at Laurel Lake whom we'd come to know, began our service by saying, "The peace of God is upon this place and upon all who come here. Friends and family of Shelley and Kurt, we have come here to witness the promise which they are going to make to each other, and to give thanks for the promise, and to give thanks for the love which has brought them together, which they share with each other, and which they will share with us." He goes on to say that, at the heart of the wedding, it's the promise we will make to one another that is at the heart of the wedding.

Next, Shelley and I read five Rilke quotes on Love that were her favorites, two of which are as follows:

"I hold this to be the highest task of a bond between two people...that each should stand guard over the solitude of the other."

"For one human being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation."

The two musicians then played more on their recorders before I read my introduction to the vows that Shelley and I had written to say to one another: "What seems to be universally true is that

## My First 83 Years

one person marries another because of love — whatever his or her concept. Eric Hoffer, one of my favorite philosophers, puts forth this view: ‘All that one can say of love is that it enables us to put up wholeheartedly with imperfections.’ In that statement I believe Hoffer meant to imply laughter as a means of putting up with imperfections. Certainly Shelley and I have laughed with each other about our idiosyncrasies. And so, keeping in mind that love itself is imperfect, we would like to share with you a personal concept of our commitment to one another.”

Then Shelley spoke her vows to me: “What is it I love so about this special friend? When I look inside, I find a stronger self for having known you for these past six years. This is the same self that has evolved as I have grown and we have grown together. I see in you a gentleness — in your touch, in the tone of your voice, in the way you greet me, in the way you always take the time to stroke the fur on Pup’s head. Yet underneath this gentle way is also a strength that speaks clearly and singularly — a determination to strive for excellence in all that you do — in your work at GTE, in your struggle as an artist to perfect your work as a writer. And in your determination to show me again and again that I am loved. It is in my relationship with you that I find a haven, a safe place where I can look inward and let my roots take hold so that I may reach for the sky. It is with you that I feel we can achieve that delicate balance of togetherness and

## My First 83 Years

aloneness — of intimacy and individuality. It is because that I love you — because I trust and respect you — that I wish for us to be married. I promise to help sustain our love and make it grow through the course of our lives. And with this promise, I accept the responsibility of becoming your wife.”

Then I spoke my vows to Shelley: “My dear Shelley — here we are gathered on top of another mountain; you, the lady who likes to sit on the edge of cliffs, staring off into space, driving me crazy for fear you’ll fall off; and me, the writer who’s always thinking up those bad puns to try for a laugh from you (like calling this park Miller High Life). But today I’ll refrain from bad puns, rather than risk your look that tells me I’m coming on like Bob Hope. We have climbed many mountains together, some higher than this one, some physical, some emotional, but none more symbolic than the one we stand on today. For on this one, we promise to accept one another forever. Already you have accepted my ahinga-ha’s, which is a fast and bullish way of completing distasteful chores; my spacing out, which is a way of being present physically but not mentally; and my fear of crowds, which is anything more than six people. You have shaved my ego down a bit, gently, with tenderness, with humor. You have helped me laugh at myself when it’s time to laugh and be serious when it’s time to be serious. Most important, perhaps, is that you have listened to me — which seems to be your special

## My First 83 Years

talent. You hear Mozart and song birds and me. You hear beneath the sounds. You hear the composer's soul. You hear joy and sadness, hope and despair, screams and whispers. You hear me because you want to. And that's love. You listen without telling me how it ought to be. You evaluate what you hear, which is probably the reason you understand me. You always seem to understand, not with doubt or criticism, but with the compassion I need from my closest friend. I feel fortunate that you want to decipher the meaning of our life together, for that takes our friendship to intimacy and space and vivid colors. And that's love. You understand without telling me how it ought to be. You have touched and comforted me in my painful moments and, in turn, have allowed me to comfort you when you need to same. Already it seems that we have talked with each other a million years and walked a million miles — all the time with hands clasped together. Always there has been warmth to your touch that signifies how much you care. And that's love. You comfort me without telling me how it ought to be. Now I must say to you what you already know — that is, how much I care about you. I love you for all the things you've done for me, I love you for who you are, and I love you for who you will become. In every way, you are the beauty of my life. So I promise you this: I will help sustain our love and make it grow through the course of our lives. And with this promise I accept the responsibility of becoming your husband."

## My First 83 Years

Shelley and I then exchanged rings, followed by Carl Scovel pronouncing us husband and wife and leading us in prayer and meditation. “...Out of this tangled world, oh God, thou hast drawn together these two souls and bound them firmly with the swift, sure vows of love. Their destiny shall now be woven of one design, and their perils, and their joys shall not be known to them...Eternal God, bless this congregation, and all the friendships and marriages which build up human love. May our love for each other be our best gift to thee. Amen.”

Music from two recorders ended the ceremony, at which point friends and family congratulated us and then straggled back to the mountain’s parking lot. The only glitch to folks driving down the steep and curvy road to the bottom was that Shelley’s uncle, a flat-lander from Ohio, was too anxious about the descent and had to enlist someone else to drive his truck down to the main road. Other than that, everyone made it without incident to the lake house, where we congregated on the porches for eating, drinking, and socializing. For those who wanted some action, I’d set up our croquet set on the front lawn and our badminton net on the back lawn.

Most of all, I remember the day was a torrent of emotions and love.



# Who have been your closest friends throughout the years?



When I was a child, my closet friends were those with whom I shared common interests. Not until I was adult did I have a friend intimate enough for sharing my secrets.

When I was five, I rode tricycles and pedaled fire trucks around our city apartment complex with Johnny Johansen. We almost got kidnapped (or worse) one morning when we pedaled our fire trucks outside the apartment complex and were offered candy by a group of men in a car parked nearby if we would get into the car with them. We ran.

When our family moved to New Hampshire, I fished frequently off the shore of Sportsman's Pond and Laurel Lake with Johnny Bullock. I played tennis with Timmy Treat and water-skied behind their family's motorboat on Laurel Lake. The Treat family

## My First 83 Years

were summer residents, old friends of my mother, who had a tennis court and lived just a few hundred feet down the road from our house. I spent so much time there, swimming at their beach, even participating most evenings in their family's penny-ante poker games, that theirs was a second home to me. And a lot more fun than my own house.

I had a couple girlfriends in high school, Dink Foster and Mary Lou Johnson, and a guy friend, Pete Wright, with whom I sang in the a capella choir and a duet ("Tell Me Why the Stars Do Shine") on talent night at the New Hampshire Boys State conference one summer at UNH. I usually sat with Pete on choir trips to places like Boston and Atlantic City, although I once sat with Nancy Crowell, who seemed to like me a lot and encouraged me to invite her to the school prom, even though she was taller than me. Nancy wore flat shoes that night instead of high heels.

One year at Annapolis, I had a roommate, Ron Baker, with whom I gallivanted during our Academy flight-training exercises at Virginia Beach and Pensacola, Florida, during the summer of 1960. But we lost track of one another after I left Annapolis.

The first friend with whom I was close enough to share my family secrets was John Abel. John had blonde hair, full lips, and Bambi eyes that made women pick him out of a crowd. We met in our assigned dorm room at Michigan State University at the

## My First 83 Years

beginning of spring term in 1962. I was a discredited engineering transfer from the U. S. Naval Academy, and John had just transferred from Albion College as a Phys Ed major.

When not in classes, John and I talked about life and went places together. One of the first was a Friday night mixer in our dorm's recreation room, where males and females moved in lines to the raucous Ray Charles tune, "What'd I Say." Women in short skirts were doing far more with their hips and pelvis than I'd ever seen. "Tell your momma, tell your pa, Gonna move you back to Arkansas." Everyone in the dance seemed to know the next move during the Hitchhiker, the Pony, and the Holly Gully. What the dancers did when Ray Charles was slowly moaning "Ah welllll, ah heyyyy, yeahhh... yeahhh... yeahhh," looked and sounded like a mass orgasm. John had no inhibitions about doing this dance and other one-on-one dances and had no trouble finding dance partners who wanted to face him and make suggestive movements with their hips. However, Annapolis had perpetrated a social misfit, making me believe you performed salacious acts only while inebriated.

East Lansing was a dry town, but adjoining towns had plenty of beer-drinking hangouts. John had a bright red Volvo that he'd purchased with the small inheritance his mother had left him when she died. On weekends he drove us to a crowded jazz joint, where we drank Strohs beer and talked about life. Then John

## My First 83 Years

drove home for the summer term while I moved from the dorm to a ranch house with two frat guys, took three summer courses, and began working part-time in the Holiday Inn kitchen. The chef there had his girlfriend fix me up with a wild woman, who almost caused me to flunk my boring Mechanical Vibrations course.

When the frat guys returned to their fraternity house that September, John and a fellow engineering student moved into the ranch house. We had some great parties there, including the one in which I informed Wild Woman that John was a virgin and needed some instruction. Perhaps because John was so handsome, she enthusiastically obliged.

When I graduated at the end of that year, I was hired as a sales engineer at IBM's Lansing office and was happy that I'd still be close to John, who still had another year at MSU. While attending IBM's eight-week training course in Detroit, I bought a bright red Triumph Spitfire as a reward for becoming an engineer at a prestigious company. But overseers of the training determined that I lacked the right stuff to sling bullshit about IBM's products. At the very moment that I was being fired, President Kennedy was being assassinated. November 22, 1963.

So I packed my bags and drove back to East Lansing and talked about the President's tragedy with John, who was living now in a

## My First 83 Years

five-person house at the edge of the campus. I crashed in a sleeping bag on his bedroom floor, where I had nightmares about a man chasing me with a gun. I could never see the face of the man with the gun, so I always assumed it was my father. But John suggested maybe the faceless man symbolized my fear of death. I said I wasn't afraid to die, but maybe I was.

In May the following year, now employed at a Boston company that manufactured water purification equipment, I flew to Indianapolis on a technical service trip and drove my rental car to Indiana University on the Friday after I finished the job. John was a graduate student there and said he had just the woman for me. I said I didn't need a woman because my objective was to visit him for the weekend before flying back to Boston on Sunday. But John said he had it all arranged. John seemed to think he owed me a favor for introducing him to Wild Woman at Michigan State. A plain young woman showed up at John's place, the bottom floor of a two-story house. Grace was a town girl, not with any wild demeanor, but ready to spend the night. John directed us to his bedroom.

I woke up in the morning and turned toward Grace. She was staring at the ceiling. She asked if I had time to drive her to visit her mother's grave. I did. As I watched her stand before the grave, I thought about the love she must be missing. I thought every person must be looking for love. But love is an abstract

## My First 83 Years

concept, difficult to pin down if you'd never felt it. I wondered what love felt like.

After I dropped Grace off in town, John and I drove to Indianapolis to attend the Indy 500 time trials. We covered our ears against the screaming Indy cars and returned to John's house in Bloomington, where we sipped a beer or two and talked about troopers attacking civil rights marchers in Selma, Alabama, student demonstrations against the Vietnam War, and draft card burnings at the University of California. I said I wanted to get away from the chaos and travel through Europe for a year. I had this dream of visiting the extraordinary sights pictured in my Humanities textbook — like the Parthenon in Athens and Michelangelo's statue of David.

Three years later I'd been driving my VW Beetle in Europe for ten months, living sometimes with local inhabitants, and making notes for a memoir that I would eventually call *Dancing with a Scarecrow* in Bavaria. When I visited the American Express office in Madrid to pick up letters from home, one was from John. He'd flown to Madrid a few months earlier for a short visit with his fiancée, who was studying there. He wrote that Barb would welcome my visit and included her phone number. When I called her, she said to come to her place the next afternoon when she'd be finished with her university classes.

## My First 83 Years

There wasn't much tranquility in Barb's apartment, but there was food and a sofa for me to sleep on. Barb's dark complexion and small, black-rimmed glasses gave her the appearance of a Spanish intellectual. The other American women in the apartment appeared more Anglo. Each woman had a Spanish boyfriend who appeared for supper and a visit to the bedroom. Barb's boyfriend, Paco, didn't like her long conversations with me about John or that I'd be sleeping on the sofa. But the women called the tune, regardless of whether Paco saw himself as a matador needing to vanquish the American bull intruder.

At breakfast Barb said I should visit the Prado Museum while she was in class, because it was one of the best art museums in Europe. I went there and was stunned by the work of Rubens, Rembrandt, Goya, and Breughel. I spent the next three days in the museum, trying to absorb everything. I thought it ironic that I'd never visited a museum in the States but was suddenly absorbed in the World's great art. I'd wept in Florence when I stood before Michelangelo's statue of David. For a kid like me whose life had been consumed by sports and sports heroes, this fascination was a transformation I hadn't expected. Each room in the cavernous museum seemed to hold a new surprise that required quiet contemplation.

As Barb finished her exchange program at the university, and I prepared to head for England, she said something that bothered

## My First 83 Years

me. "When I first met you," she said, "I thought you were just like John. Now that I've known you for awhile, I realize that John's just like you."

"No," I said. "John's definitely his own man."

The next day I drove Barb to the train station to meet her girlfriend so they could begin a summer of travel in Europe. We hugged goodbye and said how nice that John had facilitated our meeting. I thanked her for sending me to such a fantastic museum. I had become so enamored with Rubens' women at the Prado that I could still see their naked beauty: The Three Graces, Perseus Liberating Andromeda, and The Judgement of Paris.

I did not hear much from John after I returned to the States. In one letter John said he and Barb had broken up. He was teaching physical education in a high school in Colbran, Colorado. Later he said he was engaged to another woman. But the tone of his letters seemed cooler than that of a close friend. I worried that Barb might have accused him of being my copy, causing him to doubt our bond of friendship. Eventually, his letters stopped.

In my old age, I still think about John and wonder if he's still alive. Photographs show him visiting my family during the Christmas after my visit with him at Indiana University. My two sisters were immediately entranced by his beauty, as though he too were a subject to be memorialized as a famous painting. They



## My First 83 Years

were instantly in love with him. Years later my sister, Karla, lived in Colorado and searched for his name in various locales but without any success.

I suppose I'd loved John too. I'd shared my secrets with him as he had with me, especially that his stepmother had not liked him, making his Christmas with my family a more enjoyable occasion. We'd consoled one another in our heartbreak at the time over the loss of President Kennedy. We'd had a connection I wished would have lasted through the ages. But life is often stingy in the granting of wishes.

However, I did get my wish for a life partner when I met Shelley in 1975. She became the closest friend I'd ever had and my wife in 1981. Through the years, Shelley has been with me through painful and joyful times. I don't know whether love and friendship are separate entities, but our relationship has grown to involve both — so much so, that they seem intertwined.

## My First 83 Years

# What things do you think you cannot live without?



\* Most of the things I can't seem to live without are connected with thoughts that cause my anxiety. It's not that I wouldn't want to live without these thoughts. It's just that I seem stuck with them and must use their lessons to somehow to create a life that works better.

I'm unsure whether I could live with the knowledge that I would have to meet my father again in heaven.

Part of my anxiety about whether there is an afterlife revolves around the question of whether God allows mentally-ill people into heaven and, if so, would I have to meet Dad again there. A middle-aged Baptist woman wrote Dear Abby and said, "I believe when I die I will go to heaven. My problem is, if going to heaven means being reunited with my parents and other family members, then I don't want to go! The idea of spending eternity with them is more than I can stand, but I don't want to

## My First 83 Years

go to hell, either. Any thoughts?” Dear Abby replied, “Yes. When you reach the pearly gates, talk this over with St. Peter. Perhaps he would be willing to place you in a different wing than the one your parents and other family members are staying in. And in the meantime, discuss this with your minister.” Bad advice! It was probably the woman’s minister who was pushing the heaven reunion business in the first place. I thought St. Peter should have a talk with Abby about blowing off this woman’s dilemma with the facetious quip about requesting “a different wing.” That was like getting healthy food tips from Paula Deen. Maybe going to hell wouldn’t be that bad.

The ID window on the modern telephone is a life-saver for me.

Years after Dad’s death, the sound of the phone still startles me. I guess my brain thinks he is calling from the grave, probably still angry with me for ending all communication with him when it became apparent I could not forgive him for all the times he threatened Mom over the phone that he was coming home “to kill the kids.” My sister said he’d ranted about killing the doctor who’d failed to save his second wife from cancer. He once called the Boston apartment where Shelley and I were living at the time just to say he loved us, but by the time she finished talking with him, he was ranting about her keeping her last name when we married instead of adopting mine. She told him to never call again. Now a modern phone displays a caller ID

## My First 83 Years

when it rings. When I don't recognize the caller, I don't answer it, figuring it is telemarketing, scams, or Dad.

\* Medical appointments put me on edge, but I know I need doctors while I'm alive. At least the good ones.

Medical appointments make me nervous because of unpleasant surprises in the past. I'd had a new primary care physician who said I was going to fall and die. My former PCP had retired, and the clinic had assigned me this heavy, dark-haired woman with a wispy mustache. She thought at my age I should have a bone scan, which revealed a slight case of osteopenia (bone thinning). She decided I should begin taking a prescription drug called Fosamax. I'd read about possible serious side effects with this drug, so I suggested first trying to build bone with calcium supplements, more exercise, and calcium-rich food. She said it was too late for that, implying I could no longer build bone mass. I asked what would happen if I didn't take the drug. She said I was bound to "fall, break my hip, go into a nursing home, and die." I called the clinic to see about getting a new doctor, but they said the shortage of doctors meant no switching. Then my foreseer of broken bones went on maternity leave and didn't return. So it was PCP roulette. On another occasion I was waking up from a routine colonoscopy and heard Doctor D, the woman who performed the procedure, say to my wife, "Whatever it is...it has to come out of there." I

## My First 83 Years

turned my head enough to see the doctor's frown. Even in the fog of anesthesia, I sensed the pendulum of mortality was swinging toward me. Ten years earlier my colonoscopy had been clean — not even a polyp. I'd been healthy all my life. But then...Surprise! Cancer! Five years after radiation, surgery, and chemotherapy, I still worry that the Big-C will return.

\* I definitely wouldn't want to live without food expiration dates on jars and packages. If the "use by" dates were not there, I'd be a worse mess than I already am.

One day I found in our refrigerator a sealed package of fully-cooked chicken tenders that was a week past its "use or freeze by" date. Thinking a few days past due didn't matter, I threw the package in the freezer. When I told Shelley, she said to throw the package away. I thought this was unusual, because she sometimes retrieved from our food storage shelf in the basement canned or bottled goods that were a couple years past due. And then, despite her reluctance to "waste food," I had to say throw them out. After my stepfather's death, I'd cleared my mother's basement food shelf of foods that had been stored for years in case of the nuclear holocaust. Occasionally I threw out stuff from her refrigerator. I didn't want to arrive at her house to find her comatose because she eaten an old chocolate éclair with a deathly cream filling. Currently there is a half a jar of blueberry jam in our refrigerator that I think has been waiting to kill

## My First 83 Years

someone for a couple years. The date on the cap is worn such that I can't read it. When I asked Shelley about it (twice), she said she thought it was okay. But I don't trust her intuition. I'll wait for some mold to grow on top of the jam and then renew my argument to discard.

\* I wouldn't want to live in an environment without snow. It was part of the joyful days while growing up.

Our town received four inches of snow on a recent mid-January day and then rain on top of it. And then freezing. Same last winter. A perennial mess. When I grew up here, it was always just fluffy snow. Lots of it. So much so that we kids skied all winter down Bullock's hill and sledged down the precipitous Sandy Hollow Road. When I first had a driver's license in my pocket, the snow banks were so high on the sides of our snow-slick country road that I jumped into my mother's old Dodge. On a straight-away, I jammed the brakes and yanked the steering wheel hard left, causing the car to spin until it hit the snow bank. Each time I repeated these spins, I felt an astonishing exhilaration. Recently I watched a Netflix movie called "Don't Look Up" in which scientists discover that a huge comet will hit and destroy the Earth in six months. The politicians and a slick-talking entrepreneur dilly dally and come up with false solutions that don't work. Half the country believes the scientists are lying. I've read that the movie is a metaphor for

## My First 83 Years

global warming. A lot of talk and no action. No cooperation among countries that could act. Putin cares only about Ukraine. China cares only about annexing Taiwan. Trump cares only about being reinstated as a President who would say that the comet is a big lie. The consequences were predictable. Earth got busted.

\* I find beauty in lady bugs but not so much in spiders. But if either of them disappeared, it would mean the Earth was going too.

Ladybugs are beautiful little insects and not the kind that would usually cause me anxiety. Tiny, round beetles with a red back and black spots. The trouble is that they tend to infest my writing studio in the winter, mainly because I have a warm, south-facing window. So they crawl around mostly on the window (five there as I write this). But occasionally one lands on my keyboard or on my computer screen with the idea of staying there for awhile. If you touch one, it releases a stink. And I don't want to injure them either. But if one continues to crawl around on a paragraph I'm trying to write, my patience wears thin. Then I usually slip a small piece of paper beneath the ladybug and transfer it to a windowsill far away from me. The most egregious thing a ladybug did was to fly into my ear while I was watching TV. My first inclination was to dig it out, but I didn't want a stink in my ear. So I tapped around the edge of the ear until it came



## My First 83 Years

out and flew off. Spiders usually show up in our bathroom or in the bedroom. Some are fast, and some are slow. They are all creepy looking, and I hate it when I find one around my bed. When I catch one, I squish it. Shelley, on the other hand, likes to capture elusive insects in a paper cup and escort them outside. The only ones I do that with are crickets, because they are supposed to bring good luck to a house. And I'd be stupid to squash good luck. But I wish God would make me less anxious and more compassionate with spiders.

\* If news broadcasters disappeared, I'd have to live with fewer people to grumble about.

Take Rachel Maddow, for example. Her excitable voice seems to say, "Isn't this amazing what I'm telling you? And if you have any doubt, my friend, I'll give it to you again." And again. And again. I'm assuming most of Rachel's audience consists of intelligent people of the same political persuasion and who don't need to be riled up any more than they already are. She seems like a nice, intelligent lady who wants me, as her "friend," to embrace her rants against disingenuous politicians. But I can handle only about five minutes of Rachel before my mind starts fucking itself. Chris Hayes is on MSNBC just before Rachel, and his voice seems to say, "I'm pissed off about this, and you should be too." The trouble is that I don't really want to be pissed off at 8 P.M. but am sometimes intrigued by the equanimity of some of

## My First 83 Years

his guests, like Adam Schiff. ABC's David Muir's voice says, "We should all be in a panic about this." NBC's Norah O'Donnell seems to say, "Isn't it amazing that someone as beautiful as I am can give you the whole truth." I like to watch Norah's eyes though, because when they blink, it's as if a little more mascara could be the glue to keep her eyes wide open. She nods a lot, and that dissipates some of the anxiety I feel when she exclaims, "Breaking news!" The most even-keeled broadcaster is probably Kate Snow, whose soft voice seems to say, "I know things are bad, but I'll give you a hug if you come around." When Chris Hayes begins ranting on a subject that he is pissed off about, I often switch channels to CNN's Anderson Cooper. His calm voice says, "This is the way it is, but I doubt anybody's going to do anything about it." CNN's John King also has a modulated voice that seems to say, "I'll let the experts tell you how it is while I go off and take a little nap." I should probably avoid newscasters who make me anxious, but some innate curiosity always pulls me back to the sins of the world. Maybe someone should start a "good news" network that just broadcasts uplifting stories.

\* If I lost my memory to Alzheimer's or some other mental affliction, I would lose the story that has been my life and the ability to tell it.

I'm not sure why I remember traumatic events so vividly and am so hazy on the details of many happy family events. It

## My First 83 Years

bothers me that eventually my mind might be entirely clogged with anxiety-producing events. For years I had not thought about witnessing a race car accident in Monaco, until Jesse began racing a red Mazda at events sponsored by the Sports Car Club of America. That was the time I began to rely on prayer to quell my anxiety about his dream of living in Europe as part of the Formula One race circuit there. One day he said, “Dad, did you say you saw a Grand Prix race in Monaco when you were over there?” I said, “Yeah, An Italian race driver died that day.” He said, “What year was it?” I said, “Nineteen Sixty-Seven.” He said, “Do you remember the driver’s name?” I said, “I think it was Lorenzo Bandini. He hit a steel post beside the harbor.” He tapped a few keys on his laptop and voilà — a photo of the fiery accident. He said, “How do you remember names from that long ago?” I said, “As you get older you remember Nineteen Sixty-Seven better than why you’re standing in the hallway scratching your head.” That got me wondering why, now in my eighties, my mind often revisits the trauma of a five-year-old. On that day I didn’t intend to ignore Mom’s instructions, especially with Dad away in the Army and her having to monitor my sister and me alone. But Johnny Johansen and I pedaled our fire trucks outside of our apartment block’s inner courtyard through one of the red brick archway exits onto the sidewalk on Lexington Street. It was early Saturday morning in Newark, New Jersey. I’d told Mom that Johnny and I would stay within the

## My First 83 Years

courtyard but then had the impulse to pedal outside to where cars were parked along the sidewalk. Having traveled to forbidden territory, I thought my red fire truck needed a mechanical tune-up. So I tipped it onto its side, kneeled on the sidewalk, and began tinkering. Johnny did the same. Men's voices made me look up at a car parked near us. Inside were three men in suits and business hats with wide brims. They had drowsy eyes. One of them rolled down his window. He said, "Hey, kids. You want some candy?" I didn't answer but stopped tinkering with my fire truck. "We have some candy here in the car," the man said. "Why don't cha come in with us and have some?" I didn't remember Mom ever talking to me about a situation like this, but some instinct made me afraid. I still didn't speak until the man opened the car door and began to get out. I didn't want to leave my fire truck, but the fear was strong. I turned to Johnny and said, "Run!" I sped through the archway to the courtyard and left Johnny as he headed for his apartment. I raced up flights of stairs and banged on the apartment door. When Mom answered, I gasped for a breath. I explained what happened. Our kitchen window had a view of Lexington Street. I pointed to my abandoned fire truck and the men, who were now emerging from the car. Two men were supporting a third who seemed to have trouble walking. The men began moving through the same archway. Our living room window faced in toward the courtyard. Mom and I moved to that window. The three men

## My First 83 Years

moved slowly across the courtyard to an apartment entrance on the other side. I thought one of the candy men must live in the apartment complex. Soon two men returned across the courtyard and out to their car. They drove away. Mom and I went down to Lexington Street and retrieved the fire trucks. She told me in a quiet voice that I'd done the right thing. I think she was afraid too. Dr. Ted Huey, a professor of psychiatry and neurology at Columbia University, says there is a misconception that emotion and trauma are bad for memory. He says, "The way our brain tags what's important to be remembered is emotion." During these emotionally charged moments, the brain is both flagging the moment as important but not necessarily able to focus on parsing out the most important details. What ends up happening is that trauma survivors sometimes have very vivid memories of strange details. For example, someone might remember the sweater their attacker was wearing or their smell but not his or her face or what kind of car they were driving. "That's because even though the memories are very vivid and your memory is actually turned up very high...you're not kind of thinking calmly and rationally about what I should remember and what I shouldn't remember." What I remember vividly were the wide-brim hats and the drowsy eyes and that the speaker's voice seemed more dangerous than benevolent. I'd rather remember the details of joyful events but fear that I'm too weighed down by events like this and those of my abusive father. More evidence

## My First 83 Years

that I should see a psychotherapist.

\* I wouldn't want to live without my nutty brother-in-law, but I have no idea which one of us will die first. It is comforting to know that he continues to support my sister. So, despite his idiosyncrasies, life wouldn't be as interesting without him.

A few years ago while visiting my sister in Colorado, I became nervous about teetering on the edge of a cliff on the Grand Mesa. Kent was driving us up a narrow mountain road with no guard rails to protect us from plunging into a deep ravine. His left hand held the steering wheel, and the right hand, a cup of coffee. Occasionally he looked out across the ravine to point out some scenic wonder to Shelley, who was in the front with him. My sister and I were in back, tensing up. In the novel, *The Art of Racing in the Rain*, the author says, "They say your car goes where your eyes go." Our car was drifting toward the edge. My sister shouted. But a long career as a helicopter pilot had rendered him almost deaf. Finally Kent turned his head toward us and said, "What?" Fortunately, we relieved our anxiety later that day by soaking in the Ouray hot springs. Kent also had a number of contrary opinions that usually put me on edge. The most egregious occurred thirty years earlier when, as the father of five and a future sixth, he'd said the most important aspect of raising a child was discipline. Without a firm hand, he'd said, quoting the biblical "spare the rod and spoil the child," our

## My First 83 Years

toddler was destined to grow up a spoiled only-child, implying that spoiled kids have trouble with relationships. Jesse wouldn't have friends because Shelley and I didn't believe in spanking. I was surprised at the time that Shelley didn't strike Kent with a rod. It was risky telling a woman who'd had surgeries for endometriosis, two ectopic pregnancies, and a C-section birth, that she was remiss in having only one child and was raising him the wrong way. I researched "sparing the rod" and discovered the Biblical rod is a shepherding reference and that sheep herders guided their sheep with it but didn't whack them. "In our counseling experience," according to one pastoral counselor, "we find that these people [spankers] are devoted parents who love God and love their children, but they misunderstand the concept of the rod." Other parts of the Bible suggest that respect, authority, and compassion should be the prevailing attitudes toward children. Later I read that a psychologist, John Valusek, who is a crusader against spanking, said any use of force against children is unnecessary and damaging. "We wonder where violence comes from. What I'm saying is, even with the best of intentions, with the best parents, once you use spanking, whether you're doing it in God's name or whatever, you're saying it's okay to use pain to accomplish certain purposes." So what happens to a rambunctious boy who was never spanked? What Shelley and I saw was a young man who made friends easily and had empathy to help those in need. His six cousins

## My First 83 Years

seemed to love and respect him. For that outcome alone, Shelley and I believed love and reasonable discipline had resulted in a better outcome than the harshness of smacking a child. On one visit to my sister and her family, Kent volunteered that he'd been wrong in his prediction about how sparing the rod would ruin Jesse's future. Regrettably, I still felt like relieving my anxiety by whacking the righteous uncle with the biblical rod. Or maybe a broomstick.



# What do you like most about your siblings?



I like most the memories that my sisters and I shared during our lifetimes. Karla, who has lived in Colorado for many years, is eight years younger than me but communicates often with us about her six kids and their families. When Shelley was going to be away for awhile, Karla flew east on her own and spent a couple weeks with me. During that time, she cooked special meals for us and was a joyful presence. We reminisced about our lives.

Donna, who was three years younger than me, died thirty years ago. So the things I liked most about her have to be in the past tense.

There was a time when we were children that I retrieved my father's old boxing gloves and tried to persuade Donna to box with me. She said no. I told her I'd learn how to dance

## My First 83 Years

rock-and-roll with her if she boxed with me. I told her she could hit me as hard as she wanted, and I'd just tap her lightly. She still said no, but when five-year-old Karla came home from her day-care house, she said she'd do it. First, I removed her eyeglasses. Then I slid a football helmet over her head, tied pillows around her middle, and pushed the big boxing gloves on her little hands. I got down on my knees and slipped on the other set of boxing gloves. I told Karla to try hitting me as hard as she could. I blocked her punches. Now and then I tapped her pillows with a light jab. I laughed when she couldn't get close enough to hit anything except my arms. I blocked her wild swings. When Karla became frustrated, she rushed me headlong and slammed my nose. I laughed, but my nose stung, and there was some blood. Karla smiled. I said, "Okay, you win." I thought Karla was happy to participate in a stupid activity with her big brother.

In later years I liked that Karla saw her big brother as a role model. Since she was athletic, I sometimes took her with me skiing to Gunstock Mountain in New Hampshire. Some years after I graduated from Michigan State University, Karla spent a couple years there too. After my vagabond year in Europe, she found the courage to explore Europe on her own and visit her pen pal in Germany. She seemed to build courage the same way I had — by forcing herself to move into the anxiety of new ventures until she conquered it. I admired her for that, especially

## My First 83 Years

since she'd been a bit on the shy side as a kid.

What can I say about a sister who died too young? Donna was a tiny blonde who loved horses, movie star magazines, and folk music. As an adult, she loved Jesse, who seemed to hold a special place in her broken heart. When she was single and twenty-one, she'd given up her newborn daughter for adoption and never had another child.

On the day I turned three, my mother was in the hospital giving birth to Donna. For awhile I resented having to share my birthday with her. Later I realized our yearly celebration together renewed a loving connection, and I missed that when she died.

During the happy times in our family, Christmas mornings were a time when Donna and Karla would sneak out of their room about five A.M. and crawl onto my bed with whispers about when we could go downstairs to see what Santa had left under the tree. After about a half hour or so, I suggested we tiptoe to the stairs and sit on the top step. Almost immediately Mom's voice came from her bedroom, telling us we could not go downstairs until she had gone first to snap on the tree lights. Although she said we were not going downstairs until six A. M., she seemed to always give in before that prescribed hour, drag herself downstairs, and light the Christmas tree. As soon as she said okay, my sisters dashed downstairs ahead of me.

## My First 83 Years

During the tragic times in our family, the top of the stairs was a frightening place. That's when Donna and Karla would huddle behind me, whimpering about whether our raging alcoholic father was going to kill Mom. When he shouted he was going to kill the kids, I had to assure them that he was just trying to scare Mom.

Donna often helped a farm girl named Dolly water her family's horses by riding them bareback to a nearby brook. One day a skittish horse reared up, slipped in mud, and went over backwards, pinning Donna underneath. The horse broke her thigh bone, putting her in traction at a hospital and then in a cast that summer. Because both Mom and Dad worked, I helped a live-in nurse care for Donna. This seemed her worst catastrophe until, at age fifty-three, she was diagnosed with lung cancer.

As she neared the end of her struggle, Jesse, who was five at the time, said, "Is Aunt Donna going to die?"

I'd just returned from the hospital, where Donna had lapsed into a coma, and was sitting in bed with him after our nightly story. "Yes, I think she's going to die."

"Will I ever see Aunt Donna again?"

"Probably not until you get to heaven." I explained that her cancer most likely had come from smoking cigarettes.

## My First 83 Years

“I’m never going to smoke,” he said.

Donna had a special relationship with Jesse. She and her husband had no children, so Jesse was the only child she saw on a regular basis. She loved shopping for him and seeing his eyes light up when he opened her brightly colored packages.

But Donna’s best present was her NASCAR recordings. Because NASCAR races were unavailable on our TV then, she recorded them from her cable service at their home in Derry and brought them whenever she visited. Shelley and I tolerated NASCAR blaring from the TV but could not become enamored with racing as were Donna and Jesse. We continually rejected his requests to race go-karts. But shortly after turning thirteen, Jesse started dirt bike racing, which many would say was a clear sign of mentally deranged and deficient parents. But because Jesse had met all the prerequisites (saving half the cost of the Kawasaki KX85 and getting A’s in school), it was difficult to say no to a kid’s passionate dreams that had been fostered by his aunt.

Eight years later, Jesse and the friend loaded a red race car onto Jesse’s new trailer and towed it to the New Hampshire Motor Speedway for an event sanctioned by the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA), causing Shelley and me anxiety tremors in which the imagination sees speed demons crashing in various airborne configurations. It was an older Mazda Miata sports car

## My First 83 Years

that he'd purchased for \$2500 and converted from a used street car to an SCCA regulation Spec Miata while slowly depleting the savings he'd accrued by working part-time and summers at a small computer consulting company. At the race track, I could almost hear Donna cheering him on from heaven.

As kids, Donna and I had had our squabbles. But as we matured, we found some common ground, such as collecting Elvis Presley records, learning to dance rock and roll together, and occasionally displaying our dance moves at school functions.

When I was a senior in high school, Donna introduced me to a freshman girl who'd asked to meet me and later tickled my neck while we danced at the senior prom. When I was a midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy, I fixed Donna up with a classmate who didn't have a date for June Week. Flying to Annapolis and dancing at all the fancy balls with Jim were, according to Donna, the thrill of a lifetime.

When I completed an engineering degree at Michigan State University and returned to work in Boston, Donna was living in an apartment on Beacon Hill with another single woman and working in the business offices of an airline at Logan Airport. When I took her skiing at Gunstock Mountain over the Christmas holidays, I thought she'd gained a little weight while I was away. It wasn't until two months later that she called me to say she

## My First 83 Years

was having a baby and needed a ride to the hospital. I raced to her apartment and drove her to the nearest hospital — Massachusetts General. They said they didn't deliver babies. Go to Boston City Hospital. Somehow we made it there in time. About all that I remember at the hospital was a social worker telling me Donna intended to give up the baby for adoption. I said I was worried about my sister. Donna had told me on the way that she'd had a bad experience with a doctor and thus had had no prenatal care. The experience made me feel as though, as a protective brother, I had somehow let her down. Forty years later a woman named Leslie called me to say she thought we were related. I said she was welcome to visit us but that her mother, Donna, had died ten years ago. I felt sad that they would never meet.

Donna had drifted away from Dolly and her farm after the horseback accident, especially in summer when a city girl and her parents were at their lakeside cottage nearby. She readily accepted city girl's invitation to smoke cigarettes at secret destinations where they could discuss boys and share the latest movie star magazines. Movie stars wore makeup, smoked cigarettes, and led glamorous lives.

I can still see Donna pressing a Virginia Slim between her lips as she became a style-conscious young woman whose voice teacher at the New England Conservatory of Music told her to give up

## My First 83 Years

singing if she couldn't quit smoking. So she quit voice lessons, bought a guitar, sang folk songs at smoky Boston parties, and became the "girlfriend" to a member of a musical group that played gigs mostly on Cape Cod. Eventually she settled in New Hampshire with a husband and became the assistant to a bank president. Mom often said she wished Donna had developed her vocal talent, recalling she'd always wept when Donna sang "Oh Holy Night" at Christmas pageants.

Now when I visit the town cemetery and Donna's headstone, I still have this vision of the joy in her face whenever her young nephew opened a special present she'd wrapped for him. I wish she'd lived to see him grow up. She would have loved being with us at our childhood home on the day that we watched him make his first solo flight overhead in a Cessna 172. We'd waved from the ground.

As I'd watched him flying high, I was convinced Donna had kept him safe during his many racing adventures. I'd read that guardian angels, or spirit guides, serve to protect whichever person God assigns them. Author Liliah Gifty Akita says, "Everyone was born with a guardian angel. Guardian Angels brighten our journey of life with divine love, protection, peace, healing, grace, strength and miracles."



## My First 83 Years

I was unsure when Donna died whether God had assigned her to take over Jesse's protection, but I wanted to believe his safety was the best gift she had given us.



Sisters Donna and Karla with me

## My First 83 Years

# What was the neighborhood you grew up in like?



Until I was seven years old, my neighborhood was a rough section in the city of Newark, New Jersey, where I was born. We lived in an apartment complex that consumed an entire city block and had an inner courtyard with a playground and a few areas of grass.

I didn't really want to cause trouble for my mother while living in this environment. But there were plenty of boys in the apartments, some older, who had ideas for adventures that seemed exciting. One Saturday a bunch of us walked to a nearby theater to watch a war movie that kept repeating as the afternoon and evening wore on. Some kid's parent had to come and haul us out. Another day some of us walked to Newark Bears Stadium and crawled through a hole in the back wall. There we

## My First 83 Years

spent the afternoon watching baseball from the bleachers. When I got home, Mom was angry that I hadn't let her know where I was going. I thought she should at least have been happy I wasn't hanging out at the Ballantine brewery next door or down by the Passaic River.

Mom got upset too whenever I went roller-skating with my gang on Lexington Street, even though I said the cement surface of the walkways inside the courtyard was not smooth enough. She worried, of course, that I'd get hit by a car.

The trouble with a five-year-old having a pedal-type fire truck in the city was that it facilitated a disobedient kid who pedaled alongside Johnny Johansen's fire truck to a street outside our apartment complex. It was early on a Saturday morning. I thought my red fire truck needed a mechanical tune-up. So I got out, tipped it onto its side, kneeled on the sidewalk, and began tinkering. Johnny did the same. Men's voices made me look up at a car parked near us. Inside were three men in suits and business hats with wide brims. They had drowsy eyes. One of them rolled down his window. "Hey, kids," he said. "You want some candy?" Moments later I told Johnny to run, and we left our fire trucks behind. In our apartment Mom and I watched the men from our window as two of them supported a third across the courtyard to an apartment on the other side. After the men departed, Mom and I went to the street and retrieved my fire truck. She had a

## My First 83 Years

frightened look in her eyes when she told me I'd done the right thing.

When my father was discharged from the Army, Mom became determined to move us out of the city. She had the idea of moving to my grandparents' unheated summer house in New Hampshire, thinking our migration to a tranquil environment would be a safer place to raise kids.

She told my father about our neighborhood of beady-eyed men who parked by the sidewalk and tried to lure small kids into their car. She said the city was a dangerous place for children because of kidnappers.

My father said kidnappers only took kids belonging to people with ransom money...like the Lindbergh baby.

Mom argued it was dangerous for me to roller-skate on Lexington Street and hang around with older kids who were always causing trouble. She said the severe coughing spells that choked me every winter were because the air quality in Newark was bad.

But my father said jobs outside the city were hard to find, and he'd be happy as long as he didn't have to work in an office again. Although he had a business certificate from Rutgers, he worked now as a Hennsler beer salesman and enjoyed driving

## My First 83 Years

around to talk sports with his various customers.

Mom had a plan though. She subscribed to a New Hampshire newspaper, the Manchester Union Leader, and scoured it for sales jobs that my father could handle. Convinced our happiness was in New Hampshire, she intended to move us to my grandparents' summer house at Laurel Lake, where she'd found so much joy as a girl.

Eventually she spotted an advertisement for a Narragansett beer salesman to cover the coastal area around Portsmouth. That summer, a few months after I turned seven, we moved next door to the Whipple farm, my grandparents' summer neighbor for over thirty years.

The gray clapboard house sat high on a field-stone foundation. Its slate hip roof, open front porch, and screened side porch were features of an old New England style. It had windows that rattled when the wind blew, a wood stove and hand-pump in the kitchen, and a two-hole outhouse that was part of a shed connecting the house to a barn. Crystal clear Laurel Lake was a five-minute walk. Mom rejoiced then. She was living in the place that held all her summer girlhood memories.

Mom had never lived through a cold winter in a house without insulation but told my grandparents she was sure we'd be fine. But my father's weekly sales trips meant he was home only on

## My First 83 Years

weekends, and he had no interest in learning about home repairs or problems like heat and insulation. Mom told Ruth Whipple she was pregnant and worried about making it through the winter in her condition.

My grandfather arranged with the local fuel oil company to install an oil furnace in our dirt cellar. The workmen cut a rectangular hole in the living room floor and fit a metal grate across the hole. When the chilly weather began, Mom had wood delivered and, despite being pregnant, was soon splitting each log to fit the openings in the large cast-iron kitchen stove. I could keep warm by standing on the metal grate in the living room or next to the kitchen stove.

When Mom rushed to the outhouse, she wrapped herself in a long fur coat she'd had since her time at Wheaton College. She told my father she had bladder problems and morning sickness at the same time, and so she sat on one hole and got sick down the other hole. Getting larger in the belly didn't stop Mom from driving Henry Whipple's pickup truck to Winchendon so Henry's wife Ruth could deliver Thanksgiving turkeys to the people who'd ordered them. Ruth didn't drive. When Mom had spent summers here as a young girl, she'd often helped young Henry bring cows in from the pasture.

## My First 83 Years

When it snowed, Dad got the car stuck on Quarry Hill. Mom with the big belly and the long fur coat pushed while Dad sat behind the wheel and spun the tires. I felt bad about Mom in the cold and wanted to help her push, but she refused to let me. I thought Dad should be doing the pushing and letting Mom do the tire-spinning. If Mom could drive Henry Whipple's truck, she could spin the tires of an old Pontiac.

Donna and I adapted well to the country that first winter. For our bathes, Mom pumped water into pots that she heated on the wood stove. Then she poured warm water into a round metal tub that sat in the middle of the kitchen floor. In the cold outhouse, we did everything fast. And we read comic books while on kid chairs that we dragged onto the heat register.

Only my father complained. He left each Monday to sell beer in his suit and camel-hair topcoat and homburg hat. On weekends he complained about everything from shoveling snow to splitting wood. When he got the car stuck in the driveway, he said, "Goddamn fucking snow." Henry's dad had to pull the goddamn fucking car out with his horses. The Whipple house had a clear view of our driveway, and Henry's family giggled at my father from behind their curtains as they witnessed the city boy who couldn't get out of his own driveway. As an authority on everything within his domain, Henry knew trucks worked better in snow than most cars. "Pontiac's a damn city car," Henry said.



## My First 83 Years

“It ain’t no goddamn use in the snow.”

Except for Mom’s relationship with Henry and his family, we were newcomers to a New England town inhabited mostly by Finns who have long memories about the War and subtle prejudices against those with German surnames. It didn’t matter if you lived in the village with its white churches and town hall and two-story, two-room schoolhouse, or in the hardscrabble Depot area where trains steamed through, or along back roads that snaked out of town to forests and streams and an abundance of ponds and lakes. This was a town where everyone thought they knew who practiced dental hygiene and who was sleeping with whom. We were city people who had moved to rural New Hampshire and been labeled as outsiders. That Mom had been a summer resident for a long time didn’t count.

Fortunately for me, Mrs. Damon taught the third and fourth grades without prejudice. As a new third grader and the smallest kid in the room, I only had to behave myself and show her my capabilities. By Christmas I had all A’s on my report card except for a B+ in Music. She smiled at me often. My conduct was “very good,” not because of what happened to Freddy, but because I wanted my new authority to like me. When the big fourth grader misbehaved, Mrs. Damon instructed Freddy to stand, walked toward him with a ruler in her hand, and clamped his hand in hers with the intent to smack the back of his hand. But as Mrs.

## My First 83 Years

Damon raised her ruler, Freddy flinched, yanked his hand back, and toppled Mrs. Damon and himself to the floor. We kids gasped. How traumatic for Mrs. Damon to be piled on top of big Freddy with her dress all tangled. Mrs. Damon rose slowly. She instructed Freddy to rise. She tapped his hand lightly with the ruler and walked back to the front of the classroom.

I wasn't afraid of Mrs. Damon as I had been with the city kindergarten teacher who'd told the class I peed my pants, but knew I wanted to stay on the good side of those with authority.

Mom with the big belly guided our family through one of the stormiest New Hampshire winters on record. She split wood for the kitchen stove, shoveled the driveway, and, in March, emptied the outhouse using my grandfather's old wooden wheelbarrow. Despite the hardships, she still seemed to believe this was the place to raise children. And, as if to reinforce her viewpoint about the benefits of clean country air, the severe coughing spells I'd had each winter in the city did not return. My sister Karla was born that spring on April 4th.

I've often wished our autumn foliage drive that following September to Hogback Mountain in Vermont had never happened. With baby Karla nestled in her arms on the ride home, Mom implied Dad was failing as a beer salesman, saying she was having trouble paying the bills. The rationales for spending or

## My First 83 Years

not spending escalated until Dad's shoulders snapped back, and he said, "So you're saying it's my fault then. So you're saying it's all my fault. Okay. If I'm such a failure, I see no point in living. I'm going to kill us all." He then jammed the gas pedal to the floor and accelerated our old Pontiac down the road, causing the steering wheel to vibrate. I tried to comfort whimpering Donna by saying he was just trying to scare us. Ultimately he let up on the gas, deciding he didn't want to die after all. As an eight-year-old, this trauma was the first time I realized our home was a more dangerous place than anything in our rural neighborhood.

I enjoyed catching frogs with my bare hands, lying in the foliage beside the brook. Usually just their head appeared above the water line, and fast hands could usually grab one. I had heard that cooked frog's legs were considered a delicacy that tasted somewhat like chicken. What I don't remember is whether Mom actually cooked any for me or whether I let them go. What I do remember is that the poison ivy was a terrible plant that a former city kid better learn to recognize before getting into it again. Once I learned what the three-leaf clusters looked like, the plant that frightened me more was skunk cabbage. Besides being our neighbor, Henry Whipple was also a school bus driver who voiced many controversial directives. "If you kids keep foolin' around on my bus," he said, glaring at me in particular, "I'm

## My First 83 Years

gonna put you out next to a patch of skunk cabbage.” The way he said it made the cabbage sound like a poisonous plant. Of course, I eventually fooled around on the school bus, which caused Henry to brake to a stop at the base of Quarry Hill, about three miles from home. “Git out,” he’d said to me, “You kin walk the rest of the way.” I remembered my anxiety as I watched the bus rumble out of sight. I had glanced into the bushes then and wondered which plant was skunk cabbage and whether it could poison me from a short distance. Not until later did I learn skunk cabbage was a rotten-smelling flower that was toxic only if you touched it and not nearly as dangerous as a toxic home.

If the ski hadn’t broken, it would have been my leg. It was a time in my young history when wooden skis were still the standard. Johnny Bullock and I liked to race from the top of their hill down through an open gate in a stone wall at the bottom. We were side by side on this particular run, heading for the opening at the same time and speed. Johnny was elbow-to-elbow with me on my left side as we entered the opening. Bam! Snap! My right ski caught in the gate post and snapped in half. I was in a snow pile, catching my breath and wondering how I would tell Mom that I’d already ruined the skis that she’d given me for Christmas. I hiked up the hill, carrying my skis, and slumped down the road toward home. I saw pain in her face when I explained that I hadn’t seen the gate post. But all she said was that she was glad

## My First 83 Years

that I was all right.

The Sears bike was a sturdy, one-speed bike with green fenders and thick white-wall tires. Growing up in a small town, I was part of a group of kids who organized our own games. At school recess we played pickup baseball or football, depending on the season. After school and on weekends, we rode our bikes from scattered locations to a small field behind the Depot firehouse, where you had to dodge a few boulders if a baseball was hit in a certain direction. We loved our pickup games, and always came home with a sense of euphoria and sore limbs that we hardly noticed. Even though it was a three-mile ride to the Depot firehouse, and I had to walk the bike up one steep hill, I never seemed to run out of energy. When Pauline invited me to her house after school to watch cowboy dramas on their new television, I didn't mind the four-mile ride, because we held hands while watching TV. The Sears bike had delivered me to my first romance.

Each summer Mom sent me to the July boys' session of Camp Takodah, starting when I was ten. I loved this YMCA camp where you could play games all day. By my third summer, I was banging the dickens out of a badminton birdie and beating everyone except the camp counselors. On my softball team I was a loud heckler, as though winning were the only true thing in life. As a small boy, I took pride in my athleticism. But my

## My First 83 Years

obsession with winning was a bad trait I'd inherited from my father.

My grandmother Gallup spent summers with us at her former vacation house, but where my family now lived permanently. She loved playing cards with me. As soon as she'd taught me Canasta, we had huge struggles to beat one another. I cried the first time she beat me and was always disappointed when she returned to New York in the fall. Perhaps because I was close to my grandparents, Mom put me on a plane in Keene each April so that I could spend my spring school vacation week with them. There was a city neighborhood filled with new adventures.

The first thing Grandma and I did together after she and Grandpa met me at LaGuardia Airport and taxied us to their apartment on Morningside Drive was to have a Canasta battle. Then on Monday she took me to the Central Park Zoo and on Tuesday to Radio City Music Hall, where we saw dancing girls called Rockettes and a romance movie. A Canadian Mountie was kissing some woman hard on the lips and singing to her. Grandma wiped her eyes with a tiny white handkerchief. On Wednesday Grandpa and I took the subway to Yankee Stadium. There was something about the swaying and squealing of the train, something about all the strange-looking passengers, something about the city smells that made the subway seem like a magic event rather than just a way of getting some place.

## My First 83 Years

Inside the stadium, Grandpa bought two programs and found a man who sold Yankee patches made of felt. He said Grandma would sew the patch on my jacket. When we emerged from a small tunnel into the stands, I saw a grass field greener than any memory I had of green, and dirt redder than any at home. We had front-row seats near first base. Seeing the Yankees for the first time seemed like a dream come true. The next day Grandpa took me downtown on the subway to visit his office on Lafayette Street, where he gave me envelopes with bright foreign stamps for my stamp collection. Later he and I walked to Chinatown for lunch at the Port Arthur Restaurant. I ate tasty new things that Grandpa suggested and drank tea for the first time. After lunch, he took me to the Hayden Planetarium, where we spent time together in the dark, looking up at the stars and planets and listening to a speaker talk about the universe. I flew home and told Mom and Dad that I intended to play professional baseball someday — shortstop. Mom said I needed to write Grandma and Grandpa a thank-you letter even if I'd said thank you in person. So I wrote them that the fishing season had just begun and I'd caught a rainbow trout off Gallagher's dock.

Spring and summer were usually the seasons with the most fun, our neighborhood growing with summer residents who owned tennis courts and motorboats. I went fishing often with Johnny Bullock either off one of the docks in Laurel Lake (before the

## My First 83 Years

summer residents arrived) or at our favorite clearing on the shore of Sportsman's Pond. I played tennis with Timmy Treat on his family's tennis court, swam at their private beach, water-skied behind their motorboat, and spent evenings at their house playing penny-ante poker with the Treat family and their myriad of guests who visited from New Jersey and New York. The Treat house was only a few feet down the road from ours and was like my second home. When Timmy wasn't around, I sometimes water-skied behind Bobby Perry's fast motorboat. Sometimes I joined Junior Whipple, his siblings, and my sister Donna in a game of hide-and-seek on their horses. We road them bare-back and "hid" as best we could on their property until the person who was "it" found one of us and our horse behind some trees or bushes. However, the "found" person had to race the "it" person back to the horse stable to avoid the actual capture.

Another activity with the Whipple kids was exploratory walks in the woods behind our houses. Although there were logging trails there, we kids often ventured into the forest off the trails and sometimes got temporarily "lost." But eventually we always found our way home.

I never regretted growing up in a rural environment and was thankful that Shelley and I could raise Jesse in the same place. It was a peaceful neighborhood that could be exciting at times.



# Where did you go on vacations as a child?



**M**y family didn't really go anywhere together for what might be called a family vacation. I'm not sure if my parents had no incentive to see other places or whether they thought we couldn't afford something like a vacation cottage by the ocean. As I grew older, my mother did send me each year for a July session to nearby Camp Takodah in Richmond, where I got to expend my high energy in various sports activities. I suppose she believed that Laurel Lake, where we lived, had a summer vacation atmosphere, with tennis, fishing, water-skiing, swimming, canoeing, and so forth.

When I was about eleven, Mom began flying me from Keene to New York City to spend my April school vacation with my grandparents (her parents) and a week of adventure. There my grandparents took me to places like Radio City Music Hall, the Central Park Zoo, the Hayden Planetarium, a Yankees baseball

## My First 83 Years

game, and other fascinating venues.

I remember only one family trip that could be classified as a family vacation. It was shortly after we'd moved to New Hampshire that Mom and Dad decided to use Christmas to return to New York and New Jersey to spend the holiday with our relatives.

Dad said we should drive to New York City in the middle of the night. He had a plan about driving during the holidays to visit both sets of my grandparents and his sister, Isolde, and her family. We should go to bed early the night before the trip, sleep for a few hours, get up at two A.M., and drive while there was no traffic. So in the black of night, Mom folded Donna and me into winter coats and led us to the rear seat of our old Pontiac, where we curled under a blanket. In front, Mom bundled Karla in her arms. Almost as soon as Dad started the car, I fell asleep.

Sometime later Mom shouted. The car lurched, there was a loud thud, and Donna and I were slammed to the floor. I could see our car's headlights and smell hot brakes. I could feel my arms and legs. I could wiggle my fingers and toes. I heard Mom say, "Oh, Rolf."

Dad said, "Damn."

Mom said, "Are you kids alright?"

## My First 83 Years

Donna said, "I bumped my head."

I said, "What happened?"

Mom said, "We hit a deer."

I said, "Is the deer dead?"

Mom said, "We don't know. Daddy will have to get out and look."

I said, "Where are we?"

Mom said, "Somewhere between Richmond and Athol."

We were stuck on a frigid night in the middle of nowhere. I knew Dad didn't think well in a crisis, and Mom was checking the still-sleeping Karla in her arms. Dad held the steering wheel and stared ahead. Mom said, "Rolf, you need to get out of the car and check the damage." She handed him a flashlight from the glove compartment and said, "First turn off the headlights so we don't run down the battery."

Dad snapped on the flashlight and doused the headlights. When he opened the car door, I felt a blast of cold air. He slammed the door shut. I saw his flashlight out in front. Dad's plan about traveling at night looked bad now. In a day crisis, other cars could stop and help you. On this night, we could freeze to death before anyone found us.

## My First 83 Years

As Dad inspected the car, I said, "How did we hit the deer?"

Mom said, "It jumped right in front of us. There was nothing Daddy could do. We were lucky it wasn't worse."

I was not sure how Mom always seemed to see the bright side of a bad situation. What was she thinking? That the deer could have charged us head-on and knocked us up into a tree? Rammed us from the side and tipped us over? That was not my picture of how deer operated. I said, "Mom, what do you mean it could have been worse?"

"We hit the deer right at the top of the hood. If the deer had jumped one inch higher, it would have slid down the hood and crashed through the windshield into Karla and me and Daddy."

Mom was saying the difference between life and death might only be one inch. That gave me something to think about. Maybe God was warning us. Maybe He was giving Dad a warning for his temperamental behavior on our autumn foliage drive to Hogback Mountain in Vermont.

Dad got back in, said the deer was dead and probably weighed over two hundred pounds. The hood and grill were bashed in, no radiator fluid was leaking out, and the right front fender was almost against the wheel. But he might still be able to drive the car. He started it up and backed slowly away from the deer. He

## My First 83 Years

said, "Everything sounds okay. Let's just go."

Mom said, "We have to tell someone about the deer."

Dad said, "Who?"

"I saw a house back a mile or two."

"Everyone's asleep."

"You'll just have to wake someone up."

"What good will that do?"

"I feel bad enough we killed a deer. It makes no sense to have it go to waste. If someone gets to the deer now, it will fill someone's freezer."

Dad couldn't argue with Mom's reasoning, although his grumbling meant he didn't care about filling someone's freezer with deer meat. When he turned the car, the tire rubbed against the crunched fender. When he drove straight, the tire didn't rub. He drove until Mom pointed out a house. He parked beside the road, left the engine running. He walked to the house and banged on the front door until lights came on. He shouted, "We hit a deer a mile down the road. We thought someone should call the Fish and Game officer to let him know about the deer."

Dad returned and said, "Okay, we've done our duty. Let's get going."

## My First 83 Years

Mom said, “I feel better that we told someone.”

When the car was humming along, Donna and I curled under our blanket again. The next time I woke up, the car was rocking back and forth. We were in a gas station and someone was yanking on the front fender. Dad was outside with the yanker, telling him the details of our deer accident. With the fender pulled away from the wheel, Mom said, “Now we can relax.”

The rest of the way to New York City, Dad bragged about killing the deer. He seemed to take great pleasure when gas station attendants and toll booth collectors remarked about the clumps of deer hair jammed in the Pontiac’s grill. As if to punish Dad for bragging, God threw a huge snowstorm at us as we left Grandma and Grandpa Gallup’s New York City apartment on Morningside Drive, forcing Dad to a stop by the roadside in a place called the New Jersey Meadows. We slept overnight in a bowling alley on the curved benches where bowlers usually sat. The next morning Dad shoveled around the car until we were free to continue.

We finally reached Nutley, New Jersey, for a Christmas visit with my German grandparents. As always, Mama hugged me to her big belly so my nose almost stuck to her dress and prompted me to say “Ich liebe dich” (I love you). On every visit she joked about my time as an infant, when I’d said “swigadette” for the cigarette she was smoking. Papa was a quiet man who

## My First 83 Years

disappeared after supper about the same time my cousins and I heard “Santa” clomping around on their roof. I adored Papa, because he was kind and gentle and once led me by the hand to a Saturday kids’ matinee at a Nutley movie theater. And I loved the smell of his pipe.

On the way home to New Hampshire, we stopped in White Plains, New York, to visit the huge stucco house on Gedney Esplanade where Aunt Isolde, Uncle Dick, and my two cousins lived. They had two fancy cars, including a Jaguar, and two Irish Setters. And two bathrooms. They seemed to have at least two of everything.

A few weeks after we returned home, Aunt Isolde called with the news that Papa was dead. He’d been riding home with his carpool from his job as an aeronautical engineer at the Wright Patterson Aircraft Company when he fell asleep in the back seat and no one could wake him. I saw fear in my father’s eyes. It was difficult to say what bothered him most — his father’s death or having to face his own future alone.

Dad said Mama would now live with Isolde and Dick in White Plains. “Isolde said Mama could never adapt to using an outhouse and having no bathtub. And having to wash in cold water pumped at the kitchen sink.”

## My First 83 Years

I thought Mom was relieved that her temperamental mother-in-law would not be coming to New Hampshire. As for me, I was burdened by the fear that, if a grandfather I loved could fall asleep while riding in a car and never wake up, then death could take anyone at any time.

I suppose it was the trauma of this trip that made me remember it as the one family vacation that instigated my fear of death and made me eager to avoid anything similar in the future.



# Did you have any nicknames as a child? How did you feel about them?



**T**he one nickname that I remember was midget. Because I was smaller than all the kids my age, being called a midget made me feel as though there was something wrong with me. Being small, especially for a boy, seemed one of the worst maladies that could befall a male child.

The problem became more acute when I entered high school. In physical education class, playing touch football outside, I was the athletic jackrabbit who could catch any pass thrown near me. I thought helping my team win would stave off any teasing about my being a runt who looked about twelve years old. But in the locker room, Joe Judd pointed out I had no pubic hair.

Joe was a big moon-faced kid from my town, one of those eighth-graders whom Mister Parker, our teacher and principal at

## My First 83 Years

Emerson Elementary, used to pin up against the wall for making smart remarks. I didn't expect any small-town camaraderie from Joe, but I was pissed off that he was making his mark in Keene High School at my expense. As I was toweling myself after a group shower, Joe pointed to my crotch and said, "Hey, look! No hair!"

"Better no hair than no brain," I responded.

"Is the midget looking for a punch in the mouth?"

"Why don't you save your muscle for a bigger kid with lots of hair?"

"Because it's the midget that's got the big mouth."

I shrugged and went about getting dressed. I knew if Joe ever hit me, he'd kill me. I thought he wouldn't punch me in the locker room and risk suspension. I knew my smart remarks would land me in trouble some day, but quick words were the best weapons I had to defend myself. When I was in trouble, those words seemed to pop out of my mouth. I'd been punched twice for popping off, and I regretted mouthing off to Joe. It was stupid for a midget to challenge a giant.

When I was twelve and spending one week at a church camp in the White Mountains, I was lured into believing that being small didn't matter. When green-eyed Jackie held my hand, I relished

## My First 83 Years

the magic of her touch. Until Jackie reached some untapped place in me, I'd thought pretty girls saw me as an energetic puppy that should stay out of their way. When she reached out and held my hand, it made me feel that the religious instruction was insignificant compared to the way I felt when this slim girl touched me. Jackie in her white blouse and short shorts seemed like a religious experience. I wasn't sure why Jackie liked me. She was taller than me (as were most girls my age), but usually we sat on the floor of a lodge during bible class or on the ground during evening vespers. Later, when the teasing about my being a midget began, I thought about Jackie holding my hand. My photos of her in short shorts reminded me that I wasn't too small to be attractive to a pretty girl.

More serious problems began the spring after I turned sixteen, when I was selected from my high school's cappella choir to be in the All-State Music Festival in April. I would have been excited if it had been all-state baseball, but the junior varsity baseball coach thought I was too small to hit the ball any distance, even after I'd blasted some scorching line drives. Being a reserve on the J.V. team was killing my dream, and the uniform was too big.

But by some strange miracle that summer, my Boys State week held at UNH ended with my being chosen as one of New Hampshire's two representatives to Boys Nation in Washington, D.C. It was the first time I felt special, as though the asterisk next

## My First 83 Years

to my name said something good instead of midget or too small. My trip partner and I met some huge guys from states like Texas and Nevada in the dormitories of the University of Maryland, where we were being housed for the week. The big guys were kind to me and didn't razz me when I challenged one of them to some Indian wrestling. I placed my right foot against the right foot of a muscular guy from Nevada and grasped his right hand. I rammed our clasped hands down and drove his arm behind his leg. He lost his balance, moved his back foot. He wanted to try again. Same result. Others wanted to try. Same result. I was recognized as the Indian-wrestling champ. My low center of gravity had some advantages.

I was glad for this small recognition, because the other boys at Boys Nation were so mature. I was only five foot two, still the midget. On the day of our White House tour, the American Legion chaperones for our Boys Nation group said we would not meet the President. Big disappointment. President Eisenhower was still recuperating from abdominal surgery. The tour ended, and someone told us to wait on the White House lawn. Someone said Ike was coming out after all. The group formed a semicircle. I couldn't see over everyone. A chaperone noticed my problem and led me to the front on the far left-hand edge. Ike came out smiling and said how we represented the best in the country. He moved forward to the center of the semicircle and shook hands

## My First 83 Years

with John Lee Frye, whom we'd elected as our Boys Nation president. Then Ike stepped back and scanned the front row until his eyes locked on mine. He walked directly to me, stuck out his hand, and said, "You're a small fellow. Where are you from?"

I shook his hand and said, "New Hampshire, sir."

Ike said, "I've been to New Hampshire a few times."

I knew Ike liked to fish, so I said, "You should bring your fishing rod next time you come. I caught a five-pound smallmouth bass once."

Ike said, "Sounds like you're a good fisherman."

I smiled. Ike said good luck and began shaking hands with guys next to me. I leveled my camera for two close-ups of him. It was hard to believe the President had picked me out because I was the smallest kid. I thought maybe he did it because he was only a few inches taller than me. When I'd seen him on TV, he'd seemed tall. But Ike had empathy for small boys, and now something good had come from this handicap. Only a few more guys in the front row got to shake his hand before Ike waved and retreated into the White House.

Just after turning eighteen, I was only 5' 3 1/2" in height, which was 1/2 inch too short for entrance to Annapolis. As the bus passed through the main gate at the Naval Academy, I had the

## My First 83 Years

fear that they would reject me during the physical examination for being too small. The domed chapel, ivy-covered buildings, sparkling river, sailboats, white-uniformed midshipmen — all seemed like the ingredients of a great adventure if I could appear taller within the next hour. But reality came in the form of a Navy corpsman telling us to strip down to our skivvies. When my turn came for the stethoscope inspection, I held my breath. Previously, at the Air Force Academy physical exam, they had detected a heart murmur. Here the medical guy told me to relax. He listened here, there, and everywhere around my chest and back. He marked something on my medical sheet and said okay. What did okay mean? I decided it meant to move along to the next inspection point.

Another corpsman told me to back up against a wall to get measured. He pressed a spindle down on my head. He raised the spindle and said stand up a little straighter.

I raised my heels slightly off the floor. The spindle came down lightly on my head.

The corpsman said, “Sixty-four inches.”

I said, “Thank you, sir.”

The corpsman grinned. “You don’t have to call me sir. I’m just an enlisted man.”

## My First 83 Years

I wished I could thank him for giving me half an inch, but some gifts needed to be unspoken.

During plebe indoctrination summer at Annapolis, I learned that the Naval Academy had a different word that meant midget. At our table in the mess hall, the upperclassmen in charge said we'd have to brace up during meals when the brigade returned in September, saying that's when the shit would hit the fan. He said to memorize Reef Points, which was a small black bible of naval history, obscure facts, and stupid speeches you had to recite when prompted. I saw that Reef Points defined a sandblower as "he who walks at a low altitude." That there was no special definition for a big guy implied that sandblowers were a scrutinized minority.

I'm unsure how long it took me to shake the feeling of being too small...a midget who was prone to failure because he did not portray the physical attributes needed for success. But in my maturing years, I didn't think of it anymore. I just came to believe I could accomplish anything that stimulated my pituitary gland...within reason.

## My First 83 Years



Mom being celebrated as the oldest resident of Fitzwilliam



## My First 83 Years



Kirkmans and Boyacks, Mom and sister Louise in front



Renovating our barn into a two-car garage

