

# LITERARY TEA

## SPRING 2021



**STONY BROOK  
UNIVERSITY**



*Cover Photo by Eric Lohse*



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## **Me, Dad, and Martin Block**

Camile Abelson

My Dad loved the radio - was never much of a TV guy - but he could listen to the radio at home & in the car for hours. He would talk with delight about the radio of his childhood, but always it was the music. As an adult his listening joy was what he called "the music of his life;" what we refer to as the American Songbook sung by Judy Garland, Tony Bennett & my favorite, Sinatra. One of my most loving memories was with my father, Martin Block on the radio & semi-lit hallways in an apartment building where we lived in Brooklyn.

Martin Block was a long-time radio personality, beginning in 1935 on WNEW radio, shortly thereafter developing a program called "The Make Believe Ballroom." Though so many years ago, I can still hear the show's opening jingle sung by a jubilant chorus singing "It's make believe ballroom time, get up & swing!" Of all the radio personalities of the fifties, Martin Block was Dad's favorite; he said listening to Block & the tenor of his delivery transported him to a time & place of youth & seemingly carefree days.

I was born in Brooklyn, & after the arrival of my sister then later my brother, we moved to our final apartment in Ridgewood; final apartment because at this time my parents decided, following many quiet late night conversations, their goal was to move to a house "in the country." I didn't know what that country was but my parents' faces lit when discussing it, so I knew it had to be someplace thrilling. My father had a good job at Pan American Airlines & though his salary & benefits were good compared to most, it would not be enough to get us a new house; so my father asked the superintendent in our building if he could do some work in exchange for reducing our rent. The super agreed & Dad's job was to polish the thick mahogany banisters, twice each week, in our six-story building. Dad was a hard worker & sometimes pretty tired, but our rent was reduced by a quarter, a big deal in 1954. Every penny saved went toward the dream of that new house. What made the job easier for him was listening to the radio and, in particular, Martin Block.

Dad would plug his radio into a hallway outlet on whichever floor he worked, listen to the music & banter of Block, & none of the neighbors minded (including the super). In fact they loved it. Most of the residents were like us: second & third generation Italian families hoping & waiting for their magic ticket out of a cramped apartment & into a house in the country. They were housewives & mothers who, behind their closed doors, would suddenly hear Jo Stafford singing "You Belong To Me," open their door with big smiles, see my father & say things like, "Oh, Angelo, I knew it was you. Isn't that a great song? It sure takes me back, they don't make m' like that anymore. You can play your radio all day!"

He'd flash his ear-to-ear smile & agree with them all. Oh, and how did I know this was going on? Because for four years, beginning at age five, & whenever opportunity permitted, I sat on the top step of each stairway talking to Dad as he meticulously polished & varnished his way from top floor to ground level, with the radio & Martin Block migrating with us.



My father wanted to hear about my day at school, but I wanted to hear his stories - as kids, we didn't see much of him - he worked many hours at Pan Am, sometimes seven days straight, most nights working overtime. Mom was always busy cooking, cleaning & caring for my newborn brother, my sister was just four & a half, so I grabbed whatever "me & Dad time" I could get. He'd talk about his immigrant parents from Naples, his nine siblings, growing up poor living in Brooklyn tenements & the Depression. Sitting in those darkened hallways was magic time for me, I was mesmerized; he loved the music & I learned to love it, too. I remember one day Block announcing he'd be playing songs from Gershwin's "Porgy & Bess;" this was my father's favorite musical & in time I learned the words to the song he most loved, "Summertime." Once, when Dad paused for a coffee break, we heard it played & sang it together on a top step in that hallway. My father then hugged me as I giggled - it's like it was yesterday.

After my father passed away in 1998, I reminded my mother of Dad's favorite lyric in that song: the lyric is "Your daddy's rich & your mama's good lookin'." When he first sang that to me in 1955, he winked, smiled & said, "Your daddy's not rich but your Mom sure is good lookin'!" At that moment, I looked up to see my grieving mother smile through a tear-soaked face. For all the memories, thank you, Dad.



## **Food**

Patricia Ballan

If any of you should chance by my home, be assured that I will feed you, mealtime or not and if you have been invited, bring a huge appetite to my table.

I will cook you foods both exotic and savory, mild or spicy, rich or plain. You will leave the feast feeling esteemed. It's such a pleasure for me to indulge my guests; holding back nothing in my effort to tempt and delight them. I might stray from Syrian cuisine, too, stealing without shame from any other nationality's best dishes. In this memoir, I'll focus on Arabic cuisine.

You know that I paint. Pah! Cooking is my real art form. Besides, hospitality is a cultural mandate in a Middle Eastern home as many of you already know. It's incumbent upon me to live up to my heritage!

Besides the hospitality aspect, food is an expression of LOVE. Never was a cookbook more aptly named than “The Joy of Cooking”. When done joyously and with love, the food tastes differently. I like to hear music when I cook and have a glass of wine in hand.

When my sons were teenagers, their New York and N.J. cousins would come to our house , which was known as “Club Big”, for a “cousins' weekend”. My husband readied our property for water sports; boating, a dive into the canal, sitting in the cold tub outside with soap suds frothing about. The cousins brought musical instruments and there were impromptu jams.

My job was to provide the many meals, finding unusual dishes to tempt the teens. Their appetites were fairly sophisticated as their own mothers were good cooks.

I tapped into the cuisines of various countries: India, Japan, Greece, China, Israel, Turkey, Italy. The Mediterranean diet is a healthful one of seasonal vegetables, fish, lamb and chicken and I concentrated on making healthy food that pleased the palate.

Eggplants and tomatoes are stars in the Middle Eastern cuisine. I used both in a recipe called “Sheikh il Meshee”, a.k.a. “the sheik of stuffed dishes”. The stuffing in the baked eggplant consists of ground lamb and onions sauteed with garlic, allspice, cinnamon, salt and toasted pine nuts, then topped with plum tomatoes and garnished with chopped parsley.

Small meat pies are also a favorite: dough circles baked with lamb mixed with chopped onion, peppers, tomato, allspice and pomegranate molasses .

Mazza (appetizers) are Syrian specialties : hummus, baba ghanoush, thick yoghurt with cucumbers, garlic and dried mint, or raw chopped fine lamb with bulgur wheat, onion, and allspice , dressed with scallions..lamb tartare. M'hammara is a favorite of mine: roasted red peppers, pomegranate molasses, garlic, chopped walnuts, crushed saltines, olive oil, lemon juice and Aleppo pepper whipped in a Cuisinart and served with fresh, hot Syrian bread with pockets.



When fresh mint was abundant I made tabboule. When grape leaves were at their tender best for picking at the end of June, I made stuffed grape leaves with lamb and rice, and cooked them over a broth made with lamb bones and garlic, finishing them with lemon juice. Syrians don't grow grape vines for their fruit, but instead for their leaves!

Rice was never plain: I toasted pine nuts and set them aside, then sauteed itty-bitty pieces of the thinnest pasta in butter. Long grain rice was boiled in chicken broth ,salt and allspice, the browned pasta bits added ten minutes before it was finished, The rice was fluffed and topped with the toasted pine nuts. A touch of cinnamon never hurt, either, and in fact, most hot dishes contained allspice , cinnamon, garlic and onions.

And then there are the desserts! You've no doubt heard of baklava. Our family makes it with clarified butter on the fillo leaves with chopped pistachios. After baking, a simple syrup flavored with an extract of orange blossoms is poured over it. Greeks make theirs with chopped walnuts and cinnamon, by the way.

If you want to hear about knaifi (my sister, Leila, makes the very best), or ma'amoul, (pastry stuffed with dates or nuts), give me a call.

My specialty is atiyef. I make thin pancake crepes, put a dollop of ricotta cheese mixed with a bit of sugar on them, fold them over into a crescent and pinch the edges. They're placed into a baking pan and melted butter is poured on them . After baking, they're topped with simple syrup.

Are you hungry yet?? I'm at the door with my apron on.



## **Steve McQueen -The King of Cool Proves Comic Too**

Joel G. Cohen

The iconic Steve McQueen, the “King of Cool”, is best known for dramatic roles in *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), *The Great Escape* (1963), *The Cincinnati Kid* (1965), *The Sand Pebbles* (1966), *Bullitt* (1968), *The Getaway* (1972) and *Papillon* (1973). In none of these films does McQueen make us laugh.

You might smile watching Nevada Smith (1966) as Steve sits eating a can of Georgia peaches while road-schooling his way through McGuffey’s Primer.

We mostly recall Steve McQueen on screen as serious business- a paid gunman, prisoner of war- escape artist, gambler, China sailor, detective, bank robber and prisoner desperate for his freedom

In his penultimate screen role as Tom Horn (1980)- the real life tracker, scout, Pinkerton guard, interpreter of the Apache wars and man who helped capture Geronimo, we shouldn’t expect any laughs.

McQueen opens the film, surprising us with a comic riff. His character arrives in Hagersville, a small town near Cheyenne, Wyoming around sunrise, needing to board his horse. As he enters the livery stable he asks the Attendant, played by Elisha Cook, Jr. (The Maltese Falcon) to put his horse in a separate stall. Horn warns that his horse will kill any other sharing the stall.

A: “Why do you keep him around?”

TH: “It’s a mother-in-law horse.”

A: “What’s that?”

TH: “A mother-in-law horse is a horse you put your mother-in-law on and then send her off to the hills and hope they don’t return.”

Horn is then off to the local saloon for his morning whiskey. He comes upon a party of seven men including boxer Gentleman Jim Corbett, his handlers and some press (CP). Their mood is celebratory.

CP: “Hey Tex you ever hear of a hook punch?”

TH: “No I haven’t”

CP “Well here’s to the man with the greatest hook punch in the world. Bartender, give Tex a glass of champagne”. Horn asks for whiskey and what all the good cheer is about.

CP: “We’re toasting the next heavyweight champion of the world, Gentleman Jim Corbett.

TH: “Well he’s not the champion yet”. ‘Why don’t we toast something interesting.?’

CP: “Like what?”





TH: “Like Geronimo there (picture on top of bar). He’s interesting.”

CP: “ In a pig’s ass. Don’t you read the papers? They put Geronimo in jail, where he belongs. Let me ask you something, Tex. Who’s Geronimo next to Jim Corbett? “ (JC)

TH: “Geronimo’s a man so great that Corbett there’d have to stand on his mothers’ shoulders to kiss his ass”. Horn realizes his humor has gone too far.

Corbett then inquires as to whether Horn has a gun on him. He does not. Corbett begins removing his clothes preparing to give Horn the beating that only a near heavyweight champion could deliver.

JC: “I don’t know where you come from... but the manners you arrived with are just awful. I’m trying to imagine how you could make such a reference to the mother of the future heavyweight champion of the world”.

TH: “You ain’t champion yet. Besides, you’re acting like an asshole”.

JC: “I could go to the penitentiary over you”.

TH: “Before we start this fight, I wanna ask you one question”.

JC: “Is it about my mother?”

TH: “No I’ve said enough about her. If I win this fight, am I the champion of the world?”

JC: You’re not big enough”.

TH: “Then what are you picking on a little fellow like me for? You get in a fight in a public bar, they’ll discredit you from your profession. I’m gonna save you from that.”

It appears that Horn has talked his way out of a beating, but his fist fight with Gentleman Jim is on the cutting room floor.

The story does have a few light moments in it as Horn dines on Maine lobster for the first time and tells the many at the table he’s never eaten a bug so big.

When asked to explain why he is present questioning an auctioneer over a questionable bill of sale for cattle he replies “stock detective” and the rustlers laugh. They will all be tracked and killed later by Horn.

The film is more tragedy than comedy. Horn will lose the woman he loves- gave his horse to, his freedom, over a trumped up murder charge. His last not so “Great Escape” attempt shows an impressive jailbreak, but Horn and McQueen can’t outrun time.

Horn is hung before the town with Sheriff Creedmore played by Slim Pickens, reluctantly overseeing the lengthy proceeding . (Slim earlier appeared with McQueen in The Getaway providing Doc McCoy and the Mrs with a car ride into Mexico at the film’s end). The public hanging is the end of Horn and nearly the end of McQueen who died in 1980 at age 50.

The comic riff McQueen provides throughout the film Tom Horn is truly unexpected pleasure.

See for yourself.



## **Union Guy - A Memoir**

Michael Dobler

This is not at all what I set out to write. I intended to share the story of my wife’s degenerative illness, the gradual and painful loss of her sense of self and of her identity, and of the emergence of new identities for me -- retiree, caregiver, widower. But I can’t do it. Maybe it’s too soon, maybe it’s too personal, maybe it’s just too hard to share it with a laptop full of virtual strangers. Maybe next time.

Yet somehow this has become a story about my own identity. I turned 70 in September, and I’ve recognized that the way I’ve seen myself for most of my life has drastically changed. I was a husband, a father, a teacher, a union activist. But now my wife has been gone for three years, my kids are adults who live in California and Massachusetts, my teaching career has been over for eight years. Yet I’m still a union man, and it’s still a big part of how I see myself.

I think back to the 1950s. I’m a kid, maybe 7 or 8. We’ve sold the corner candy store in Brooklyn, where I spent a good part of my early childhood, collecting comic books and ice cream cones, and giving customers their cigarettes. (It is the fifties). My father now drives a truck, delivering Levy’s bread. Their commercial- “you don’t have to be Jewish to love Levy’s real Jewish rye” -- even now still plays in my head. Each day, my father gets up in the middle of the night to start his route. Once in a while, on a Saturday, he has to go in to work, at 115 Thames St, Brooklyn, to pick up a check or something. I have no idea why I remember this address. Inside, there’s a high platform that presents an obstacle for my still growing legs to climb onto, but I like to jump off it when we leave. I feel good being there with my father and all the men.

One day the drivers go on strike. I don’t exactly understand what that means, but I see the stress on my parents’ faces, and I learn that sometimes “you do what you have to do”. I learn that when you’re on strike you don’t go to work, and you don’t get paid. And I learn what a picket line is, and most importantly, that you never, never cross one. I don’t know when and how the strike ended, but I know that it was a big deal.

Every month a magazine comes to the house, from something called the Teamsters. My father explains that that is his union, and sort of explains what that means. I’m not sure I understand, but I sense it’s important. Much later, we talk about Jimmy Hoffa, and how he doesn’t represent all union guys.

Sometimes on Sundays, we dress up and visit my grandmother- my father’s mother. There is a funny smell in her apartment, plastic on the couch, and hard candies in a bowl. Always hard candies. Her second husband, Uncle Charlie – that’s what we call him- sits at the kitchen table. Sometimes I see a newspaper there from something called the Workman’s Circle, whatever that is. I learned later that it was a left leaning Jewish organization, supporting worker’s rights and social justice. The pieces fit together.



Now it's 1973. I've been married for a year and a half, and I'm applying for a teaching job. At my interview with the Social Studies Department, they ask me, inappropriately I guess, what I would do if they went on strike. I don't know what answer they're looking for, so I decide to go with the truth. I think of my father, and of the strikes against the war I took part in in college. "I would never cross a picket line", I say with conviction. I get the job.

Eight months later we are on strike. I'm a new teacher walking the picket line. I never for a moment consider not doing it. You do what you have to do. We are on strike for a week, and we lose two weeks pay. We are offered low interest loans. I have to pay back \$33 a month for a couple of years. But I feel proud. We have achieved something together, and protected people's jobs, including my own. I'm a union guy.

Now it's 2005. I've been a union rep, a head rep, and a vice president. And now I'm a local president. It consumes my life. I complain, obsess, and worry, but I love it - and my family and friends know that. My friends make fun of me when I talk about the strike of '74, like some old veteran sharing war stories. You know, Glory Days. I realize that this is how many see me- The union guy. It's part of who I am. And it makes me proud. Dad would have liked it.

So now I'm 70 and at least that part of my old identity is intact. Now I'm a widower, a retiree, a grandfather. But still a union guy. And one more thing- My son's doctoral dissertation and first book was called "Media and Culture in the U.S. Jewish Labor Movement : Sweating for Democracy in the Interwar Era". He has been a union organizer and now is helping to organize the Uber drivers in California. We've come full circle. My father would have been proud. I am too.



## **A Purchase- Revisited**

Sheila Eisinger

There’s a dance supply store around the corner from my house in Saint James. About fifteen years ago they had a closeout sale on scales, and on impulse I bought one. The scale isn’t the usual scale that tells body weight. This special scale measures the dances you know. You step on it, just as you would a regular scale, but it bears no resemblance to any other scale. The fact is that it intuitively senses one’s dance ability. I used it once when I bought it, made a note on a special pad included in the box then put the scale away on a high shelf in the linen closet.

The other day when I was taking out summer blankets I noticed the box, way up on the top shelf, untouched for years. I hardly remembered it or its contents, but down it came. This strange contraption was rediscovered, to be used today during a new stage in my life. I set the scale up in the bathroom, stepped on it and waited while the scale assessed my DT, my Dance Total, or TDR, Total Dances Remembered. I had lost weight! In dance language, this is anything but a happy scale figure. It means I now know and remember fewer dances than when I had first weighed myself fifteen years ago.

True, today I recognize the music to more dances, but I’ve forgotten steps to dances I used to know, and the new dances I’ve learned don’t add up to more than those I’ve forgotten. Actually, if there were no models in the center of the circle for me to watch, like Jill and Roberta, my TDR would drop even lower. I used to hear a melody and my feet and brain knew what to do. Now my brain first has to sort out why the music sounds familiar. Sometimes, after one go-around my feet and brain are in sync, and I get a passing grade.

There’s hope for me, I think. Less time in the kitchen reading gourmet recipe books and preparing new dinner recipes for my husband and me, and more time tediously reviewing folk dance steps would probably result in a heavier though less upbeat dance weight.



## **Flanders Field Redux**

Len Farano

“In Flanders Fields the poppies blow”,

Lines from an ode writ long ago.

A lesson from a soldier who

Had served his country brave and true,

About the dead whom he once knew.

He gave them voices to call upon

Their living brethren to fight on

So they shall not have died in vain.

“Defeat the foe!”, was their refrain.

What have we learned from this sad verse?

That war is hell and even worse

That man cannot his conflicts cease

But must rage on and break the peace.

Perhaps one day when bloodlust yields

We’ll have no need for Flanders Fields.

*Memorial Day – May 31, 2021*



## **Mandrake McMillan**

Barbara Golub

Mandrake McMillan was a famous magician  
His performances were strangely unique  
Poor Willie Withers lost his laugh  
When Mandrake McMillan sawed him in half

Billy Black loved his dog Jack  
And woefully cried to have him back  
But when the dog barked during his act  
Mandrake thrust poor Jack on the rack

Mandrake failed at whatever he tried  
Audiences booed at his evil side  
He couldn't face such a sad disgrace  
So he hitched a ride into outer space  
And became a sex therapist for an alien race



## **Flying Lessons**

Irma Gurman

From as early as I can remember, my mother planted in my mind that flying was dangerous. When she heard about someone planning to fly somewhere, there was always an “Oh, my God” attached to the statement. My family never flew. Therefore, when I was 27 I stepped foot on a plane for the first time. Oh, my God, was I terrified! But as Sol and I love to travel, I was forced to board airplanes countless times. I never lost my fear until I was 60 years old. That year, we went on a safari to Africa, and we took puddle jumpers between the game preserves. This time, looking down at the savannah and the majestic animals below, I said, Oh my God, It is SO BEAUTIFUL! And I fell in love.

When Sol asked me what I wanted for my next birthday, I informed him that I wanted to take flying lessons. I was going to rediscover the magic that was revealed to me in Africa. I made some phone calls and found an instructor who flew out of Farmingdale Airport. He sent me a brochure with lots of pictures and explanations. I learned about ailerons and rudders and stabilizers and, with Sol’s help I almost understood the physics of lift and how amazing it was that this chunk of steel could actually go airborne. I now was an aviation expert!

I arrived at my lesson. It was just my instructor and me and a teeny two engine prop plane. We circled and inspected the plane. We checked that the wings were attached and that the propeller turned. The little Cessna was calling to me. Into the cockpit I climbed. I faced the control panel with all of its little dials. My instructor gave me a quick explanation and it was time for me to emulate Amelia Earhart!

I turned the key, started the engine and pulled the throttle. The plane moved faster, then suddenly, we were IN THE AIR! It was pure magic! The wonder of it! My instructor showed me how to keep level by watching the horizon on the dashboard. I learned that if the horizon tilted to the left or right, we would bank or turn. It was fun, and it was SO EASY! I watched with fascination as we soared over the roofs of the houses on the south shore, then approached the coast. And I was once afraid to fly? Nonsense!

On the morning of the lesson, my instructor would call me at home to verify that the visibility was good. If there were cloud cover, it would not be safe to fly. Meanwhile, back at home, Sol would wait for the phone call to inform him that I had landed safely. It was hard for him to hold his breath for 45 minutes, but he did it because he loved me.

I would eventually fly solo, but first I would have to fly without instruments and learn to use my own judgment. I took several lessons. Then one day, I decided to invite Sol to join us at a lesson. That morning there was a possibility of cloud cover, but my instructor decided that the skies would eventually clear, so the three of us boarded the little toy plane. But he was wrong. Ten minutes into our flight, the sky turned gray and the horizon disappeared from my dashboard. I had no idea if we were flying level, and obviously we weren’t, because I started banking. Mind you, if you bank more than 60 degrees you can lose control of the plane, and banking can cause someone to get nauseous, which is what happened to Sol. He sat behind me groaning and shaking. Of course, my instructor took over the landing. Finally, we were down and safe.



And do you know what my instructor said to me? He said, “In a few more lessons I want you to fly SOLO to Connecticut.” Solo? So soon? NO WAY! That’s all Sol had to hear. He wanted our marriage to last at least a few more years.

So, that was the end of my flying lessons.





## **We Shall Overcome**

Ron Hollander

I was in jail in Cairo, Illinois. Because that was where the Salvation Army slept its homeless and wanderers.

But I was more than a wanderer. I was a crusader in summer 1962, on a mission to Mississippi to let freedom ring. There was a new civil rights paper in Jackson, the capital, and I was going to write for it. But first I would follow Mark Twain’s Huck, and raft down the Mississippi to get there.

I had hitchhiked 1,047 miles from Long Island to Cairo (Care-O), at the southern tip of the state, where the Ohio River meets the Mississippi. In “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”, Huck and the escaped slave, Jim, drifting down the Mississippi, plan to turn their raft at Cairo and head up the Ohio to the free states. But they get lost in a heavy night fog, miss Cairo, and continue south back into slave lands. I—a drop-out English major from Brandeis University—was set on recreating their journey.

I didn’t have to hitch. I could easily have taken the train or even Trailways. But I was following the path trod by Jack Kerouac and the Beats. Or by Woody Guthrie before them. I was going on the road to find America, and in that journey, the even less explored continent, my twenty-year-old self.

Hitching was freedom. It was severing ties to the safe, prescribed, feathered nest the 1950s had prepared for me. Instead, I would walk defiantly on my own. The journey was part of the destination.

The trip west was surprisingly uneventful. Standing on the shoulder of the highway, my blue-and-gray-checked plastic suitcase at my feet, one hip outthrust, my thumb raised, I was totally free and on my own. It was an exhilarating solitariness that will never, ever exist again with lure of the cell phone.

Cars and especially trailer trucks buffeted me as they whooshed by. I didn’t mind. Each brought me closer to the eventual one that would stop. Some honked or gave a thumbs-up in support. I couldn’t help believing they envied me a bit, like a wild horse bound only by the reach of its hooves and the horizon.

I slept where I could. One night, dropped off late at a highway ramp in what I thought was wilderness, I parted the bushes to see a deserted, lavishly lit, aquamarine motel swimming pool ringed by empty chaise lounges. Checking into the motel never occurred to me; would Kerouac? Instead, I moved a chaise behind some shrubs and slept comfortably, pleased at my self-reliance.

Another night, someplace in Indiana, I slept on a railroad embankment. I had to clear the loose track gravel so it wouldn’t dig into my back. I propped my head on my suitcase and dozed off. It didn’t take long for mosquitoes from the nearby river to find me.



As I hitched, I taped destination signs to the side of my suitcase so drivers would know where I was headed. For the last leg of my journey through Kentucky, I printed a big “CAIRO.” Thus I came into the worn river town with one empty main street, surrounded by looming levees holding back two vast rivers that bound the United States. Now I had to find Huck’s ghost.

There was a joy in being in a new place, knowing no one, not even an idea of how the few broken streets ran, where to get breakfast or to sleep. It was a gift for me to open. I started with shelter.

I walked up to a cop, one of the few people out. “Where does the Salvation Army sleep its homeless?” I asked.

He looked at me warily, like “Who is this guy?” and “What is he up to?” Mostly he eyed my “CAIRO” sign and asked what it meant. I told him about hitching. He seemed to relax.

“In the jail,” he said with a smile. I flinched. “We lock you in when you’re ready and let you out in the morning.” Well, okay, I thought, if that’s the way it is....

I spent the day trying to get on a tug with its barges heading downriver. Building a raft was a crazy idea; it wasn’t the 1840s. No one would take me, citing union rules and safety. Discouraged, I checked into jail.

They searched my suitcase, then clanged shut the barred door. “Don’t do no sleep walkin’,” a cop joked. I had the cell to myself. There were three metal shelves bolted to the wall as beds, with blue-striped mattresses as thin as a concentration camp’s. I climbed to the middle one. It smelled of rusted iron.

As I lay down, I heard the murmur of soft, young voices coming from other cells. The cinder block walls did not reach to the ceiling, so sound carried.

“Alright, now, we’re all going to sleep,” said one more authoritative than the rest. “We’ll make more plans tomorrow about getting out. Y’all sleep well.”

And then there in that dank, backwater jail, carrying over walls built to imprison, came the sound of sweet voices full of hope and of the future; gentle, earnest voices that would not be turned back. One started softly, “We shall overcome...” And the others joined in:

“Oh, deep in my heart  
I do believe.  
We shall overcome  
Some day.”

It was the first time I heard the pre-Civil War hymn that became the anthem for the civil rights movement, and for me, for years to come. Now I understood why the cop was looking at my sign; he thought I was a protester to be arrested and jailed.

In the morning I made a new sign: “JACKSON.” Huck and the river could wait. There was fire in the land, and I was needed.

*11/25/20*



## **My Lesson in Aging**

Aldustus Jordan

There is a way my sons look at me as I age.  
A fleeting glance, as I had done with my father.  
Our eyes meet and they turn away quickly  
to hide worry, concern, uncertainty and curiosity.

The “pill-rolling” tremor in my left hand,  
pronounced limp in my gait, (basketball and marathons),  
difficult exits from my easy chair and stiff achy knees  
hibernate in winter and renew in Spring.

Long gazes, without expression, trapped in reverie--  
loved ones, friends, roads taken and not, a few regrets.  
Memories in search of detail, buoyed by emotion and feelings.  
When did this all happen? —marriage. children, grandchildren.

My sons imagine my absence from the dinner table,  
family gatherings and photos, a black beret in the closet.  
Absence can be seen, excused, forgiven, a void filled with  
hope that the absentee will appear when the door opens.

But they miss and feel presence—life’s emotional stage defining  
who we are, how we’re remembered—a certain smile, approving  
nods, silly jokes made funny by perfect timing, unapologetic drifts  
into afternoon catnaps, tight hugs, special forehead kisses.

Fleeting glances remind me to listen and learn from my sons.  
Life is a well-worn satchel full of moments, memories, thoughts,  
feelings and dreams--not perfect, unpredictable, happy and sad.  
But I own them and, even if I try, cannot be given back.  
Life goes on.



## **Melted Into Thin Air**

Mahlon Lantz

Time to get up.

Wonder what time it is. I am guessing 7:45.

I throw back the covers, slip into moccasin slippers, pick up the vest from the back of the chair, and head for the TV to check the time.

The lake is really clear. There is a bluegill near the pad a few feet out...and a decent bass lies below. Maybe it is a foot to 14 inches long. To the right is another bass. Time to get out the fishing tackle. I know the fly to use—it has a dark, wool head and a strip of rabbit skin trailing behind. Wait. The spinning line is all tangled! It will take some time to straighten this mess. Why am I working on this rig anyway.? I should be getting my fly rod ready.

I throw back the cover. But, I thought I just did that. Guess I was dreaming. What time would it be now? Maybe 8:15?

I need to call the insurance company about that car accident. Another call will be to Fidelity to check the final cost for selling my Pimco fund and purchasing bonds from Johnson and Johnson. Glad there aren't any OLLI classes today. Oh I need to call Laura about the latest changes in the schedule.

For breakfast, I took out frozen pancakes to thaw. The new container of maple syrup will be needed.

I really need to go to the bathroom now. I'm guessing that the time is 8:30. There are the ceiling tiles. This time my eyes are really open.

My previous intentions melted into thin air.



## **Free At Last**

Peter Lee

FREE AT LAST! FREE AT LAST! THANK GOD ALMIGHTY WE ARE FREE AT LAST!

Not so fast there, Dr. King. I’m not “free” until I get my second vaccine dose on the 24th, and then I still have to wait for two weeks after that, then, and only then, will I be “Free at last.”

My wife and I got our shots separately at a facility at SUSB last Wednesday. Afterwards I realized that this was the first time I’d been in a public place with a lot of people in a very long time. I felt like I wanted to hug them all and say “God Bless You,” but the National Guard troops on duty there would have found that activity unacceptable. My wife was there earlier in the day and she told me that she felt like she was in the army, because she had to wait on so many lines and all the National Guard troops to direct her and ask questions. As I recall from my time in the service, it was mostly “Hurry up and wait” and being told by the sergeant to do something, then an hour later being told by another sergeant not to do it. I really don’t see why they needed them. What were we going to do, attack them with our walkers? Also, police presence from both the university and the county was practically everywhere. They all did a great job of directing us to each “Station of the Cross,” as it were, so there was no wandering around clutching your papers and asking people if they knew where Duran Duran was, or the way to San Jose.

As we’re all aware, you must have a reservation before you can go. If you’ve tried it, then you know that this is a daunting task, and my wife tried it numerous times until there was Spanish Moss starting to grow between the computer screen and her left ear. Our son Dan, Doctor, Dr. Dan, that is, because he’s a health care professional, had already gotten his shots, but managed to get ours, not through any special connection, but because he left the application screen on one side of his split screen computer while doing his work on the other. Eventually, we got approved. Then the appointment and the confirmation with date, time, and location, had to be printed, and you also had to bring your license, Medicare and supplemental insurance cards. I also brought a snapshot of my Studebaker just in case someone asked. Hey – you never know!

Before you can enter the building, they give you a folder with forms that first must be filled out. Nothing too difficult or different from the usual medical forms seemingly designed by the Department of Redundancy Department. Once inside, there was the first of a seemingly endless parade of young women wearing masks asking you pretty much the same questions as the one whom you just left. Even as I was about to be injected, the woman asked me to verify my name, date of birth and social security number. I’m pretty sure this is to make sure you are who you say you are, but also to check if you’re non compos mentis and not waste any precious serum on you. Anticipating this, I stayed up late, well past my usual 6PM bedtime, to study for those questions and, as a backup, wrote them on the palm of my hand. Hey – I’m not messin’ around, here! Then, just as she was about to inject me she said that I might “feel a little pinch.” I’ve heard that before in the dentist’s office. It’s dentist-speak for “It’s going to hurt like



hell.” Then, In went the juice, no pain, and it was over in a second, so I asked her if I got the full dose and she said something that sounded like “senior.”

I have impaired hearing or “CHS” (can’t Hear Shit), as it’s called, and as a result I haven’t heard a complete sentence or even an incomplete one clearly since the mask mandate began. Everyone sounds like they’re Lloyd Bridges from “Sea Hunt, twenty feet underwater wearing a diving mask. Then, just make sure I can’t hear anything at all, now every place you go where you need to interact with another person, they’ve got a clear acrylic shield with only a small enough space to pass money.

The library has the most barriers, with some seemingly wrapping completely around the desk. One woman at the East Northport Library was wearing one of those clear welder-style masks over her face mask. I asked her if she was going to add one of those Jules Verne-style diving helmets with the little hinged porthole on front, but got no response. Next I told her what book I wanted to request, then she looked in the computer, looked up and said: “Mnfff gniph hohhhih harreoechh ahchiiiah.” I politely indicated I couldn’t hear her, which is more than some rude putz at my ENT who, well before the mask era, stood in front of the receptionist and said in a horribly oud nasal voice, “HAAAHHHHH?” which was loud enough to be heard over the racket the garbage truck outside was making. He did this not once, but at least three times, and after the third I thought that the doctor was using some new kind of test for people who not only have no hearing but no ears or even head! Fortunately, I can use my pantomime skills to communicate what I want and, no, I don’t do that damn “feeling along the invisible wall with my palms” bit.

Now every time I go to ask for something at those “Hygienically Sealed for Your Protection” booths, I write what I want on a piece of paper and slide under the opening, if there is one. At that moment I feel like Virgil Starkwell, Woody Allen’s character in the bank robbery scene from “Take the Money and Run,” where the teller calls the manager over to ask if that word on the note is “Gun” or “Gub” followed by a lengthy discussion involving at least five additional employees trying to figure it out. Meanwhile, poor Virgil is standing at the teller’s window, looking very nervous while holding a black plastic gun.

In summation, there’s good news and bad news: It turns out that the vaccine is 50% effective after the first dose, and by the time I read this I will have probably gotten my second shot and possibly even have cleared the fourteen day waiting period. The bad news is that there’s a man in California who was found positive even after his vaccinations. Sorry for your loss, buddy. But far worse than that, a scientist from Yale predicts that the virus will be with us until 2024! By that time I’ll be too old, sick, and stupid to give a rat’s ass. Thanks a lot for the buzzkill, doc!



## Memories from My Early Childhood

Jim Muckerman

### Bus Rides.

Before I was old enough to attend school, my grandmother would take me on “bus rides” started by boarding a bus or a streetcar in Wellston (near our house), and transferring to other bus lines to various points of interest in the city of St. Louis. This broke the boredom of staying at home before the days we had a television. It also gave me an overview of the location of points of interest in the city, and how to get to them by public transportation. This knowledge became more and more important as I grew older.

### Baseball with a Black Boy.

At other times I had to occupy myself with such diversions as playing two-man “baseball” with a tennis ball and a broomstick for a bat. My playmate was my next-door neighbor, Craig Coleman, a boy about my age. We made up a set of obscure and complicated rules for determining whether a hit ball was fair or foul, a hit or an out, etc. The truth be told, there weren’t all that many hits. One day, a black boy about our age came walking down the alley that ran behind our back yards. He saw us playing, and asked if he could join our game. He told us his name, but I don’t remember it. After amending our rules to specify the order of the game: pitcher went to batter, batter went to fielder and fielder went to pitcher, we began a new game.

One of the deficiencies of our field of play was the presence of tall weeds along the wire fence separating our back yards that seemed to attract a successfully hit tennis ball. When this happened, play had to be suspended until the ball was found and retrieved. As our game proceeded, I began to feel uneasy. Something was wrong. Was I doing something I shouldn’t? Was it wrong for me to be playing with a black boy? I was pretty sure that my family wouldn’t approve of it.

I was standing on my back porch, pushing the tall weeds on the other side of the fence back and forth with the broomstick trying to locate the ball. I found it and yelled to my playmates to come get it. The black boy responded and knelt down to pick it up. I don’t know what came over me, but I reached out and hit him across the back with the broomstick. Startled, he looked up at me with sorrowful eyes and said, “Now what did you go and do that for?” I looked at him, feeling very ashamed, and said “I don’t know. I’m sorry.” He picked up the ball, and we continued our game, but we never saw him again.



The YMCA and a Young Boy’s Theory of Stagecoach Wheel Rotation.

In the afternoons, especially after I began to attend elementary school, I often went to the YMCA, which had an after-school program for young children. We played games and were given a snack. The atmosphere was very friendly. On Saturdays, there was an all-day program for us kids that included games, lunch, and a movie, usually a cowboy movie. One ubiquitous feature of the cowboy movies was a scene in which a horse-drawn stagecoach is driven into town, and comes to a stop in front of the general store or the sheriff’s office. We children were mesmerized by a very strange feature of the rotation of the stagecoach wheels.

As the stagecoach approaches the town (say from the right), the wheels are clearly rotating in a counter-clockwise direction. As the stagecoach slows down, the counter-clockwise rotation also slows down. So far, so good. But at some point the rotation of the wheels becomes clockwise, and all the kids are fascinated! How can the stagecoach be moving forward while its wheels are moving backwards? So I told them.

“The frame rate of the pictures from the movie camera is constant, but the counter-clockwise velocity of the wheel rotation becomes slower as the stagecoach slows down. At some point, the counter-clockwise velocity of the wheel rotation becomes equal to the frame rate of the movie camera. That makes it appear that the spokes of the wheel are stationary. As the stagecoach slows down further, the counter-clockwise velocity of the wheels becomes slower than the frame rate of the movie camera, and it appears that the spokes of the wheels are moving in a clockwise direction.” I think that performing this analysis is probably why I eventually became a scientist.





## **My Calling as a Nurse**

Rachelle Psaris

As a young girl growing up, I had the goal of becoming a nurse primarily to take care of babies. I was an excellent babysitter and loved babies. My choices of a profession as I saw them were nurse or teacher. I viewed the role of teacher as one of disciplinarian and didn't welcome this as an option, thus nursing was what I chose.

Early on in nursing school I knew I did not want to specialize in Pediatrics or Newborn Nursery, realizing I connected with adults more easily. Early on in nursing school I realized that I didn't just see my roles as carrying out the doctor's orders in caring for patients, but also to make a difference in their lives emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically. I was taught this in school and after learning it decided to own it. I could not just be a robot and do everything physically right for them. I had to connect in a human way too.

In nursing school I became emotionally involved with a patient, who was suffering with End Stage Renal Disease, from which he eventually died. I had also become very attached to his family and after his death, the family stayed in contact with me for a while. I felt great pride in this relationship.

Later on as a professional nurse I found that the qualities I possessed stood me in good stead with my patients. On returning a patient to his room post operatively, I found the man in the next bed gripping the side rail, white knuckled in pain from his surgery. He wasn't my patient, but my heart went out to him and I very quickly gave him a crash course in Lamaze breathing. He had been medicated recently for his pain, but I knew he needed to focus on his breathing and to relax to help the medication take effect. He followed my instructions and slowly his hands released their grip on the side rail and his face relaxed.

A robot doesn't cry with a patient. I did though, when a patient broke down crying over the recent death of her daughter from cancer. I took her hand and without reservation allowed my tears to flow.

My sense of humor stands me in good stead also. Some patients, who I prepare for surgery, come to the hospital rigid with fear. After about an hour with them I've often found ways to get them to smile-not necessarily laugh, but smile enough to know that they've relaxed just a little bit. Again, a robot would not have accomplished this.

Many years ago the hospital I work in began a program entitled Patient Redesign for Excellence Program. Roles had been redesigned to assure optimum care for patients. At the same time cutbacks in Medicaid funding and the heavy weight of HMO caps on payments, resulted in layoffs and freezing of jobs. What resulted was more work by fewer people and a noticeable drop in morale. The union became involved at the same time because our contract was up and hell literally broke loose. I found myself caught in the middle, believing some of



what the administration was saying as well as what the union had to say. That year the manager of my department retired and she was not replaced. We became a self-managed unit. Months later the director of our Peri operative services resigned and her position had not been filled. Sometimes I felt as if I was on a rudderless ship and there were times when it was difficult to stay focused on why I was at the hospital and who I was there for. But, when things appear helpless, I resort to thinking thoughts like “my patients are what’s important and the rest can go to hell.” These are harsh words I know, but sometimes that’s what it takes to get through the day. If the rudderless ship goes aground, I won’t worry because I know there are people in higher positions than I who will take control, and I will know that my patients got what they needed from me-the best care I could humanly give them.



## First Love

Naomi Schlesinger

My favorite time of day was when Honey came home. Eagerly skipping through the kitchen while Mommy was cooking dinner, I thought about which story would be read, which pictures would be drawn. The blackboard, usually folded up against the living room back wall would soon be opened up to full height, just reaching Honey’s arms, so he could draw the storybook people and objects he read about. It might be Little Red Riding Hood, or three bowls of porridge, or a water fountain from a magic kingdom, or perhaps, a bear. Sitting next to Honey on the big, blue sofa, sinking into the pillows, hearing his soft, laughing voice as he read the words beginning to become familiar to me, the world felt warm and safe. Honey was handsome, strong, funny, and I was his favorite girl in the whole wide world.

In a few days, I was going to be a big girl, attending the Red House Nursery School. Mommy would walk with me through the park, up two more blocks past the candy store and the butcher shop and around one more corner to the front of the school...and this time, I was going to stay there without her. I had already visited the school so I knew there were lots of dresses and shoes to try on, lots of sparkly necklaces and rings, puzzles and books, piles and piles of blocks to build high houses and sky scrapers. I would wave goodbye to Mommy, play with the other children, and see Miss Frieda. I liked Miss Frieda. She had the bluest twinkling eyes and a big smile, and in a while, Mommy would come to get me for our walk home. That night, I would tell Honey all about the stories I had heard so he could draw new pictures on the blackboard. Honey always smiled when I told him my stories, and he listened very carefully. He liked to spend lots of time with me.

On Monday, when I told Miss Frieda that Honey was going to draw pictures for me that night, pictures of the ducklings that walk through the meadow in a line, she did not understand. “Who is Honey?” I explained that Honey was my father and I beamed as I described the fun we had with chalk and our special blackboard. “Oh, you mean Daddy, your Daddy.” Surprised, I stayed silent. I always called my father Honey, just like Mommy did.

That night, when Honey walked through the door, I ran as I always did to greet him so he could give me a big kiss, scoop me up, and swing me over his shoulders for a choo-choo ride to the kitchen. “Hi Daddy.” Honey and Mommy looked at one another and smiled. Something had changed forever.

This childhood memory captures my love for my father and my mother’s generosity in sharing her endearing name for him with me. He was “Honey” to both of us. My parents had been childhood sweethearts and maintained a romance through the many years of my father’s illness and shared hardships. Each one’s face expressed delight when the other walked into the room and they were a strong team.



Throughout my father’s short life, (he died at 47) I continued to love him deeply and intensely, savoring his gentleness, his keen intellect, and his wry sense of humor. First calling him Honey, then Daddy, then Dad, our early conversations based on blackboard drawings and stories evolved into discussions and fatherly advice about national events and politics; books and ideas; college selection; ethics and integrity. “Be on guard against men like McCarthy who can demean democracy.” “Have you read Fahrenheit 451? I think you would enjoy it.” “Let’s go to College Night at the high school. You might wish to select a school out of town.” “Always be truthful to yourself and others.” He spurred me to pursue intellectual interests, and encouraged me to be comfortable having a “good mind.” The fact that I was a girl was not viewed as a deterrent to aspirations of higher education and career goals (as was the case with the fathers of some of my friends).

My love for my father and the way it was treated by both parents paved the foundational path to my marrying a kind, intelligent, good man---my own Honey, Art.



## **Father’s Day**

Leonard Sciacchitano

Thousands of years of conditionings, sacrifice, hard men, strong men do what's necessary, no complains, no excuses, expecting nothing, a lifetime of duty, thousands of years of conditionings, every day do your job, protect.

Today many without fathers, defenseless, hopeless, angry, cites out of control, its children wander the streets, lost without what fathers can give them.

In special places, away from those voices of defeat, in those special places where single minded focus is critical and reality and truth cannot be denied, places where men proudly identify themselves by their work, places where long hours matter, where actions and results are far more important than words, men build business baring fruit unimaginable a few years ago, these men move us ever so slightly to equality , away from zero sum, these men fight our wars, protect, die, create a nation like no other; strong men, hard men, focus, stand up, understand and do that which can only be done by men who follow the example of their fathers and those thousands of years of conditioning, to those men, those protectors, those men we miss-understand every day we give you this one day,

Happy Father's Day.

## Trains

Mary Ann Sommerstad

The train is crossing the bay on the long black line of the railroad bridge. I can see it from the window if I stand on my bed. Slower and slower till it reaches the tracks on my street, huffing and puffing like in my Little Golden Book, so close I can see the heat waves bending the air around it. I think I can reach out the window and touch it as it makes its ponderous way a few more blocks to Atlantic City’s Convention Hall where the tracks end in front of the boardwalk. There it will unload its cargo for something fun, like baby animals for the farm show, or costumes and props for the Ice Capades. A train means only good things.

On rare occasions we can actually ride a train when we visit our grandparents in Pennsylvania. My sister and I wear our matching plaid skirts with big, gold ornamental safety pins and Mommy puts on her hat with the bird feathers. We all wear white gloves. Travel is something special. I continually look down the track to catch the first glimpse of the white headlight as the train approaches.

We are lucky that this train has a formal dining car - there are not many left. We walk through door after door between cars, stepping carefully, trying not to look down at the tracks clacking by below us at dizzying speed. Finally a smiling man in a white jacket seats us at a table with a white tablecloth and serves us tea from a little silver teapot. Outside the light wanes and our faces materialize in the window, two little dark haired girls and their young, dark haired mother with the feathered hat, and beyond them the trees flickering by. A momentary image preserved in my memory, although I am not aware of this then.

I was well into adulthood when I learned it was not considered a good thing to live near the railroad tracks. Yet still I found this difficult to believe. When I moved to Long Island in the mid 70’s, there was always a train nearby to take me to the city to meet my sister for shopping and lunch at Saks, or for dinner and the theater with my husband, or a day at the museum.

The train means only good things. No one goes to the doctor on the train, or the hospital, or a funeral.

When we had a small condo in Florida in the late nineties, I persuaded my husband to try the autotrain for the trip down. At the departing point just outside Washington D.C. we were hustled into the crowded waiting room while our cars were whisked away, clutching our pillows and overnight bags like our grandparents at Ellis Island. There were three travel options and we tried them all. First was the ( not very ) reclining seat with Trailways bus ambience. Next was the roomette, basically a glass enclosed, double wide telephone booth with an upper bunk that dropped out of the ceiling very like an MRI tube (not kidding). Finally we tried the deluxe room which although tiny was at least an actual room with its own bathroom. Meals were served in the dining car. No white tablecloths here, but rather plastic placemats and airplane food. And people you didn’t know seated opposite you - OK at dinner but not so much at breakfast.



Tucked into my upper berth at night, I could look out the window in the dark and watch the tiny towns go by, lit by the red and green lights of the railroad gates, frozen in time like an Edward Hopper painting. Far in the distance toward the coast I could see the pinkish glow of the big cities, Myrtle Beach, Charleston, Savannah, while we chugged along through the backwoods of the East Coast where nobody ever goes. In my secret heart, I wanted to peek out the door and see Marilyn Monroe stumbling down the aisle or Lucy and Ethel pulling their bed curtains aside, or Nick and Nora Charles in their elegant attire. In the late morning the train pulled into its last stop in Sanford, Florida, a scrubby, poor looking town of no particular note until a few years later when Trayvon Martin got shot there.

In the early 2000's we visited my stepson and his wife in London where they were working at the time. We decided to go to Paris, about a 3 hour ride on the Chunnel train which goes under the English Channel. The train was very modern and quiet and we had little sensation of speed until we looked at the cars moving so slowly on the highways nearby. I was a bit disappointed that the underwater part of the train ride was only 20 or minutes or so. It didn't seem much different from ducking under the East River to get to Penn Station. The train station in Paris was unexpectedly elegant and I was admiring the surroundings when a train glided noiselessly in front of me. It was sleek and silver with two levels of windows, its name inconspicuously lettered on the side - The Orient Express, destination Venice and Istanbul. My mouth dropped open. I felt as if I had stepped into an Agatha Christie novel, as though a book had suddenly come to life in front of me and all I had to do was step inside. I stood there immobilized, and the train pulled away and slowly disappeared beyond the station. But I had had a moment of magic which would set the tone for a weekend in Paris, our first and only time there.

Our house now is not far from the Port Jefferson Railroad Station as the crow flies, the end of the line. The trains in the yard are kept running all night since it is more economical than turning them off and restarting them. So on summer nights with the windows open, I fall asleep to their low rumbling sound like the purr of a great animal.

I hope that when it's time for me to fall into my final sleep, I will see the light at the end of the tunnel and it will be a train. I will step up light footed, all earthly travails left behind, and we will gather speed, going faster and faster, hurtling through time and space just as we have always been. Destination? Remember, the train means only good things.



## **Wary**

Bob Stone

Skidded across fresh snow  
like bait in nature’s trap  
the newspaper beckons  
to lure my attention from  
smooth and glistening ice  
waiting to turn my gray days  
into pain and bedpans  
where disinfectant’s scent  
hangs acrid in the air  
where I am ministered to by  
cheerful, solicitous or impatient  
half-hidden faces in floral scrubs  
and reassuring half-hidden faces  
of white coated residents.  
Where serious faces of doctors  
look through me to the next patient.

But the monotonous drip of lonely hours  
uncovers feral wariness, long hidden  
under civilization’s shiny veneer  
strips innocence from the world  
and shows perils lurking unseen  
in the breath of strangers  
the touch of a hand  
or a careless step.





## **Emma**

Annette Thies

Emma had a vivid imagination and insatiable curiosity. She imagined living in her room turned upside down so the ceiling became the floor. When she told her brother he said it was a stupid idea. He pointed out the windows would be in the wrong place and she wouldn't be able to see the box elder tree anymore. And the ceiling light would be in the middle of the floor and trip her, and on and on. Since this wasn't such a good idea, she would just have to imagine a new one. Another day another dollar, her mom always said.

The next day Emma found a new fish to fry, another of her mom's expressions. She noticed an ant hill forming in a driveway crack. As she watched the ants running back and forth between the lawn and the ant hill, she wondered how the ants felt when they looked up and saw her. Did she look like a giant? This question may have been influenced by a recent reading of Jack and the Beanstalk, but it is just as possible it was something else her mother said that morning, don't get too big for your britches.

Emma knew something about being smaller than other people. She was an 8-year-old and a tiny one at that. And she worried about all the ants, roly polys, grasshoppers, and lady bugs that were smaller than she. She thought they must have to carefully plan their day to avoid all the gigantic people in their world. When Emma heard her pleasingly plump neighbor complain about the ants that crawled on her while she was picnicking, she wanted to ask the neighbor how she would feel is someone a zillion times her size sat on her. Emma didn't ask because her mom always said that children should be seen and not heard.

One rainy day, on the way home from school, Emma's best friend invited her over to play. They were walking and planning what they would do at her best friend's house when Emma felt a squishy scrunch under her rain boots followed by a sick feeling in her stomach. She looked down, saw all the earthworms on the sidewalk and carefully lifted her foot. "Oh, no! Oh no! I've killed a worm!" she said to her best friend.

"It's okay, there are millions of them on the sidewalk. They're just worms."

"They aren't just worms they are good earthworms. How would you feel if a giant stepped on you?"

No answer. Her best friend was too busy telling Emma how they would cartwheel along her sidewalk, all the way to her front door. For the four remaining blocks to her best friend's house Emma stepped over every worm she saw. She counted ten worms she'd saved. She was beginning to feel a little better by the time they started their cartwheels toward the front door.

Emma cartwheeled first because she was faster. On the upside-down part of her fourth cartwheel she was confronted by two feet attached to two legs attached to her best friend's mother. Emma righted herself and looked up at her.



“Your mother just called; she’s been frantically looking everywhere for you. She told me to tell you to hustle your bustle right home! Those were her exact words, so you better get going.”

Emma turned and ran the three blocks to her house, barreling through the backdoor grinning and out of breath. “I’m here lickity split (she knew this was one of her mom’s favorite expressions), I thought it would be faster than hustling my bustle.” Emma thought her mom might laugh at this. She didn’t.

Emma looked up at her mom. “Mom I stepped on one earthworm, but I saved ten more and that’s why it took longer, and I forgot to call, and I promise I won’t be late again, and I’ll do the dishes every night for two weeks.” Emma waited for a response while her mom grew taller by the minute. Her mom looked down at her. Emma felt like an ant. She wondered if ants cried. Then the tears in her throat bubbled into her eyes where they dripped one by one down her pudgy little cheeks. She cried for the ants, the worms, the roly polys, and everything little at the mercy of something bigger than themselves.

Her mom leaned down and wiped Emma’s tears. “Life isn’t always a bowl of cherries.” she said and hugged Emma close. Tomorrow I’ll decide how many nights you’ll do the dishes.” Emma hugged her mom tight and whispered in her ear, “ busy hands make happy hearts.”